Personality and impression management: Mapping the Multidimensional Personality Questionnaire onto 12 self-presentation tactics

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1. Introduction

1.1. General introduction

An inescapable fact of everyday life is the need to “present well,” or to make a good impression on others, referred to as self-presentation or impression management (Goffman, 1959; Leary, 1995; Schlenker, 2005). Self-presentation behaviors have often been explained by underlying needs and motives. The need to be liked, for example, manifests in ingratiating behavior, whereas the need to be seen as blameless prompts excuses. Lee, Quigley, Nesler, Corbett, and Tedeschi (1999) recently categorized 12 of the most studied self-presentation tactics as defensive or assertive based on previous work by Tedeschi and colleagues (Tedeschi, 1981; Tedeschi & Melburg, 1984). Assertive tactics are behaviors used proactively to establish or develop an actor’s identity, whereas defensive tactics are behavioral efforts to repair or restore an identity after it has been “spoiled” (Lee et al., 1999).

Defensive self-presentation has been associated with several indicators of negative affect or emotion. “Social anxiety arises in real or imagined social situations when people are motivated to make a particular impression on others but doubt that they will be able to do so, because they have expectations of unsatisfactory impression-relevant reactions from others” (Schlenker & Leary, 1982, p. 645). Socially anxious or shy individuals tend to employ defensive tactics such as verbal disclaimers and self-handicapping (Berglas & Jones, 1978; Schlenker & Leary, 1982). Lee et al. (1999) found that defensive tactics, but not assertive tactics, were positively correlated with social anxiety and external locus of control. Other researchers have stressed the connections between self-presentation tactics generally and problematic personality features such as self-consciousness (Fenigstein, Scheier, & Buss, 1975), chronic insecurity and need for approval (Buss, 1980; Crown & Marlowe, 1964; Watson & Friend, 1969), fear of negative evaluation, anxiety, low self-esteem, and fear of failure (Doherty & Schlenker, 1991; Leary & Kowalski, 1995; Schlenker & Pontari, 2000).

There is less evidence linking self-presentation to Positive Emotionality. However, high self-monitors, as measured by the Self-Monitoring Scale (Snyder, 1974), are skilled at regulating expressions: they adopt more active, directive roles in social situations, and engage in strategic impression management more than low self-monitors. High self-monitoring individuals have been characterized as using assimilative (Wolfe, Lennox, & Cutler, 1986) and acquiescent (Arkin, 1981) forms of impression management that are conceptually similar to proactive assertive self-presentation tactics. High self-monitors express positive affect more often than negative affect (Gangestad & Snyder, 2000) and tend to score higher than low self-monitors on measures of Extraversion and Social Potency (John, Cheek, & Klohnen, 1996).
Males and females tend to report using impression manage-
ment tactics that are consistent with traditional masculine and
feminine gender roles as would be expected on the basis of social
role theory (Eagly, 1987) and socialization to stereotypes (Deaux,
1985). Females tend to use defensive tactics such as apologies and
supplication, while males tend to use assertive tactics such as
blasting and intimidation (Forsyth, Schlenker, Leary, & McCown,
1985; see Guadagno & Cialdini, 2007 for a review). Lee et al.
(1999) found that men reported more frequent use of assertive tac-
tics than women, but found no sex difference in the self-report of
defensive tactics.

The present study is the first to examine associations between
multiple self-presentation tactics and categories of tactics and per-
sibility broadly defined. Our specific aims were to: (a) predict the
shared variance of higher-order personality domains and total,
defensive, and assertive categories of self-presentation tactics, (b)
predict relations between selected specific self-presentation tactics
and primary personality traits both within and across higher-order
personality domains, (c) investigate sex differences in self-present-
tation tactics, and (d) explore the joint factor structure of self-pre-
sentation tactics and higher-order personality factors.

### 1.2. The present study

Personality traits are substantially heritable and stable disposi-
tions (Bouchard, Lykken, McGue, Segal, & Tellegen, 1990; Pedersen,
Plomin, McLearn, & Friberg, 1988; Tellegen et al., 1988), rooted in
biological mechanisms (e.g., Clark, Watson, & Mineka, 1994). Importantly, traits are distinct from the features of behavior that
result from interactions between the influences of traits and the
social environment (McCrae, Löckenhoff, & Costa, 2005; Tellegen
& Waller, 2008). These behavioral features or ‘characteristic adap-
tations include habits, attitudes, skills, roles, and relations-
ships…intended to help the individual adapt to the
requirements and opportunities of the social environment” (McC-
rae et al., 2005, p. 272). Self-presentation behaviors may be viewed
within this framework as behavioral adaptations developed
through early experience in and evoked by social situations. Baner-
jee and Watling (2010) recently showed that self-presentation
al concerns and tactics are evident in middle childhood and are asso-
ciated with social anxiety.

Tellegen and Waller’s (2008) Multidimensional Personality
Questionnaire (MPQ) operationalizes Tellegen’s (1985) three-fac-
tor model of personality. Positive Emotionality (PEM) and Negative
Emotionality (NEM) are broad affect dimensions reflecting varia-
tion in susceptibility to positive and negative emotional states.
PEM and NEM subsume social, interpersonal and pure emotional
constructs. Two primary traits, Wellbeing and Stress Reaction, rep-
cent the core emotional dispositions of PEM and NEM, respec-
tively. The interpersonal aspects of PEM are measured at the
facet level by Achievement and Social Potency (agency) and Social
Closeness (communion), and in NEM by Aggression (confrontation)
and Alienation (estrangement). The higher-order Constraint (CON)
factor subsumes Control (impulsivity reversed), Harm Avoidance
(avoidance of physical danger), and Traditionalism (conventionality);
A separate trait of Absorption reflects the proclivity for imagin-
ative, aesthetic and self-absorbing experiences. Unlike Virtues is a
stand-alone measure reflecting endorsement of highly improb-
able virtues and denial of common failings (Tellegen, 1982).

High PEM scores reflect self-efficacy and active involvement in
social relationships and work. The PEM dimension has been asso-
ciated with positive adjustment and adaptive behavior (Leon, Kan-
fer, Hoffman, & Dupre, 1991), general level of social activity and leadership (Kamp, 1986) and prosocial behavior (Krueger, Hicks,
& McGue, 2001). Wellbeing, variously operationalized, has been
strongly related to health, positive adjustment (Diener, 2000),
and a range of positive life outcomes (Lyubomirsky, King, & Diener,
2005).

NEM is correlated with anxiety and depression (Clark & Watson,
1991; Tellegen, 1985). Stress Reaction has been found associated
with a “neurotic” cluster of biographical items, such as missing
school due to emotional problems and frequent headaches (Kamp,
1986). NEM is clearly the MPQ marker of maladaptive emotional
reactivity.

Our predictions were based on conceptual links between the
defensive and assertive self-presentation factors, specific self-pre-
sentation tactics, and higher-order and primary MPQ personality
traits. Because PEM and NEM have been shown to tap relatively
independent dimensions of affect (Tellegen, 1985; Tellegen, Wat-
son, & Clark, 1999; Watson & Tellegen, 1985), we expected to find
a clear divergence of correlates for these temperament domains.
Based on the extensive literature associating self-presentation
with anxiety-related characteristics, we predicted that greater
overall use of self-presentation tactics and greater use of defensive
tactics would be associated with NEM and its emotional marker
Stress Reaction but not with PEM. We expected greater shared var-
iance overall between self-presentation tactics and NEM.

With respect to specific defensive tactics, we expected dis-
claimer and self-handicapping to be more strongly associated with
NEM than with PEM. We predicted that the assertive tactic of
blaming would show a pattern of correlates across the NEM
and PEM domains, including Social Potency and Aggression.
Considering Social Potency and Positive Emotionality as markers of
high self-monitoring, we predicted that Social Potency would show
multiple correlates with assertive tactics. We predicted that the
assertive tactic of exemplification (conveying impressions of moral
worthiness) would show associations across the PEM and CON do-
 mains, including Wellbeing, Control and Traditionalism. Within
CON we predicted that Harmavoidance would not be significantly
related to self-presentation as Harmavoidance reflects fear and
avoidance of physically dangerous situations rather than socially
threatening situations.

### 2. Method

#### 2.1. Participants

Two hundred and thirty undergraduate students enrolled in
general psychology courses at a Midwestern college completed
two self-report measures in a single session (63% female, 
\(M = 18.9\) years, \(SD = 0.9\)). Participants received credit toward a
course research participation requirement.

#### 2.2. Measures

**Personality.** Participants completed the Multidimensional Per-
sonality Questionnaire (MPQ) described in detail by Tellegen
and Waller (2008). The instrument is an omnibus inventory of normal
personality composed of 276 dichotomous mostly True–False
items, developed through a series of exploratory factor analyses.
The MPQ measures 11 primary factors at the first-order level, 10
of which load on 3 higher-order dimensions, Positive Emotionality
(PEM), Negative Emotionality (NEM), and Constraint (CON). The
MPQ higher-order dimensions and primary traits were described
earlier. Two validity scales are incorporated in the MPQ to detect
inconsistent responding; the Variable Response Inconsistency and True Response Inconsistency scales (as described by Patrick,
Curtin, & Tellegen, 2002). The MPQ is widely used in personality
research and has demonstrated excellent psychometric properties.
The primary scales are relatively independent (\(r = .00—.48, 
M = .16\)) (Tellegen & Waller, 2008). The median alpha coefficient
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