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

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the relations between Tellegen's three-factor personality model, using the Multidimensional Personality Questionnaire (MPQ), and 12 self-presentation tactics operationalized in the self-presentation tactics scale (SPT). Differential correlations of the MPQ higher-order domains and primary scales were predicted based on a review of the literature pertaining to each self-presentation tactic and the dimensional classifications of tactics. Joint exploratory factor analysis was used to determine structural relationship among the higher-order MPQ traits and SPT indicators. Results suggest an important role for basic emotional and interpersonal personality traits in the frequency and nature of impression management behaviors, overwhelmingly in the domain of Negative Emotionality. Evidence of construct validity for the SPT and further evidence of the discriminant validity of the MPQ higher-order dimensions and primary scales is also presented.

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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; Crowne & 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 acquisitive (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 management 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 tactics 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 personality 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-presentation tactics, and (d) explore the joint factor structure of self-presentation tactics and higher-order personality factors.

1.2. The present study

Personality traits are substantially heritable and stable dispositions (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 adaptations include habits, attitudes, skills, roles, and relationships ... intended to help the individual adapt to the requirements and opportunities of the social environment" (McCrae 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. Banerjee and Watling (2010) recently showed that self-presentational concerns and tactics are evident in middle childhood and are associated with social anxiety.

Tellegen and Waller's (2008) Multidimensional Personality Questionnaire (MPQ) operationalizes Tellegen's (1985) three-factor model of personality. Positive Emotionality (PEM) and Negative Emotionality (NEM) are broad affect dimensions reflecting variation 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, represent the core emotional dispositions of PEM and NEM, respectively. 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 imaginative, aesthetic and self-absorbing experiences. Unlikely Virtues is a stand-alone measure reflecting endorsement of highly improbable 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 associated with positive adjustment and adaptive behavior (Leon, Kanfer, 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-presentation 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, Watson, & 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 variance overall between self-presentation tactics and NEM.

With respect to specific defensive tactics, we expected *disclaimer* and *self-handicapping* to be more strongly associated with NEM than with PEM. We predicted that the assertive tactic of *intimidation* 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 domains, 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 (60% 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 Personality 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