On Christmas Day, 1981, I met my (former) wife’s family for the first time. We had just started dating, so I knew for this group of important strangers, I had to be on my best behavior and say and do all the right things. I wanted to make sure the impression they formed of me was that of a likable fellow whom they’d be proud to call a member of the family someday.

As people busily opened their presents, I noticed the wide and gleeful eyes of a 14-year-old girl as she unwrapped what was to her a special gift—her very own basketball. Being the youngest in a family of eight kids, she didn’t have much she could call her own, so this was a significant moment for her. She had finally broken away from a life filled with hand-me-downs and communal equipment. She hugged that ball as if it were a puppy.

I saw my chance to make the perfect first impression. “I’m not a bad basketball player,” I thought to myself. “I’ll take her outside to the basketball hoop in the driveway, dazzle her with my shooting skills, become her idol, and win family approval.”

“Hey, Mary,” I said. “Let’s go out and shoot some hoops.” After we stepped outside, I grabbed the new ball from her. “Watch this,” I said as I flung it toward the basket from about 40 feet away. We both watched as the ball arced gracefully toward its destination, and for a brief moment, I actually thought it was going to go in. But that was not to be.

As if guided by the taunting hand of fate, the ball struck an exposed bolt that protruded from the supporting pole of the hoop. There was a sickeningly loud pop, followed by a hissing sound as the ball fluttered to the ground like a deflated balloon. It sat there lifeless, never having experienced the joy of “swishing” through a net. For that matter, it had never even been bounced on the ground in its short-lived inflated state.

For a few seconds, we both stood numb and motionless. Then I turned to apologize to the 14-year-old girl, whose once cheerful eyes now harbored the kind of hate and resentment usually reserved for ax murderers and IRS auditors. In a flash, she burst into tears and ran into the house shrieking, “That guy popped my ball!” It was hardly the heroic identity I was striving for. As the angry mob poured into the backyard to stare at the villainous and still somewhat unknown perpetrator, I became painfully aware of the fragile nature of the self-images we try to project to others.

We all have been in situations—a first date, a job interview, a first meeting with a girlfriend or boyfriend’s family—in which we feel compelled to “make a good impression.” We try to present a favorable image of ourselves so that others will form positive judgments of us. This phenomenon is not only an important and universal aspect of our personal lives but a key element of social structure as well.

In this chapter, I examine the social creation of images. How do we form impressions of others? What do we do to control the impressions others form of us? I also discuss the broader...
FORMING IMPRESSIONS OF OTHERS

When we first meet someone, we form an immediate impression based on observable cues such as age, ascribed status characteristics such as race and gender, individual attributes such as physical appearance, and verbal and nonverbal expressions. This process of impression formation helps us form a quick picture of the other person’s identity. Keep in mind that the importance of this information—the value attached to a certain age, race, or gender; the particular physical or personality traits a society defines as desirable; the meaning of certain words and gestures—varies across time and place. Hence, the impressions that people form of others must always be understood within the appropriate cultural and historical contexts. For instance, an emotionally expressive person in the United States may give the impression of being energetic and outgoing, in the United Kingdom such a person may seem boorish and rude, and in Thailand or Japan that person may be considered dangerous or crazy.

Social Group Membership

Social group membership has a profound effect on the impressions we form of others. We can often determine people’s age, sex, race, and to a certain degree ethnicity merely by looking at them; social class is less obvious but sometimes becomes known early in an encounter with another person through their language, mannerisms, or dress. Our socialization experiences have taught us to expect that people displaying these indicators of social group membership have certain characteristics in common. For instance, if all you know about a person you’ve not yet met is that she’s 85 years old, you might predict that she has low energy, a poor memory, and a conservative approach to life. Think about your expectations when you learn that your new college roommate is from a different region of this country—or, for that matter, from a different country. Of course, such expectations are rarely completely accurate. Nevertheless, we typically begin social interactions with these culturally defined conceptions of how people from certain social groups are likely to act, what their tastes and preferences might be, and what values and attitudes they are likely to hold.

This information is so pervasive and so quickly processed that we usually notice it only when it is ambiguous or unavailable. If you spend a lot of time texting or tweeting with strangers, you may have noticed how difficult it can be to form a friendship or carry on a discussion when you don’t know whether you are conversing with someone of the same sex or someone of a different sex, or whether the person is much older or much younger than you are. Social group membership provides the necessary backdrop to all encounters between people who have little if any prior knowledge of one another.

Physical Appearance

We confirm or modify early impressions based on social group membership by assessing other characteristics that are also readily perceivable, such as a person’s physical appearance (Berndt & Heller, 1986). The way people dress and decorate their bodies communicates their feelings,
beliefs, and group identity to others. People’s clothes, jewelry, hairstyles, and so on can also indicate their ethnicity, social class, age, cultural tastes, morality, and political attitudes.

But again, culture can influence these impressions. Physical attractiveness is enormously important in U.S. culture. Everywhere we turn, it seems, we are encouraged to believe that if our complexion isn’t perfect, if we are too short or too tall, if we are overweight or underweight, if our hair isn’t stylish, if our clothes don’t reflect the latest fashion trend, we have fallen short of some attractiveness threshold. Although we readily acknowledge that using a person’s physical appearance to form an impression is shallow and unfair, most of us do it anyway.

Is Beauty Only Skin Deep?

The famous Greek philosopher Aristotle said, “Personal beauty is a greater recommendation than any letter of introduction.” Contemporary research confirms that physical appearance affects our perceptions of others. Attractive men are seen as more masculine and attractive women more feminine than their less attractive counterparts (Gillen, 1981). We often assume that good-looking people possess other desirable traits, such as happiness, kindness, strength, and sexual responsiveness (Dion, Berscheid, & Walster, 1972). Decades of research has also found that perceptions of attractiveness are associated with a variety of positive outcomes, such as the number of votes a candidate receives in an election or the quality of a professor’s end-of-semester teaching evaluations (Lee, Pitesa, Pillutla, & Thau, 2018).

Such judgments can sometimes be converted to financial gain. After all, one of the cornerstones of the hiring process is the face-to-face interview where impressions are formed and selection decisions are made. Economists have even coined a term, the beauty premium, to refer to the economic advantages attractive people enjoy:

Handsome men earn, on average, 5% more than their less-attractive counterparts (good-looking women earn 4% more); pretty people get more attention from teachers, bosses, and mentors. . . . Fifty seven percent of hiring managers [in a recent survey indicated that] qualified but unattractive candidates are likely to have a harder time landing a job, while more than half advised spending as much time and money on “making sure they look attractive” as on perfecting a résumé. (J. Bennett, 2010, p. 47)

The beauty premium is particularly robust in jobs that require a lot of interpersonal interaction with co-workers, clients, and customers. It is less relevant in jobs that involve working in relative seclusion with information and data. The fact that the beauty premium is not universal across all occupations is important sociologically. It suggests that physical attractiveness is not just a matter of people’s stereotypes; it is seen as a component of productivity, and as such it is highly valued in certain jobs, but not others (Stinebrickner, Stinebrickner, & Sullivan, 2018).

But beauty is not always associated with positive impressions and outcomes. For instance, people might assume that those who are extremely attractive are spoiled or aren’t particularly intelligent. The (good-looking) actor Rob Lowe said, “There’s this unbelievable bias and prejudice against quote-unquote good-looking people, that they can’t be in pain or they can’t have rough lives or be deep or interesting” (quoted in Brodesser-Akner, 2014, p. 12). More substantially, specific goals may override the favorable bias attractive people usually enjoy. A recent study found that potential employers are often reluctant to hire attractive people when they apply for tedious, laborious, and less desirable jobs because they assume such applicants think these positions are beneath them and would therefore be dissatisfied and unmotivated to perform well (Lee et al., 2018).
In Malawi, a southeast African country with a high rate of HIV infection, women who are too beautiful are often subject to suspicious gossip. People who are HIV positive tend to be extremely thin as AIDS takes its toll on the body. Some of the most effective treatments for HIV are antiretroviral drugs (ARVs; see Chapter 14). One of the side effects of the drug is weight gain and smooth skin. Hence, others might presume that women who look too healthy must be taking ARVs, meaning that they are HIV positive and not desirable sexual partners (Koenig, 2011).

Impressions based on appearance can also work their way into the legal system. In one study, undergraduate subjects at Cornell University were provided with profiles of defendants in criminal trials and asked to assess their guilt and suggest a punishment. The profiles included information about the defendant’s race, gender, height, weight, and eye color, and a high-resolution color photograph, which previous subjects had coded as either attractive or unattractive. In addition, they were given a trial summary (these were all aggravated assault cases), transcripts of the attorneys’ closing arguments, and the judge’s instructions to the jury. The researchers found that unattractive defendants were 22% more likely to be convicted and, if convicted, spend an average of 22 months longer in prison than their better-looking counterparts (Gunnell & Ceci, 2010). The findings of this study did not come as a surprise to the spokesperson for the National Association of Criminal Defense Lawyers, who stated, “We usually want our clients in a suit, with their hair combed and trying to appear as clean-cut as possible. [This study] bears out what many of us knew in our gut” (quoted in Baldas, 2010, p. 1).

At the other end of the physical appearance spectrum, ugliness has always occupied a lowly place on the social landscape. In literature and film, ugliness is usually associated with evil and fear, characterizing all manner of monsters, ogres, witches, and villains (Kershaw, 2008). Beyond fictional portrayals, unattractiveness can have serious everyday consequences. For instance, many parents these days are becoming less tolerant of any flaw in their children’s appearance. Numerous websites and apps now offer retouching services so that parents can airbrush photos of their children to remove blemishes, crooked teeth, and other facial imperfections.

Let’s face it, though: Physical appearance remains a more salient interpersonal and economic issue for women than for men, even though women have more money, political clout, and legal recognition today than ever before. For instance, in a recent study conducted by the Pew Research Center, respondents were asked what they thought society valued in men and women. The most common response regarding men was “morality and honesty” (mentioned by 33% of the respondents). The most common response regarding women was “physical attractiveness” (mentioned by 35% of respondents). Only 11% of respondents thought physical appearance was valued in men (Parker, Horowitz, & Stepler, 2017). In another study, 61% of hiring managers indicated that it’s advantageous for a woman to “show off her figure” in the workplace (cited in J. Bennett, 2010).

Emphasis on female appearance is especially noteworthy in politics. Up until the 1990s, female members of Congress were prohibited from wearing pants on the Senate floor. In 2015, the Montana state legislature adopted a new dress code policy advising female lawmakers to “be sensitive to skirt lengths and necklines” (Healy, 2014, p. 24). No comparable directives exist for men. During the 2016 presidential campaign, Hillary Clinton was routinely scrutinized (and criticized) for her hairstyle and fondness for pantsuits. Here’s how one columnist described the way Australians treated that country’s first female prime minister a few years back:

For the three years and three days that Julia Gillard was prime minister of Australia, we debated the fit of her jackets, the size of her bottom, the exposure of her cleavage, the cut of her hair, the tone of her voice, the legitimacy of her rule and whether she had chosen, as one member of Parliament . . . put it, to be “deliberately barren.” (Baird, 2013, p. A17)
It’s hard to imagine physical appearance being the hub of this kind of attention for male political leaders.

So powerful is the perceived importance of women’s appearance that it can even influence standard medical procedures. For instance, after female cancer patients undergo mastectomies (the removal of one or both breasts), plastic surgeons and oncologists routinely advise them to have breast reconstruction surgery. Indeed, for years, the medical profession has embraced the idea that breast restoration is a vital component of the cancer treatment itself, even though it is medically unnecessary. Despite the toll this surgery can have on women both physically and emotionally, doctors continue to push for it, motivated by the belief that the appearance of breasts to others will improve women’s quality of life after cancer (Rabin, 2016).

Women routinely inflict serious pain on themselves as they alter their bodies to conform to cultural definitions of beauty. They may pluck their eyebrows, glue on eyelash extensions, use hot wax to strip away “unsightly” body hair, or wear ultra-tight-fitting Spanx underwear. Here are a few particularly dangerous practices:

- In China, hundreds of women each year, convinced that being taller would improve their job and marriage prospects, subject themselves to a procedure in which their leg bones are broken, separated, and stretched. Metal pins and screws pull the bones apart a fraction of a millimeter a day, sometimes for close to 2 years. Many Chinese women have lost the ability to walk from this treatment; others have suffered permanent, disfiguring bone damage (C. S. Smith, 2002).

- In the United States, affluent women sometimes undergo potentially dangerous cosmetic foot surgery—called the “Cinderella procedure”—to reduce the size and change the shape of their toes so that they can fit into fashionable, narrow high-heeled shoes (Stover, 2014).

- Girls and women can now wear decorative “circle lenses,” brightly colored contact lenses that make eyes appear larger because they cover not just the iris, as ordinary lenses do, but part of the whites as well (Saint Louis, 2010). These lenses, which give wearers a childlike, doe-eyed appearance, are available online without a prescription, much to the chagrin of eye doctors who fear the damage they may cause. A spokesperson for the Food and Drug Administration wrote that consumers risk significant eye injury, even blindness, when they buy contact lenses without a valid prescription.

At the individual level, the emphasis on physical appearance can devalue a person’s other attributes and accomplishments. It can also be dangerous. People—especially women—who feel their looks don’t measure up to cultural standards experience higher incidences of eating disorders, increased symptoms of depression, and a greater desire for plastic surgery (Engeln, 2017).

At the institutional level, the cultural obsession with attractiveness plays an important role in the nation’s economy by sustaining several multibillion-dollar enterprises, including the advertising, fashion, cosmetics, plastic surgery, and weight loss industries.

**Sizing People Up**

In U.S. society and in most industrialized societies, the negative effects of being considered unattractive are perhaps felt most strongly by those whose body size exceeds cultural standards (Carr & Friedman, 2006). Overall, over 18% of youth between ages 2 and 19 and nearly 40% of adults are obese. Both figures reflect sharp increases from a decade ago (Hales, Fryar,
In response to this trend, various social institutions have been forced to adapt their practices to the growing size of the people they serve. Consider these examples (Taubes, 2012):

- In 2012, the Coast Guard increased its assumption about the average weight of a boat passenger from 160 pounds to 185 pounds.
- Around 25% of Americans between 17 and 24 are unqualified for military service because of their weight.
- Compared to 1960, airlines spend about $5 billion more each year in jet fuel because of the extra power needed to fly heavier Americans. Commercial airlines have obesity seating policies that require a passenger to purchase a second seat if they are unable to fit comfortably into a single seat in the ticketed cabin, unable to properly buckle the seatbelt using a single seatbelt extender, and/or unable to put the seat's armrests down when seated.

We are just starting to get a picture of the financial toll obesity exacts nationwide. Estimates of medical costs associated with obesity range from $147 billion to $210 billion a year, or over 20% of total medical spending in the United States (State of Obesity, 2016). In addition, the loss in economic productivity due to medical ailments associated with obesity, such as hypertension, orthopedic problems, sleep apnea, and diabetes, could run between $390 billion and $580 billion annually by 2030 (Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, 2012). On average, obese adults spend 42% more on direct health care costs and are charged nearly 30% more for emergency room visits than nonobese adults (State of Obesity, 2016). Such figures have led some health insurance companies to charge higher premiums to anyone over a certain body mass index (Singer, 2010), and some employers are now demanding that workers who are overweight pay a greater share of their health care costs (Abelson, 2011b). Not surprisingly, the federal government spends hundreds of millions of dollars annually telling citizens to eat less and exercise more (Taubes, 2012).

Against a cultural backdrop that glorifies thinness, fat is seen not only as unhealthy and costly but as repulsive, ugly, and unclean (LeBesco, 2004). People are likely to judge an overweight person as lacking in willpower and as being self-indulgent, personally offensive, and even morally and socially unfit (Millman, 1980). “Being fat” is the most common reason kids get bullied and picked on in this country, above such traits as race, ethnicity, religion, and physical disability (Bradshaw, Waasdorp, O’Brennan, & Gulemetova, 2011). One study found that mental health caseworkers were more likely to assign negative characteristics (e.g., being too emotional, being unhygienic, engaging in inappropriate behavior) to obese patients than to thin patients (Young & Powell, 1985).

Obesity also has implications for people’s experiences in the health care system. Most hospitals don’t have CT or MRI scanners that can accommodate extremely large patients. Doctors in such cases are likely to resort to less precise X-rays and hope for the best. Furthermore, overweight patients often complain that doctors criticize them for their weight even when the health problem that brought them to the doctor in the first place is unrelated to their size. For instance, one obese patient went to an urgent care center complaining of shortness of breath. The doctor told her she had a lot of weight pressing on her lungs and that the only thing wrong with her was that she was fat. It turned out that the woman had life-threatening blood clots in her lungs that were unrelated to her size (Kolata, 2016).

Such assumptions about the relationship between size and health also affect women’s access to medical opportunities like infertility services. Most U.S. fertility clinics will not perform in
vitro fertilization procedures on extremely obese patients. Many doctors assume that high body weight causes infertility and that simply losing weight will fix the problem even though the specialty’s two main governing organizations—the American Society for Reproductive Medicine and the Society for Assisted Reproductive Technology—have not stated definitively that reproductive services should be declined on the basis of weight (Sole-Smith, 2019).

It is often said that weight discrimination is the last acceptable form of unequal treatment in the United States (Carr & Friedman, 2006). In the workplace, researchers have found significant discrimination against obese and overweight people at every stage of the employment cycle, including hiring, placement, compensation, promotion, discipline, and discharge (Roehling, 1999). Like unattractiveness in general, research has consistently shown a wage penalty for obese employees, especially women. Researchers at the George Washington University School of Public Health have found that obese men earn on average about $4,772 a year less than normal-weight men and obese women earn $5,826 less than normal-weight women (Newswise, 2011).

In high-visibility occupations such as public relations and sales, overweight people are often regarded as unemployable because they might project a negative image of the company they are working for. Flight attendants have been fired for exceeding airline weight requirements, even though their job-related abilities met company standards (Puhl & Brownell, 2001). A casino in Atlantic City once warned its cocktail waitresses that if they gained more than 10% of their current weight, they’d be suspended without pay for 90 days while they tried to lose the extra pounds. If their weight loss efforts were unsuccessful, they’d be fired (I. Peterson, 2005).

Negative perceptions of obese people are not universal, however. In Niger, for example, being overweight—ideally with rolls of fat, stretch marks, and a large behind—is considered an essential part of female beauty. Women who aren’t sufficiently round are considered unfit for marriage (R. Popenoe, 2005). In Mauritania, girls as young as 5 and as old as 19 are sometimes forced by their parents to drink five gallons of fat-rich camel’s milk each day so they become fat (LaFraniere, 2007). In Botswana, fatness is equated with female fertility and is therefore a positive sign of a woman’s marriageability. Large women are said to have “fat eggs” and are therefore fit to bear children (Upton, 2010). In many developing countries, where food supplies are scarce, being overweight is associated with being middle class or wealthy.

Indeed, some anthropologists argue that women’s roles in society always influence cultural tastes in body shape. For instance, men tend to prefer larger female bodies in industrial societies where women are economically independent (e.g., Britain, Denmark) and in nonindustrial societies where they bear responsibility for finding food. Only in societies where women are economically dependent on men (e.g., Japan, Greece) do men have a strong preference for thin, hourglass figures in women. As one anthropologist put it, men’s preferences in female body type depend “on the degree to which they want their mates to be strong, tough, economically successful, and politically competitive” (Cashdan, 2008, p. 1104).

Rates of obesity—and accompanying maladies associated with obesity, like diabetes—have been rising worldwide, due principally to the increased production of more processed and affordable food than ever before (Murray & Ng, 2014; Swinburn et al., 2011). At the same time, though, Western images of thinness—and perhaps the stigmatization of obesity as well—have begun to infiltrate places that once had positive attitudes toward large bodies, such as Mexico, Tanzania, and Puerto Rico (Brewis, Wutich, Falletta-Cowden, & Rodriguez-Soto, 2011). An Indian businesswoman stated, “I think all around the ideal of beauty is skinny thin. I had a highly educated friend confess that she would prefer for her children to be anorexic rather than overweight” (quoted in Parker-Pope, 2011, p. A3).
In the United States, the value attached to body size is linked to race and social class. By official measures, 70.9% of Whites are either overweight or obese. Among African Americans and Latino/as, the figures are 75.7% and 79.6%, respectively (ProQuest Statistical Abstract, 2019). As in contemporary developing countries, obesity was once considered a sign of wealth and high status in the United States, but today it’s just the opposite. Being overweight is likely to be equated with poverty, where sedentary lifestyles and high-fat diets can be commonplace (Gilman, 2004; D. Kim & Leigh, 2010). Weight problems are compounded in poor communities because the key determinants of physical activity—safe playgrounds; access to high-quality, low-cost food; and transportation to play areas—are either inadequate or nonexistent. And because of poor grocery distribution in low-income neighborhoods, fresh fruits and vegetables are actually more expensive than in suburban stores. Poor black and racially mixed neighborhoods have significantly fewer large-chain supermarkets, natural food stores, fruit and vegetable markets, and bakeries than wealthier white neighborhoods. What they have more of is local grocery stores, convenience stores, and fast-food restaurants—all of which provide fewer healthy choices and tend to charge higher prices for the healthier food they do offer (M. Lee, 2006). These areas are sometimes referred to as “food deserts” because of their nutritional isolation and the lack of mainstream, high-quality grocery stores.

In addition, fast-food companies have grown more aggressive in targeting poor, inner-city neighborhoods. Researchers have found that obesity rates among ninth graders increase by an average of 5% when their school is located within one tenth of a mile of a fast-food restaurant (Currie, DellaVigna, Moretti, & Pathania, 2009). Another study found that lower-income black adults who live closer to fast-food restaurants have higher body mass indexes than those who live farther away (Reitzel et al., 2014). The problem became so acute that in 2008 the Los Angeles City Council adopted legislation mandating a 1-year moratorium on the building of new fast-food restaurants in an inner-city area with a 30% obesity rate (Kurutz, 2008). In 2012, the mayor of New York tried (and failed) to restrict the sale of super-size sugary drinks in fast-food restaurants.

As with physical appearance in general, U.S. women feel the contemporary distaste for obesity particularly strongly. Clothing companies contribute to women’s heightened weight concern through the way they size women’s clothes. Several companies now manufacture size 0 outfits. In 2007, the fashion designer Nicole Miller became the first to introduce a “subzero” size for women with 23-inch waists—roughly the circumference of a junior soccer ball—and 35-inch hips (the average U.S. woman has a 34-inch waist and 43-inch hips; Schrobsdorff, 2006). It is feared that 0 and 00 sizes are becoming status symbols among young girls who glorify razor-thin bodies. For older women, clothing companies also engage in a common practice known as “vanity sizing,” whereby garments with the same size number become larger over time. In the 1930s, a woman with a 32-inch bust would have worn a size 14; in the 1960s, she’d have been an 8; today, she’d be a size 0 (Clifford, 2011). Such a practice allegedly makes older women feel better about themselves because it gives the illusion that they are thinner than they really are.

But not all U.S. women share weight concerns equally. Eighty percent of African American women and 78% of Latina women are overweight or obese, compared with 66% of white women (ProQuest Statistical Abstract, 2019). Yet white women are significantly more likely than women of color to express concerns about their weight and to exhibit disordered eating behaviors (Abrams, Allen, & Gray, 1993). In one study of 11- to 17-year-olds, white girls were more likely than Latina and black girls to think they were overweight, even though their actual weight was in the “normal” range. Indeed, young black women were far more likely than other groups to consider themselves “good looking” (Mikolajczyk, Iannotti, Farhat, & Thomas, 2012).
Likewise, adult African American women, especially poor and working-class women, worry less than women of other races about dieting or about not being thin enough (Molloy & Herzberger, 1998). One study found that although African American women are more likely than white women to weigh more than 120% of their recommended body weight, they are much less likely to perceive themselves as overweight or to suffer blows to their self-esteem as a result (Averett & Korenman, 1999). When black women do diet, their efforts to lose weight are more realistic and less extreme than white women’s attempts.

However, some researchers challenge the suggestion that women of color are somehow immune to body weight concerns (e.g., Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2009). Some have suggested that women of color have always suffered from body dissatisfaction and disordered eating but have largely been overlooked by researchers because they are less likely than white women to seek treatment (Brodey, 2005). Others speculate that body dissatisfaction among women of color has actually increased recently because they are more likely than their predecessors to be exposed to and adopt for themselves dominant white preferences, attitudes, and ideals about beauty and weight. One study found that the risk of disordered eating increases for African American women who have a strong desire to assimilate into the dominant white culture (Abrams et al., 1993). Concern over weight shows how powerful cultural beliefs are in the formation of self-concepts. At best, the failure to meet broad cultural standards of thinness can lower self-esteem and generate antagonism toward one’s own body. At worst, it can lead to life-threatening eating disorders. Such drastic responses indicate the importance of body size—and physical appearance in general—in forming impressions of other people.

Verbal and Nonverbal Expression

Aside from physical appearance, another important piece of information we use in forming impressions of others is what people express to us verbally or nonverbally. Obviously, we form impressions of others based on what they choose to tell us about themselves. But beyond speech, people’s movements, postures, and gestures also provide cues about their values, attitudes, sentiments, personality, and history (G. P. Stone, 1981).

Sometimes people use these forms of communication purposely to convey meaning, as when they put on a smile so that others will find them approachable. Professional sign language interpreters know that facial expressions are an integral component of sign language. According to one interpreter, “The only way you can do a question is with your eyebrows. A major way to do an adverb is with mouth movements. Even in [formal speech] there’s often irony, which you show on your face,” (quoted in Schulman, 2014, p. 19). However, many physical expressions, such as a shaky voice, a flushed face, and trembling hands, are difficult to control. They transmit an impression whether we want to or not.

Most of us are quite proficient at “reading” even the subtlest nonverbal messages. We learn early on that a raised eyebrow, a nod of the head, or a slight hand gesture can mean something important in a social encounter. So crucial is this ability in maintaining orderly interactions that some psychologists consider a deficiency in it to be a learning disability akin to severe reading problems (Goleman, 1989).

MANAGING IMPRESSIONS

From the previous discussion of impression formation, it’s clear that at the same time we’re making judgments about others, we’re also trying to manipulate information about ourselves to sway how others judge us. This ability to influence the impressions others make of us is the
It should be obvious by now that whether we like it or not, we frequently judge people’s character by their size, shape, and physical attractiveness. Furthermore, you’ve seen that meeting cultural standards of beauty has always been a more treacherous and consequential endeavor for women than for men. What makes things even trickier is that the standards of physical attractiveness can shift over time. For instance, although standards of beauty can vary between cultures or between ethnic groups within the same culture, the idealized female body type has become thinner and thinner over the years.

What better place to see the “shrinkage” of feminine beauty than in national pageants like the Miss America contest. Here are photos of the Miss America winners from 1936, 1947, 2009, and 2015. Aside from the obvious changes in fashion styles, do you notice any differences between the bodies of the women on the left and the bodies of the women on the right? How do you think definitions of beauty in the 1930s and 1940s compare to definitions of beauty today? Could Katie Stam (Miss America, 2009) or Kira Kazantsev (Miss America, 2015) have competed successfully in the 1936 pageant? Do you think the appearance standards used to judge contestants in a competition like the Miss America pageant reflect broader cultural tastes or determine those tastes? In 2018, the Miss America Organization eliminated the swimsuit competition from its pageants, claiming it would no longer judge contestants on their attractiveness. Do you think that such a change will render assessments of contestants’ physical appearance irrelevant in these pageants?
defining feature of human interaction. We often try to create impressions of ourselves that give us advantages—by making us seem attractive or powerful or otherwise worthy of people’s attention and esteem. Of course, we’re not always good at it. Remember my ill-fated jump shot with my future sister-in-law’s new basketball?

The process by which people attempt to present a favorable public image of themselves is called impression management. Erving Goffman (1959), the sociologist most responsible for the scholarly examination of impression management, portrays everyday life as a series of social interactions in which a person is motivated to “sell” a particular image to others. The primary goal of impression management is to project a particular identity that will increase the likelihood of obtaining favorable outcomes from others in particular social situations (E. E. Jones & Pittman, 1982; Stryker, 1980). To do so, we can strategically furnish or conceal information. At times, we may need to advertise, exaggerate, or even fabricate our positive qualities; at other times, we conceal or camouflage behaviors or attributes that we believe others will find unappealing.

The prominent role that social media now plays in our lives has created new challenges for impression management. Recall our discussion of role taking in Chapter 5. In our “offline” lives, we interact with various people each day: family, acquaintances, co-workers, friends from different corners of our lives. Consequently, we have the opportunity to express multiple selves and manage different impressions that suit our different immediate needs. You’re probably not the same person when you’re with your friends at school as you are when you visit your grandparents. As long as you keep these disparate groups apart, you’re OK. But online—when, say, you’re posting photos of yourself on Instagram—you have one shot at managing the impression you want others to form of you. And it’s an impression various people who have come to know you under very different circumstances could have access to. Perhaps you know someone who posted half-naked drunken photos from their 21st birthday party only to have them seen, with much dismay, by unsuspecting parents. Similarly, on Twitter, once we tweet some rant or intimate self-disclosure, it’s out there forever, remaining in the feed of whoever is following us. That’s a lot of pressure. Social media sites seem to acknowledge the necessity for managing multiple selves by allowing users to customize impressions to particular selected audiences through privacy settings and friend lists.

Whether it occurs online or offline in face-to-face interaction, obtaining favorable outcomes through impression management is usually associated with a desire for social approval—that is, with being respected and liked by others. However, different circumstances may require projecting different identities (E. E. Jones & Pittman, 1982). Maybe you’ve been in situations where you’ve tried to appear helpless or meek in order to get someone else to do a task you really didn’t want to do. A famous actress once said of her director, “He wins us over by being humble, so we help him with this thing he’s making” (quoted in Friend, 2017, p. 32). Or perhaps you’ve tried to appear mean and fearsome to intimidate someone or “played dumb” to avoid challenging a superior (Gove, Hughes, & Geerkin, 1980). Because of our capacity for role taking, we are able to tailor our images to fit the requirements of a particular situation.

Goffman argues that impression management is not just used to present false or inflated images of ourselves. Many authentic attributes we possess are not immediately apparent to others; sometimes our actions may be misinterpreted. Imagine yourself taking the final exam in your sociology course. You look up from your paper and make brief eye contact with the instructor. You’re not cheating, but you think the instructor may interpret your wandering eyes as an indication of cheating. What do you do? Chances are you will deliberately overemphasize your noncheating behavior by acting as though you’re deep in thought or by glancing up at the clock to highlight your “law-abiding” image.

Frequently people try to present a favorable image of themselves by strategically altering their physical appearance. Clothing and body adornment can be used to manipulate and manage the
impressions others form of us. People can dress to convey the impression that they are worthy of respect or, at the very least, attention (Lauer & Handel, 1977). Some research has shown that women who dress in a traditionally masculine way during a job interview are more likely to be hired. Likewise, students perceive teachers who dress formally as more intelligent than teachers who dress casually (cited in Blakeslee, 2012). When I was a new faculty member at my university, I decided I’d dress extremely casually (for instance, in shorts and a t-shirt) when teaching, hoping students would see me as “cool.” A fellow professor, who was hired the same year I was, wore a tie and sport coat to class every day. One day at a large faculty gathering, he walked up to me, stood right by my side, and asked those around us jokingly, “Can you believe we both have the same job?”

Children often signal their entry into the world of adolescence by wearing the clothing of their peers and refusing to wear the clothing chosen by their parents (G. P. Stone, 1981). The purveyors of various music subcultures like pop, hip-hop, metal, emo, indie, dance/house/techno, and goth use clothing and hairstyle as an expression of identity and social rebellion. And as you are well aware, fashion is a significant element of the student subculture on most college campuses. In short, by what they wear, people tell one another who they are, where they come from, and what they stand for.

**HAJO ADAM AND ADAM GALINSKY**

**CAN YOUR CLOTHES MAKE YOU SMARTER?**

We all know that clothes affect how others perceive us. Books like *Dress for Success* and TV shows like *What Not to Wear* confirm the impression management beliefs we all have: People treat us differently depending on what we’re wearing. People tend to receive more respect—from friends, clients, and customers—when they are dressed formally than when they are dressed casually. Not surprisingly, when we wear formal clothing, we tend to perceive ourselves differently, too, thinking we’re more competent and rational than when we’re wearing shorts and a T-shirt (Peluchette & Karl, 2007).

But is it possible that the type of clothing people wear can also affect the way they act and process information? A growing scientific field called “enclothed cognition” argues that the answer is a resounding yes. In one study, when subjects were expensive, tailored suits, they were more likely than those dressed casually to forgo a $12 reward that day in order to receive a $20 reward the next day. The researchers argued that these subjects were demonstrating better abstract processing, the kind of big-picture thinking CEOs and managers are required to perform on a daily basis. On the flip side, when subjects wore uniforms associated with lower-level workers, they demonstrated greater levels of the “machine-like” thinking required for repetitive tasks (Slepian, Ferber, Gold, & Rutlich, 2015).

Social psychologists Hajo Adam and Adam Galinsky designed a series of experiments to address this question further. They gave subjects long white coats and told some of them the garment was a “lab coat.” Others were told it was a “painter’s coat.” The ones wearing “lab coats” performed better on an array of cognitive tasks that required close attention. In one task, subjects were shown a series of letters on a computer screen for a brief second and asked to immediately identify whether the letters were in blue or red. In some trials, the letters were congruent: R-E-D printed in red and B-L-U-E printed in blue. In others, however the letters were incongruent: R-E-D in blue and B-L-U-E in red. The subjects in “painter’s coats” made about twice as many mistakes in the incongruent trials as the subjects wearing “lab coats.” Even when they were given an actual painter’s coat but told it was a lab coat, subjects outperformed others on tasks requiring sustained attention and memory (Adam & Galinsky, 2012).

Research on enclothed cognition can have real-world utility. For instance, does wearing the robe of a judge make people behave more ethically? Can putting on the uniform of a firefighter make someone more courageous? A few years ago, the Utah Department of Corrections decided it had to do something about the unruly, non-compliant, and violent inmates in its women’s prisons. Operating on the contention that uniforms make prisoners more likely to disobey rules (Ash, 2009), it provided the inmates with brand-new, plum-colored uniforms and lifted its ban on cosmetics. Shortly afterward, disciplinary problems plummeted. Some believe that thanks to the new uniforms, the women no longer saw themselves as prisoners but as people (Neilson, 2016).
Dramaturgy: Actors on a Social Stage

“All the world’s a stage, / And all the men and women merely players: / They have their exits and their entrances; / And one man in his time plays many parts,” wrote William Shakespeare in *As You Like It*. Analyzing social interaction as a series of theatrical performances—what sociologists call **dramaturgy**—has been a staple of symbolic interactionism for decades. Like Shakespeare, Goffman (1959) argues that people in everyday life are similar to actors on a stage. The “audience” consists of people who observe the behavior of others, “roles” are the images people are trying to project, and the “script” is the content of their communication with others. The goal is to enact a performance that is believable to a particular audience and that allows us to achieve the goals we desire. Just about every aspect of social life can be examined dramaturgically, from the ritualized greetings of strangers to the everyday dynamics of our family, school, and work lives.

Front Stage and Back Stage

A key structural element of dramaturgy is the distinction between front stage and back stage. In the theater, front stage is where the performance takes place for the audience. In contrast, back stage is where makeup is removed, lines are rehearsed, and performances are rehashed, and where people can fall “out of character.”

In social interaction, **front stage** is where people maintain the appropriate appearance as they interact with others. For workers in a restaurant, front stage is the dining room where the customers (the audience) are present. Here, the servers (the actors) are expected to present themselves as upbeat, happy, competent, and courteous. **Back stage**, however, is the region where people can knowingly violate their impression management performances. In the restaurant, back stage is the kitchen area where the once courteous servers now shout, shove dishes, and even complain about or mock the customers.

As in the theater, maintaining the barrier between front and back stage is crucial to successful impression management because it blocks the audience from seeing behavior that would ruin the performance. During a therapy session (front stage), a psychiatrist usually appears extremely interested in everything their patients say and shows considerable sympathy for their problems. At a dinner party with colleagues or at home with family (back stage), however, they may express total boredom with and disdain for their patients’ disclosures. If patients were to see such back stage behavior, not only would it disrupt the performance, but it would damage the psychiatrist’s professional credibility and reputation as well. One study found that beneath their mask of neutrality, many psychiatrists harbor strong and professionally inappropriate feelings—including hatred, fear, anger, and sexual arousal—toward their patients (cited in Goleman, 1993).

Props

Successful impression management also depends on the control of objects, called props, that convey identity. In the theater, props must be handled deftly for an effective performance. A gun that doesn’t go off when it’s supposed to or a chair that unexpectedly collapses can destroy an entire play. The same is true in social interaction. For instance, in preparation for an upcoming visit from their parents, college students may make sure their schoolbooks are in clear view and empty beer bottles disposed of. Similarly, someone may spend a great deal of time setting a romantic mood for a dinner date at home—the right music, the right lighting, pictures of former lovers hidden from view, and so on.

Sometimes people use props to create an environment that reinforces their authority over others. Note the way props were used to intimidate this professor as he testified before Congress:
And then I was called to the witness stand. Now, the chair is something nobody talks about. It is low and extremely puffy. When you sit in it your butt just keeps sinking, and suddenly the tabletop is up to your chest. The senators peer down at you from above, and the power dynamic is terrifying. (H. Jenkins, 1999, p. 21)

Props needn’t be inanimate objects. Various Japanese companies rent out human beings, posing as friends or co-workers, for social events such as weddings. Brides or grooms who want to impress others with the number of friends they have will sometimes pad the guest list with these impostors. Those who have recently lost jobs might rent “co-workers” to maintain an air of respectability (Demetriou, 2009). One company, Family Romance, will rent out people pretending to be substitute relatives like spouses, parents, even children. Some customers use these human props to project a public image of stability and respect, as when a single mother rented a fake husband for an interview with a prestigious school she hoped her daughter could attend (Batuman, 2018).

In China, some companies will rent white foreigners to pose as fake employees when potential clients and investors visit. The companies hope that the presence of these individuals will help to secure a contract or simply support the company’s claim of being prestigious, successful, and internationally connected. An ad in a Chinese newspaper for a company called Rent-a-Laowai (Chinese for “foreigner”) read: “Occasionally companies want a foreign face to go to meetings and conferences or to go to dinners and lunches and smile at the clients and shake people’s hands” (quoted in Farrar, 2010, p. 1).

Viewing impression management from a dramaturgical perspective reminds us that our everyday actions rarely occur in a social vacuum. Indeed, our behaviors are often structured with an eye toward how they might be perceived by particular “audiences.”

**Image Making**

In our individualistic, competitive society, appearances can sometimes provide a critically important edge. A person’s desire to maximize prestige, wealth, and power can be the driving force behind a thorough makeover. Two prominent examples are Americans’ pursuit of improved looks through the invasive alteration of their bodies and politicians’ pursuit of a popular identity through a carefully controlled public image. As you will see, these efforts are not things a person undertakes on his or her own. Whole industries have evolved that are devoted to making and remaking images for the public eye.

**The Surgical Alteration of Appearance**

The desire to manage impressions by changing physical appearance motivates some people to do far more than try a new hairstyle, get a tattoo, or buy a new outfit or two. Even in tough economic times, people in the United States are willing to spend huge sums of money to medically alter their looks. According to the American Society of Plastic Surgeons (2019), there were over 1.8 million cosmetic surgery procedures and nearly 16 million minimally invasive, nonsurgical procedures (such as Botox injections, cellulite treatments, and chemical peels) in the United States in 2018. Ninety-three percent of the patients were women (ProQuest Statistical Abstract, 2019). These figures represent a 163% increase over 2000. The overall cost for these procedures was about $16.5 billion. Exhibit 6.1 shows recent trends in the popularity of cosmetic procedures.

The desire to surgically alter one’s appearance is not unique to the United States:

- Doctors perform more plastic surgeries per capita in South Korea than anywhere else in the world; the United States ranks sixth. It’s estimated that one in five women in
Seoul has had some kind of cosmetic surgery (International Society of Aesthetic Plastic Surgery, 2016).

- Japan leads the world in blepharoplasty, an eyelid surgery that gives a rounder, more “Western” look to the eye, and hair removal (International Society of Aesthetic Plastic Surgery, 2018).

- Brazil leads the world in the number of head and facial procedures performed each year (International Society of Aesthetic Plastic Surgery, 2018). In 2001, the Brazilian contestant in the Miss Universe contest scandalized many non-Brazilians by speaking freely and publicly about her breast implants, cheekbone reconstruction, silicone remolding of her chin, pinned-back ears, and liposuction. She told reporters, “I have to work on my figure to get it where I want it. It’s something I need for my profession . . . . I have a doctorate in body measurement” (Kulick & Machado-Borges, 2005, p. 128).

- In China, the growing cosmetic surgery industry was valued at $71.8 billion in 2018. Roughly 22 million people went under the knife to alter their looks that year (cited in Zhihua, 2018). As one Chinese student put it, “In China we say there are no ugly women, only lazy women” (quoted in Savacool, 2009, p. 62). As in Japan, the most commonly requested procedure is one designed to make the eyes appear larger and more “Western” (LaFraniere, 2011). In fact, China hosts an annual Renzao Meinu or “artificial beauty” contest, where people from all over the globe compete to become the world’s most beautiful product of plastic surgery (Savacool, 2009).
The growing popularity of cosmetic surgery reflects an alarming level of discontent among people about the way they look. Researchers estimate that 30% to 40% of U.S. adults have concerns about some aspect of their physical appearance (Gorbis & Kholodenko, 2005). And 1.7% to 2.9% of the population—or about 1 in 50 people—are so self-conscious about their looks that their lives are constricted in some significant way, from feeling inhibited during lovemaking to becoming homebound or even suicidal (American Psychiatric Association, 2013; K. A. Phillips, 2019). About half of these individuals seek some sort of professional medical intervention, like surgery or dermatological treatment (Gorbis & Kholodenko, 2005). Indeed, the number of Americans undergoing weight reduction surgery, such as stomach banding, has increased sevenfold over the past decade, at a cost of over $6 billion annually (cited in Hartocollis, 2012b).

Political Portraits

If you have ever seen a U.S. political party’s national convention the summer before a presidential election, you have witnessed a highly professional, meticulously planned effort at impression management. Music, balloons, lighting, logos, colors, even individual delegates in the audience are all transformed into props that are manipulated to project images of patriotism, unity, organization, strength, and, above all, electability. At the center is the candidate, who must personally present an image (also professionally crafted) that will appeal to enough voters to win the election. Campaign staffs are concerned as much with ensuring that their candidate “appears presidential” as they are with the candidate’s positions on key political issues.

Consider the images Barack Obama had to craft during his two presidential campaigns. During his first election in 2008, he had to deal with problems in “looking presidential,” such as not wearing an American flag lapel pin (which he started doing), “fist bumping” his wife on the campaign trail (which he stopped doing), and having the middle name “Hussein” (which he could do nothing about). He successfully managed his most obvious image problem—his race and ethnicity—by repeatedly telling audiences on the campaign trail that he didn’t look like the presidents on our currency and acknowledging that he had a funny name. In doing so, he neutralized opposition attempts to paint him as un-American. By 2012, Obama’s political enemies were still trying to paint him as an alien threat, calling attention to his “exotic” upbringing and questioning his religious affiliation, his ability to govern for “all” Americans, or even whether he was a U.S. citizen.

The impression management dilemma many candidates running for office face is how to downplay their affluence. Privileged backgrounds don’t provide the “up-from-nothing” life story many candidates these days seem to want (Leibovich, 2014). Every election cycle, we watch all manner of exceedingly wealthy candidates go through the charade of altering their clothing, mannerisms, tastes, and vocabulary to show voters that they’re just like them. They’ll highlight the hardscrabble lives they had when younger: living with an abusive, alcoholic father; being raised by an immigrant single mother; dealing with daily racial or religious taunts; struggling with their sexual identity; growing up poor, whether on the Texas-Mexico border, in a Pennsylvania steel town, in rural Oklahoma, or on the tough streets of Brooklyn.

Even when they have no such story of early struggles, candidates will work hard to craft an image that they’re “just like” everyone else:

It is known that during an election season, a flock of politicians will migrate to local pubs, greasy spoons, and fried-Oreo stands at county fairs in an attempt to appear more normal. The wool suits will be replaced with casual windbreakers. . . . Social media has become an enormously useful hub for candidates to trumpet how relatable they are—to show just how much they are like us. (Larson, 2019, p. 11; emphasis in original)
For some candidates, whose massive wealth simply can’t be ignored, such attempts can seem far-fetched. Donald Trump, one of the richest presidential candidates in history, was able, through rough tell-it-like-it-is language and “Make America Great Again” baseball caps, to persuade poor and working-class voters that he could empathize with their suffering at the same time he was glorifying—and even exaggerating (Farenthold & O’Connell, 2019)—his own net worth. Although he is an Ivy League graduate, real estate tycoon, reality TV star, and heir to vast inherited wealth who once compared himself to Jesus, Trump claimed he was just like everybody else. “I love blue collar workers,” he said during the campaign. “And I consider myself in a certain way to be a blue collar worker” (quoted in Edelman, 2016, p. 1).

Once elected, presidents, with the help or hindrance of the media, must play simultaneously to international and domestic audiences (P. Hall, 1990). The international audience consists of foreign allies and adversaries, whom presidents must convince of their authority and ability to fulfill commitments. The domestic audience is the voting public. Typically presidents have sought to impress voters through the portrayal of “presidential character”: good health, intellect, honesty, decisiveness, control, a stable home and family life, and so forth. Trump has been unique among presidents in that he has managed to appeal to his base of voters—and intimidate foreign foes and allies—by projecting a very different image: one of rage, vulgarity, unpredictability, and political inexperience.

Moreover, the president is but one member of an entire administration made up of various departments, commissions, and agencies, each of which must engage in its own impression management so as not to reflect poorly on the government. For instance, the Counterterrorism Communications Center provides detailed directives for how government officials ought to talk about our military involvements worldwide. Here we see the importance of projecting a trustworthy, knowledgeable image:

Try to limit the number of non-English terms you use. . . . Mispronunciation could make your statement incomprehensible and/or sound ill-informed. If you must use such a word, make sure your pronunciation is validated by an expert. Don’t use words that require use of consonants that do not exist in English and whose nearest English approximation has a totally different meaning. (Counterterrorism Communications Center, 2008, p. 2)

The White House, no matter who is in office, has a large staff of media and public relations consultants to ensure that images and messages are tightly controlled so as to depict the president in the most favorable light possible. Whenever the president travels—whether on an excursion to a small town in the heartland or a major state trip to Asia—a small advance team arrives at the location days or perhaps weeks beforehand to coordinate every logistical component of the trip. But it’s not just about making sure limousines arrive on time or security personnel know their duties. The advance team functions as an impression management extension of the president by making sure every factory the president visits, every walk they take, and every meal they eat at a local diner runs as smoothly as possible (White House Blog, 2010). Advance teams must even develop plans for dealing with demonstrators and protestors, should they be present (Office of Presidential Advance, 2002).

Often a president’s goals are accomplished through “gesture politics”—actions or initiatives that are largely symbolic and convey, whether purposefully or not, particular characteristics. National leaders frequently find themselves judged not so much by the effectiveness of their policies as by how the public responds to their gestures:

At least one European newspaper described [former] President Bush’s effort to aid tsunami victims [in 2004] as a bid to show U.S. compassion. What was important
was not the particulars of Bush’s own aid plan, but whether the public would find it convincingly noble. . . . In the public mind [programs] are secondary to (and their success is dependent on) the personal gestures that accompany them. (Caldwell, 2005, p. 11)

Like all of his predecessors, Barack Obama had his share of gesture politics appearances following such tragedies as floods in the Mississippi Delta; tornados in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, Joplin, Missouri, and Moore, Oklahoma; a school shooting in Newtown, Connecticut; the aftermath of Superstorm Sandy in New York and New Jersey; the bombing at the Boston Marathon; and the massacre at Charleston’s Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church. At each of these events, Obama was judged more by the comfort and sympathy his gestures symbolized than by the specific details of his plans. But gesture politics always carries the risk of criticism if actions fail to convey the precise level of empathy, sympathy, or strength the general public thinks is appropriate. President Donald Trump faced a harsh media backlash in 2017 for “helping” Puerto Rican victims of Hurricane Maria by throwing rolls of paper towels at them when he visited the island two weeks after the storm devastated it.

Social Influences on Impression Management

Up to this point, I’ve described impression management and dramaturgy from the viewpoint of individual actors driven by a personal desire to present themselves in the most advantageous light possible. But social group membership may also influence the sorts of images a person tries to present in social interaction. The elements of one’s identity—age, gender, race and ethnicity, religion, social class, occupational status—influence others’ immediate expectations, which can be self-fulfilling. In other words, members of certain social groups may manage impressions somewhat differently than nonmembers because of society’s preconceived notions about them. Race or ethnicity and social status are among the most notable influences on impression management.

Race and Ethnicity

In a society where race is a primary source of inequality, people of color often learn that they will be rewarded if they assimilate to “white norms” and hide the elements of their ethnoracial culture. According to Kenji Yoshino (2006), a law professor, the pressure to “act white” means that people of color must suppress the nonwhite aspects of their hairstyle, clothing, and speech. They must also monitor their social activities, participation in ethnic or race-based organizations or political causes, and friendship networks. The comedian Dave Chappelle once said that African Americans must be “bilingual” if they want to make it in this society. In other words, they become adept at identifying situations, like job interviews, where they must “code-switch,” that is, eliminate “black” patterns of speech and “speak white” (Chaudhry, 2006).

Such impression management strategies may increase the likelihood of economic benefit, but they are not without social costs. As then senator Barack Obama said in a 2004 speech at the Democratic National Convention, “Children [of color] can’t achieve unless we raise their expectations and . . . eradicate the slander that says a black youth with a book is acting white” (quoted in Fryer, 2006, p. 53). People of color who “act white” in some situations but perform a different version of their identity when with others like themselves run the risk of being considered sellouts or tagged as “Oreos,” “bananas,” or “coconuts”—that is, black or yellow or brown on the outside and white on the inside—by members of their ethnoracial communities (Chaudhry, 2006).

Moreover, it’s only the relatively affluent who have the opportunity to learn how to act white. Others—Pakistaní cab drivers, Latina housekeepers, Korean grocery store clerks, to name a
few—have no such option. Indeed, living up (or down) to certain ethnoracial stereotypes may be one of the few ways people can participate actively in public life while retaining their own cultural identity. In the past, for example, Native Americans often complained that in interactions with members of other ethnoracial groups, they were expected to “act Indian” by wearing traditional garb or speaking in the stilted manner of media stereotypes. Contemporary rap and hip-hop stars are often criticized for conforming to unflattering black stereotypes in order to appeal to white, middle-class audiences. But while individuals from disadvantaged groups may appear to fit common racial or ethnic stereotypes in public (front stage), an analysis of private (back stage) behavior often indicates that they are keenly aware of the identities they’ve been forced to present. Impression management is obviously an important survival tactic.

Sociologist Elijah Anderson carried out observational research in a racially, ethnically, and economically diverse area of Philadelphia he called Village Northton. The area is home to two communities: one black and poor, the other middle to upper income and predominantly white. Anderson was particularly interested in how young black men—the overwhelming majority of whom were civil and law abiding—managed public impressions to deal with the assumption of Village Northton residents that all young black men are dangerous.

Anderson discovered that a central theme for most black male residents was maintaining safety on the streets and avoiding violent and drug-related crime. incapable of making distinctions between law-abiding black males and others, people relied for protection on broad stereotypes: Whites are law abiding and trustworthy; young black men are crime prone and dangerous.

Residents of the area, including black men themselves, were likely to be suspicious of unknown black men on the street. Women, particularly white—clutched their purses and edged up closer to their companions as they walked down the street. Many pedestrians crossed the street or averted their eyes from young black men, who were seen as unpredictable and menacing.

Some of the young black men in the area developed certain dramaturgical strategies to overcome the assumption that they were dangerous. For instance, many came to believe that if they presented a certain appearance or carried certain props with them in public that represented law-abiding behavior (e.g., a briefcase, a shirt and tie, a college ID card), they could be treated better in contacts with the police or others in the neighborhood. In addition, they often used friendly or deferential greetings as a kind of preemptive peace offering, designed to advise others of their civil intentions. Or they went to great lengths to behave in ways contrary to the presumed expectations of Whites.

I find myself being extra nice to Whites. A lot of times I be walking down the streets . . . and I see somebody white. . . . I know they are afraid of me. They don’t know me but they intimidated. . . . So I might smile, just to reassure them. . . . At other times I find myself opening doors, you know. Holding the elevator. Putting myself in a certain light, you know, to change whatever doubts they may have. [E. Anderson, 1990, pp. 185–186]

Such impression management requires an enormous amount of effort and places responsibility for ensuring social order on this man. He feels compelled to put strangers at ease so he can go about his own business. He understands that his mere presence makes others nervous and uncomfortable. He recognizes that trustworthiness—an ascribed characteristic of Whites—is something Blacks must work hard to achieve.

Other young black men, less willing to bear the burden of social order, capitalized on the fear they knew they could evoke. Some purposely “put on a Swagger” or adopted a menacing stance to intimidate other pedestrians. Some purposely created discomfort in those they considered “ignorant” enough to be unnecessarily afraid of them. According to Anderson, law-abiding youth have an interest in giving the impression that they are dangerous: It is a way to keep others at bay. The right looks and moves ensure safe passage on the street.

The irony of such survival tactics is that they make it even more difficult for others to distinguish between those who are law abiding and those who are crime prone. By exhibiting an air of danger and toughness, a young black man may avoid being ridiculed or even victimized by his own peers, but he risks further alienating law-abiding Whites and Blacks. Members of racial and ethnic minorities face many such special dilemmas in impression management, whether they attempt to contradict stereotypes or embrace them.
It’s worth remembering that Anderson wrote his book 30 years ago, long before social media became a mechanism for the instant dissemination of racially charged incidents. Arguably, the public impression management strategies of young black men may be even more consequential today than they were in 1990. As we hear and read more and more stories of their violent encounters with police and armed civilians, it has become clear that projected images can literally have life-or-death consequences.

Socioeconomic Status

A person’s relative economic position in society can also influence impression management. Like the young black men in Anderson’s (1990) study, some working-class youths, frustrated by their lack of access to the middle-class world and their inability to meet the requirements of “respectability” as defined by the dominant culture, may present themselves as malicious or dangerous. A tough image helps them gain attention or achieve status and respect within their group (Campbell, 1987; A. K. Cohen, 1955).

Conversely, those who occupy the dominant classes of society can get the attention and respect we all want with very little effort (Derber, 1979). They get special consideration in restaurants, shops, and other public settings. They monopolize the starring roles in politics and economics and also claim more than their share of attention in ordinary interactions. By displaying the symbolic props of material success—large homes, tasteful furnishings, luxury cars, expensive clothes and jewelry—people know that they can impress others and thereby reinforce their own sense of worth and status.

Prior to the economic recession of 2008, the visual trappings of social class had become harder to spot. When credit was easily available, more U.S. adults had access to the traditional high-end props of the well-to-do. A middle-class family could own multiple flat-screen televisions or a fancy sports car. Just a few years ago, 81% of respondents in one study indicated that they had felt some pressure to buy high-priced goods (cited in Steinhauer, 2005). So the extremely wealthy ratcheted up the visual display of social status, buying even more expensive products, such as $130,000 cars, $7,000 smartphones, and $400 bottles of wine, and using posh services like personal chefs and private jets.

Tougher times, however, led even the super rich to become a bit more discreet in their public displays of wealth:

Fabulous home theaters are tucked into the basements of plain suburban houses.
Bespoke jeans that start at $1,200 can be detected only by a tiny red logo on the button.
The hand-painted Italian bicycles that flash across Silicon Valley on Saturday mornings have become the new Ferrari. (Sengupta, 2012, p. A1)

Indeed, for a time, ostentatious displays of wealth became the object of public anger and ridicule. You may recall the firestorm that erupted in the media in 2009, when the chief executives of the major U.S. automakers flew to Washington, D.C., in their private jets to appeal for federal bailout money. In fact, some public figures—like Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg in his trademark hoodie—take great pains to distance themselves from their upper-class status.

With a multibillionaire as president and an improving economy, it remains to be seen whether ostentatious displays of wealth will make a comeback. The popularity of social media sites like “Rich Kids of Instagram,” “Best of All Worlds,” and “Private School Snapchats” as well as Twitter hashtags like #blessed or #donthateappreciate indicates that perhaps they already are.

Status differences in impression management permeate the workplace, too. Those at the very top of an organization need not advertise their high status because it is already known to the
people with whom they interact regularly. Their occupational status is a permanently recognized "badge of ability" (Derber, 1979, p. 83). Others, however, must consciously solicit the attention to which they feel they are entitled. For example, physicians in hospitals may wear stethoscopes and white lab coats to communicate their high-status identity to patients; female doctors are especially inclined to do so to avoid being mistaken for nurses. These status markers become especially powerful when compared with patients, who are often required to shed their own clothes and put on revealing hospital-issue garments. It's hard to appear powerful and be taken seriously in a conversation with a doctor when you're barefoot and naked under a paper gown (D. Franklin, 2006).

Some indicators of occupational status have become the source of conflict, however. In recent years, thousands of nurses have returned to school to earn their Doctorates of Nursing Practice. As a result, they are entitled to—and often do—refer to themselves as “Doctor So-and-So” while at work in hospitals. According to one website that provides advice to nurses, referring to oneself as a doctor has several advantages:

First, it’s a recognition of the level of expertise and clinical skills of a nurse. It represents that the nurse has achieved the highest degree possible in nursing, and should be considered an expert in his or her field. Second, it also can help build trust between the nurse and patient as the patient can be reassured of the nurse's competency. (Registered Nursing, 2019, p. 1)

Needless to say, many physicians oppose the use of such titles, seeing it not only as confusing to patients but as a threat to their professional authority and stature (G. Harris, 2011a). And they’re fighting back. A bill was once proposed in the Florida state senate that would have made it a felony for nurses to call themselves doctors, no matter what their degree. It didn’t pass. In Arizona and Delaware, however, nurses, pharmacists, and other health care providers who aren’t physicians are forbidden from referring to themselves as “Doctor” unless they immediately identify their profession (Waldrop, 2013).

Impression management plays a prominent role in the socialization process within many professions (A. R. Hochschild, 1983). Managers and CEOs in large companies, for instance, become acutely aware of the image they must exude through their dress and demeanor as they rise up the corporate ladder. Salespeople are trained to present themselves as knowledgeable, trustworthy, and, above all, honest. Medical students learn how to manage their emotions in front of patients and to present the image of “competent physicians.” New teachers learn what images are most effective in getting students to comply. This teacher’s assessment of the importance of impression management more than 50 years ago still rings true today:

You can’t ever let them get the upper hand on you or you’re through. So I start out tough. The first day I get a new class in, I let them know who’s boss. . . . You’ve got to start off tough, then you can ease up as you go along. If you start out easygoing, when you try to be tough, they’ll just look at you and laugh. (E. Goffman, 1959, p. 12)

More generally, in any given interaction, one person is likely to have more power than others (Wrong, 1988). When we first hear the word power, we think of it in terms of orders, threats, and coercion. But noncoercive forms of power—the signs and symbols of dominance, the subtle messages of threat, the gestures of submission—are much more common to impression management in social encounters (Henley, 1977). The humiliation of being powerless is felt by people who are ignored or interrupted, are intimidated by another’s presence, are afraid to approach or touch a superior, or have their privacy freely invaded by another.
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The norms that govern the way people address each other also reflect underlying power differences. For instance, the conversations that take place between friends or siblings are commonly marked by the mutual use of informal terms such as first names or nicknames. When status is unequal, though, the lower-status person is often required to use terms of respect such as Sir or Ma’am or Doctor. In the South in years past, every white person had the privilege of addressing any black person by first name and receiving the respectful form of address in return. A president’s fondness for making up funny nicknames for people on his staff or members of Congress may appear amiable and friendly, but it also reinforces power differences. These people are still required to address him as “Mr. President.”

Status differences are even more clearly institutionalized in some languages. In Spanish, tu is the familiar word for “you,” which is used when one is talking to a subordinate or to a person of equal status. Usted also means “you,” but it is the formal version, used when one is addressing a person of superior status. The terms we use to address others may on the surface appear simply to be forms of etiquette. However, forms of address convey a great deal of information about who we think we are in relation to the others we encounter.

Collective Impression Management

We often find ourselves in situations that require a “couple,” “group,” or “organizational” image of some sort. These impressions are more complex than individual ones, and their management often requires the help and cooperation of others. For example, business partners often present a united front and a joint image of trustworthiness to their clients. Erving Goffman (1959) uses the term performance team to describe individuals who intimately cooperate in staging a performance that leads an audience to form an impression of one or all of the team members.

Team members are highly dependent on one another and must show a fair amount of trust and loyalty, because each member has the power to disrupt or “give away” the performance at any moment. Individuals who can’t be trusted—such as political advisers who have worked for another party or people who are emotionally unstable—thus make poor teammates.

One of the most obvious performance teams is the married couple. Couples are socially obligated to present a believable and cooperative image, particularly if the audience does not know them very well. Few things can be as uncomfortable for onlookers as being in the presence of a couple who is openly fighting, bickering, or putting each other down. The cultural value of marriage—and, by extension, the institution of family—is publicly reinforced by the ability of couples to collectively project contented images of a loving relationship.

Like individual impression management, successful teamwork depends on maintaining the boundary between front stage and back stage. If a couple’s teamwork is cohesive and the performance believable, the partners can give the impression that they are happy and content even if they have had a bitter fight moments before going out in public. But the boundary between front stage and back stage is fragile, and third parties may undermine the best efforts at team impression management. Imagine a dinner guest being informed by a precocious 4-year-old that “Mommy and Daddy were yelling the f-word at each other before you got here.” Young children who can speak but are not yet schooled in the social conventions of everyday interaction are not, from a dramaturgical perspective, trustworthy performance teammates. They are often too honest to maintain a front. They are naturally inclined to let audiences back stage, thereby disrupting both the order of the situation and the identities the actors have attempted to claim.

The ability to go back stage periodically is crucial to maintaining a sound team relationship. Not only does it give the team a place to rehearse public performances, but it also provides a refuge from outside scrutiny. For married couples, tensions can rise if they must
constantly be “on” for an audience. This is precisely why out-of-town houseguests become a burden after a long visit or why living with one or the other partner’s parents becomes so difficult. The couple has no back stage, no chance for privacy, no place to go to escape the demands of audience expectations.

Organizations must carefully manage their impressions, too, as a way of establishing their legitimacy (Ginzel, Kramer, & Sutton, 2004). Those that depend on public approval for their survival have to develop effective team performances to manage public perceptions (S. Taylor & Bogdan, 1980). Take, for instance, the way U.S. law enforcement organizations present high-profile crime suspects to the public. The suspect being transported from one place to another is usually in shackles, with armed officers on either side. Occasionally the officers halfheartedly try to hide the alleged perpetrator’s face with a coat or a hat, even though we are likely to know who the person is. If the suspect is well known, a raincoat will often be draped over their handcuffs. The “perp walk,” as it is known, is a decades-long American tradition designed not only to satisfy the press but to give the police an opportunity to gloat over their latest capture and, in the process, humiliate the suspect (S. Roberts, 2011). Moreover, if staged well, the perp walk makes the suspect look dangerous—the kind of person who would mail letter bombs, blow up federal office buildings, or commit sexual assault. If prisoners are left unshaven and unkempt and presented in orange prison jumpsuits at a court hearing, the public gets the impression that they’ve already been convicted.

Individual impression management and organizational impression management are governed by the same principles (A. R. Hochschild, 1983). Take, for instance, the management of props and physical space. Hospitals usually line their walls with soothing paintings designed to calm, not agitate; children’s wards are often filled with colorful images of familiar cartoon characters. Other types of physical structures may be managed to convey images of power and dominance. For instance, the White House is symbolically the center of world politics. Some of the most important international decisions are made within its walls. But at the same time,

the building itself—with its white walls, serene proportions, classical Greek tympanum and colonnade—has become the symbol of a power that radiates not only strength but also peace, freedom, and harmony. The rich and positive symbolism has been daily reinforced by the media broadcasting throughout the world pictures of this resplendent mansion, the opulent elegance of the Oval Office, the . . . professionalism and impeccable white shirts of the president’s men, the beautiful green lawns with a cheerful and self-confident president and his playful dog nimbly stepping out of the helicopter as if he were a Greek God alighting from Olympus. (Hankiss, 2001, p. 1)

In any society, people often find themselves in situations where they must depend on others for the successful performance of the roles they play as individuals. Without teamwork, many individual and organizational performances would fail, interactions would fall apart, and ultimately social order would be threatened (Henslin, 1991).

**MISMANAGING IMPRESSIONS: SPOILED IDENTITIES**

While impression management is universal, it’s not always successful. We may mishandle props, blow our lines, mistakenly allow the audience to peek back stage, or otherwise destroy the credibility of our performances. Some of us manage to recover from ineffective impression management quite quickly; others suffer an extended devaluation of their identities.
What happens when impression management is unsuccessful? What do we do to regain identities and restore social order?

**Embarrassment**

A common emotional reaction to impression mismanagement is embarrassment, the spontaneous feeling we experience when the identity we are presenting is suddenly and unexpectedly discredited in front of others (E. Gross & Stone, 1964). An adolescent boy trying to look “cool” in front of his friends may have his tough image shattered by the unexpected arrival of his mother in the family minivan. We can see his embarrassment in the fixed smile, the nervous hollow laugh, the busy hands, and the downward glance that hides his eyes from the gaze of others (E. Goffman, 1967). Embarrassment can come from a multitude of sources: lack of poise (stumbling, saying something stupid, spilling a drink, inappropriately exposing body parts), intrusion into the private settings of others (a man walking into a women’s restroom), improper dress for a particular social occasion (wearing shorts and flip-flops to a formal dinner party), and so on.

Embarrassment is sociologically important because it has the potential to destroy the orderliness of a social situation. Imagine being at your high school graduation. As the class valedictorian is giving the commencement address, a gust of wind blows her note cards off the podium. As she reaches down to collect them, she hits her head on the microphone and tears her gown. In front of hundreds of people she stands there, flustered, not knowing what to say or do. The situation would be uncomfortable and embarrassing not only for her but for you and the rest of the audience as well.

Because embarrassment is disruptive for all concerned, it is in everyone’s best interest to cooperate in reducing or eliminating it. To call attention to such an act may be as embarrassing as the original episode itself, so we may pretend not to notice the faux pas (Lindesmith et al., 1991). By suppressing signs of recognition, we make it easier for the person to regain composure (E. Goffman, 1967). A mutual commitment to supporting others’ social identities, even when those identities are in danger, is a fundamental norm of social interaction.

At times, however, embarrassment is used strategically to disrupt another person’s impression management. Practical jokes, for instance, are intentional attempts to rein in conceit or overconfidence and cause someone to lose identity. More seriously, groups and organizations may use embarrassment or the threat of embarrassment (e.g., hazing) to encourage a preferred activity or discourage behavior that may be damaging to the group. In that sense, embarrassment reasserts the power structure of the group, because only certain people can legitimately embarrass others. A low-status employee, for instance, has much less freedom to embarrass a superior or make them the target of a joke than vice versa (Coser, 1960).

Organizations themselves may also experience considerable public shame, humiliation, and embarrassment from time to time:

- In 2010, Toyota faced worldwide condemnation and was forced to recall some 8 million vehicles when it could no longer deny published reports of fatal accidents in which accelerator pedals had gotten stuck at high speeds.

- In 2011, some officials in Japanese government agencies were forced to resign for trying to downplay the public health crisis that occurred after a nuclear reactor sustained major damage from an earthquake and tsunami.

- Sony Corporation faced a massive public relations disaster in 2014 when a group calling itself “Guardians of Peace” (#GOP) hacked into its computer system and posted highly sensitive documents and internal correspondence between executives that
revealed disturbing examples of casual racism, star bashing, and a multitude of other embarrassing secrets (Richards, 2014).

- Over the past several years, several of the largest companies in the United States, including Yahoo, eBay, Equifax, Target, Uber, and Marriott, experienced massive data breaches that exposed the personal information of hundreds of millions of customers.

When events challenge an organization’s public image, leaders are often compelled to engage in activities that protect, repair, and enhance that image (Ginzel et al., 2004). For example, every year, publications like *U.S. News & World Report* and *The Princeton Review* issue their rankings of the top American universities. Schools that receive high rankings boast of that fact in their recruitment materials and on their websites. When a university falls in its ranking from one year to the next, though, officials face the unenviable task of scrambling to mend the school’s reputation so that alumni continue to donate money and prospective students still consider applying. Typically, schools that have dropped in the rankings opt to downplay the survey’s relevance and criticize the magazine’s methodology and ranking criteria, which only a year earlier (when they were ranked higher) were considered sound and trustworthy.

Most government agencies and large corporations now have massive public relations departments or full-time crisis management teams that carefully oversee the organization’s image by controlling negative publicity. At the time of this writing, Volkswagen (after admitting it had cheated on pollution emissions tests), Takata (after admitting it had manufactured defective—and deadly—automobile airbags), Starbucks (after two black men were arrested when a white store manager called 911, claiming they were trespassing), and Boeing (after acknowledging a design flaw that was responsible for two fatal crashes of its 737 Max 8 airplanes) were all in the process of rolling out their own public relations campaigns so as to soothe community anger, rescue their corporate reputations, and save the companies from financial ruin.

**Remedies for Spoiled Identities**

Organizations and governments can enlist the aid of experts to overcome the debilitating effects of negative images, but individuals are usually left to their own devices. Fixing a spoiled identity is not easy. The mere knowledge that we are being evaluated negatively can impede our thoughts, speech, and action. Nevertheless, the major responsibility for restoring order lies with the person whose actions disrupted things in the first place.

To restore social order and overcome a spoiled identity, the transgressor will use an **aligning action** (Stokes & Hewitt, 1976). Sometimes aligning can be done easily and quickly. If you step on a person’s foot while standing in line at a cafeteria, a simple apology may be all that’s needed to avoid the impression that you’re a clumsy oaf.

By apologizing, you acknowledge that such an act is wrong and send the message that you are not ordinarily a breaker of such social norms. Other situations, however, call for more detailed repair:

- An **account** is a verbal statement designed to explain unanticipated, embarrassing, or unacceptable behavior (C. W. Mills, 1940; M. Scott & Lyman, 1968). For example, an individual may cite events beyond their control (“I was late for the wedding because there was a lot of traffic on the highway”) or blame others (“I spilled my milk because somebody pushed me”). An alternative is to define the offending behavior as appropriate under the circumstances, perhaps by denying that anyone was hurt by the act (“Yeah, I stole the car, but no one got hurt”), by claiming that the victim deserved to be
victimized ("I beat him up, but he had it coming"), or by claiming higher, unselfish motives ("I stole food, but I did it to feed my family").

- A disclaimer is a verbal assertion given before the fact to forestall any complaints or negative implications (Hewitt & Stokes, 1975). If we think something we’re about to do or say will threaten our identity or be used by others to judge us negatively, we may use a disclaimer. Phrases such as “I probably don’t know what I’m talking about, but . . .” or “I’m not a racist, but . . .” introduce acts or expressions that ordinarily might be considered undesirable. As long as a disclaimer is provided, a self-proclaimed nonexpert can pretend to be an expert and a person claiming to be nonracist feels entitled to go ahead and make a racist statement.

Accounts and disclaimers are important links between the individual and society. We use them to explicitly define the relationship between our questionable conduct and prevailing cultural norms. That is, by using aligning actions, we publicly reaffirm our commitment to the social order that our conduct has violated and thereby defend the sanctity of our social identities and the “goodness” of society.

Other people may also try to deal with a transgressor’s spoiled identity through a process called cooling out (E. Goffman, 1952): gently persuading someone who has lost face to accept a less desirable but still reasonable alternative identity. People engaged in cooling out seek to persuade rather than force offenders to change. It’s an attempt to minimize distress. The challenge is to keep the offender from realizing that they are being persuaded.

Cooling out is a common element of social life; it is one of the major functions of consumer complaint departments, coaches, doctors, priests, and bosses. Picture, for instance, the factory manager who, in the process of demoting an employee from a supervisory to an assembly line position, says, “Your skills were being wasted in that office job. You’ll be happier and the company will benefit more if your speed and dexterity could be used on the shop floor.” Cooling out also plays a major part in informal relationships. Imagine the initiator of a relationship break-up, telling the soon-to-be ex-partner, “I value you as a friend so much that I don’t want to risk losing our bond by complicating things with sex and romance. It’s better this way.”

Cooling out is often motivated by institutional pressures. Consider the environment of higher education. The aspirations of many people in U.S. society are encouraged by open-door admission policies in some universities and most community colleges (Karabel, 1972). There is a widely held cultural belief that higher education is linked to better employment opportunities and that anyone can go to college. Discrepancies, however, inevitably arise between people’s aspirations and their ability to succeed. If educational institutions simply kicked unqualified students out of school, the result would likely be widespread public pressure and anxiety over the system itself. Hence, most community colleges opt for a “soft response” of cooling out the unqualified student (B. Clark, 1960). A counselor may direct a poor student toward an alternative major that would be easier but “not that different” from the student’s original goal—for example, nurse’s aide instead of registered nurse. Or the counselor might encourage the student to seek employment after graduation from a 2-year program rather than transfer to a 4-year university (Rosenbaum, Deil-Amen, & Person, 2006). That is, the student is gently persuaded to redefine himself or herself.

Institutional cooling-out processes such as these are inherent in a system that doesn’t have clear selection criteria. In the United States, admission into college is based on some combination of achievement (course grades), aptitude (standardized test scores), and personality traits (interviews, letters of recommendation). In contrast, educational selection in China is based on the gaokao, or
“high test”—a national college-entrance examination that is administered every June over 2 or 3 days (depending on the province) and is the sole determinant of admission to all Chinese universities (Larmer, 2015). Because one’s eligibility for college study is so clearly and quickly defined, Chinese higher education has no need for an institutionalized cooling-out process.

**Stigma**

The permanent spoiling of someone’s identity is called **stigma**. A stigma is a deeply discrediting characteristic, widely viewed as an insurmountable obstacle preventing competent or morally trustworthy behavior (E. Goffman, 1963). Stigmas spoil the identities of individuals regardless of other attributes those individuals might have. According to Goffman, the three types of stigma are (1) defects of the body (e.g., severe scars, blindness, paralyzed or missing limbs), (2) defects of character (e.g., dishonesty, a weak will, a history of imprisonment or substance abuse), and (3) membership in devalued social groups, such as certain races, religions, ethnicities, or social classes. The impression management task when faced with stigma is not so much to recapture a tarnished identity as to minimize the social damage.

The ideology of stigma often seeps into the way we describe and understand certain social problems. Take drug addiction, for instance. Various social institutions from the workplace to the criminal justice system to organized sports commonly require individuals to take—and pass—random drug tests in order to attain or maintain employment, avoid criminal charges, or compete. The language used to describe these tests is inherently stigmatizing. Results—not to mention the users themselves—are called “clean” or “dirty” depending on whether they test positive or negative (Vedantam, 2018).

Some stigmas are worse than others. For instance, the use of eyeglasses to compensate for one sensory deficiency (poor vision) is usually considered far less stigmatizing than the use of hearing aids to compensate for a different sensory deficiency (poor hearing). Contemporary hearing aids are designed to be as small and unnoticeable as possible. Eyeglasses, on the other hand, have become a common fashion accessory, often sold in their own trendy boutiques.

Stigma varies across time and culture as well. For instance, being a Christian in the 21st century is very different from being one in 100 C.E., and being a Christian in the United States is different from being one in the Arab Middle East (Ainlay, Becker, & Coleman, 1986). Ancient Mayans considered being cross-eyed desirable, so parents encouraged babies to focus on objects that forced their eyes to cross (Link & Phelan, 2001). In contemporary Sierra Leone, the stigma of epilepsy is so severe that those who suffer from the condition are considered uneducable, unemployable, and unmarriageable (Baruchin, 2011). And as you saw earlier in this chapter, obesity is stigmatized in contemporary Western societies but was seen as desirable, attractive, and symbolic of status and wealth in the past and is still seen that way in some other cultures today.

Even different situations within the same culture can yield different perceptions of stigma. For example, in the business world, non-drinking can stigmatize people and limit their career trajectory. Those who abstain often find it harder to get ahead than those willing to drink with co-workers or clients. On Wall Street, nondrinkers complain that they have difficulty closing deals or negotiating with clients simply because they don’t drink. In fact, some research suggests that nondrinkers have a harder time climbing the corporate ladder than moderate drinkers. As one director of an alcohol treatment program put it, “If you say you don’t drink, you have to deal with the suspicion that you can’t play the game” (quoted in Quenqua, 2012a, p. 1).

Interactions between the stigmatized and the nonstigmatized—called “mixed contacts”—can sometimes be uneasy. We have all felt uncomfortable with people who are “different” in
appearance or behavior. Stigma initiates a judgment process that colors impressions and sets up barriers to interaction (E. E. Jones & Pittman, 1982).

Whether intentionally or not, nonstigmatized individuals often pressure stigmatized people to conform to “inferior” identities. A person in a wheelchair who is discouraged from going camping is not given the chance to develop important skills and is thus kept dependent. Some have suggested that sightless people learn to be blind (that is, to be helpless and reliant on others) as a consequence of the low expectations sighted people have of them (R. Scott, 1981).

Nonstigmatized people often avoid mixed contacts because they anticipate discomfort and are unsure how to act (E. Goffman, 1963). In 2014, the owners of a luxury condominium complex in New York City came under fire after it was revealed that the building had a separate entrance for its lower-income residents that allowed its wealthier residents to avoid awkward exchanges. Research shows that when interacting with a person who is physically disabled, an able-bodied person is likely to be more inhibited and more rigid and to end the interaction sooner than if the other person were also able-bodied (Kleck, 1968; Kleck, Ono, & Hastorf, 1966). On the one hand, the able-bodied person may fear that showing direct sympathy or interest in a disabled person’s condition could be regarded as rude or intrusive. On the other hand, ignoring it may make the interaction artificial and awkward or create impossible demands (Michener, DeLamater, & Schwartz, 1986).

As for people with stigmatizing conditions, they often sense that others are evaluating them negatively. One study of people diagnosed with a mental disorder found that they had all at one time or another been shunned, avoided, patronized, or discriminated against when others found out about their condition (Wahl, 1999). Consider also the case of Mark Breimhorst, a Stanford University graduate. Mr. Breimhorst has no hands. When he was applying to business schools in 1998, he was given 25% more time to complete the Graduate Management Admission Test. His results were mailed to prospective graduate schools with the notation “Scores obtained under special circumstances.” Mr. Breimhorst was not admitted to any of the business schools to which he applied. He filed a federal lawsuit against the testing service, challenging the way they flagged the scores of students who needed accommodations. Suchnotations, he argued, were stigmatizing because they created suspicion that the scores were less valid than others (Lewin, 2000). In 2003, the testing service stopped flagging the results of students who receive special accommodations.

Faced with the strong possibility of discrimination, people with stigmatizing conditions often use coping strategies to establish the most favorable identity possible. One strategy is to try to hide the stigma. People who are hard of hearing, for instance, may learn to read lips or otherwise interact with people as if they could hear perfectly; those with bodily stigmas may opt for surgery to permanently conceal their condition.

Some stigmatized individuals, particularly those whose conditions are not immediately observable, use a strategy of selective disclosure. Sociologist Charlene E. Miall (1989) interviewed and surveyed 70 infertile women, nearly all of whom characterized infertility as something negative, an indication of failure, or an inability to function “normally.” Most of the women were concerned that others’ knowledge of their infertility would be stigmatizing. So they engaged in some form of information control. Many simply concealed the information from everyone except medical personnel and infertility counselors. Others used medical accounts, saying, “It’s beyond my control.” Some disclosed the information only to people they felt would not think ill of them. Some even used the disclosure of their infertility to gain control of a situation by deliberately shocking their “normal” audience (Miall, 1989).

Of course, not all stigmas can be hidden. Some individuals can only minimize the degree to which their stigmas intrude on and disrupt the interaction. One tactic is to use...
self-deprecating humor—telling little jokes about their shortcomings—to relieve the tension felt by the nonstigmatized. Others may try to focus on attributes unrelated to the stigma. For instance, a person in a wheelchair may carry around esoteric books in a conspicuous manner to show others that he or she still has a brain that works well. Still others with stigmas boldly call attention to their condition by mastering areas thought to be closed to them (such as mountain climbing for an amputee).

And some organize a movement to counter social oppression. For instance, organizations like the National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance and the Council on Size and Weight Discrimination help fat people (fat is their preferred adjective, by the way) cope with a society that hates their size by lobbying Congress and state legislatures to combat “size discrimination” and “fat shaming,” and to promote “weight diversity.” They have organized civil rights protests in Washington, D.C.; lobbied health care professionals for tolerance and acceptance; encouraged colleges and universities to consider “size diversity” along with race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and disability status as a component of an inclusive campus; publicly condemned weight-loss TV shows like The Biggest Loser for bullying overweight contestants; and organized campaigns against insurance discrimination and the dubious “science” of weight loss programs (LeBesco, 2004; National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance, 2016).

But overcoming the problems created by stigma usually cannot be accomplished solely through individual impression management or collective demonstrations. Long-lasting improvements can be accomplished only by changing cultural beliefs about the nature of stigma (Link, Mirotznik, & Cullen, 1991). As long as we hold stigmatized individuals solely responsible for dealing with the stigma, only some of them will be able to overcome the social limitations of their condition.

CONCLUSION

After reading this chapter, you may have an image of human beings as cunning, manipulative, and cynical play actors whose lives are merely a string of phony performances carefully designed to fit the selfish needs of the moment. The impression manager comes across as someone who consciously and fraudulently presents an inaccurate image in order to take advantage of a particular situation. Even the person who seems not to care about their appearance may be consciously cultivating the image of “not caring.”

There’s no denying that people consciously manufacture images of themselves that allow them to achieve some desired goal. Most of us go through life trying to create the impression that we’re attractive, honest, competent, and sincere. To that end, we carefully manage our appearance, present qualities we think others will admire, and hide qualities we think they won’t. When caught in an act that may threaten the impression we’re trying to foster, we strategically use statements that disclaim, excuse, or justify it.

So who is the real you? If people freely change their images to suit the expectations of a given audience, is there something more stable that characterizes them across all situations?

If you are aware that the impression you are managing is not the real you, then you must have some knowledge of what is the real you. And what you are may, in fact, transcend the demands of particular situations. Some basic, pervasive part of your being may allow you to choose from a repertoire of identities the one that best suits the immediate needs of the situation. As you ponder this possibility, realize that your feelings about impression management reflect your beliefs about the nature of individuals and the role society and others play in our everyday lives.
YOUR TURN

Impression management is a tool most of us use to present ourselves as likable people. Occasionally, however, our attempts fail. Survey several friends or classmates and have them describe their most embarrassing moment. Prompt them for specific details: What were the circumstances surrounding the incident? What identities were they trying to present at the time? How did their attempt to claim these identities fail? How did these people immediately react, physically and behaviorally, to the embarrassment? How did they try to overcome the embarrassment and return order? Did they offer some sort of account? Were the consequences of the failed impression management temporary or permanent? What did the witnesses to the embarrassing incident do? Did their reactions alleviate or intensify the embarrassment your respondents felt?

Once you’ve gathered a substantial number of stories (about 10 to 15), see if you can find some common themes. What are the most frequent types of embarrassing situations? What are the most frequent reactions? If your class is large, your instructor can have you report your results to a small group of fellow students or to the entire class. What kinds of patterns can you identify in the embarrassing stories people tell? Are there gender, ethnic, or age differences in what people find embarrassing?

Sociologists Edward Gross and Gregory Stone (1964) have written, “In the wreckage left by embarrassment lie the broken foundations of social transactions” (p. 2). What do you suppose they meant by that? Use your results to discuss the sociological importance of embarrassment (and, more important, reactions to embarrassment) in terms of the maintenance of interactional and social order.

CHAPTER HIGHLIGHTS

- A significant portion of social life is influenced by the images we form of others and the images others form of us.
- Impression formation is based initially on our assessment of ascribed social group membership (race, age, gender, etc.), individual physical appearance, and verbal and nonverbal messages.
- While we are gathering information about others to form impressions of them, we are fully aware that they are doing the same thing. Impression management is the process by which we attempt to control and manipulate information about ourselves to influence the impressions others form of us. Impression management can be both individual and collective.
- Impression mismanagement can lead to the creation of damaged identities, which must be repaired in order to sustain social interaction.

KEY TERMS

**account**: Statement designed to explain unanticipated, embarrassing, or unacceptable behavior after the behavior has occurred

**aligning action**: Action taken to restore an identity that has been damaged

**back stage**: Area of social interaction away from the view of an audience, where people can rehearse and rehash their behavior

**cooling out**: Gently persuading someone who has lost face to accept a less desirable but still reasonable alternative identity

**disclaimer**: Assertion designed to forestall any complaints or negative reactions to a behavior or statement that is about to occur

**dramaturgy**: Study of social interaction as theater, in which people (“actors”) project images (“play roles”) in front of others (“audience”)

**embarrassment**: Spontaneous feeling experienced when the identity someone is presenting is suddenly and unexpectedly discredited in front of others

**front stage**: Area of social interaction where people perform and work to maintain appropriate impressions
impression formation: The process by which we define others based on observable cues such as age, ascribed status characteristics such as race and gender, individual attributes such as physical appearance, and verbal and nonverbal expressions

impression management: Act of presenting a favorable public image of oneself so that others will form positive judgments

performance team: Set of individuals who cooperate in staging a performance that leads an audience to form an impression of one or all team members

stigma: Deeply discrediting characteristic that is viewed as an obstacle to competent or morally trustworthy behavior