

## Self-Presentational Processes in Exercise and Sport

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This article examines the effects of self-presentational processes on four aspects of sport and exercise: the motivation to engage in physical activity, people's choices of physical activities and the contexts in which they engage in these activities, the quality of athletic performance, and people's emotional reactions to engaging in sport and exercise.

**Key words:** self-presentation, physical activity, impression management, motivation, athletic performance

Self-presentation, also called impression management, refers to the processes by which people monitor and control how they are perceived by other people (Schlenker, 1980). Although for many, the concept of self-presentation often evokes images of Machiavellian deceit, self-presentation is neither inherently deceptive nor manipulative. On the contrary, it is a natural and necessary component of human interpersonal behavior. There are few social situations in which people can afford to disregard the self-presentational implications of their behavior (Goffman, 1959). Each person's response to another is based, in part, on that individual's impression of the other's personality, abilities, motives, and other attributes. Thus, people's outcomes in life depend to an extent on their conveying impressions that lead others to respond in desired ways. Even when people are not consciously trying to make a particular impression, they nevertheless monitor others' reactions, often at a nonconscious or preattentive level, and adjust their behavior when they believe they are making undesired impressions (Leary & Kowalski, 1990).

The fact that people monitor and control how they are being perceived and evaluated does not imply that the impressions they try to create are necessarily deceptive. Although people do sometimes try to convey images of themselves that are different (usually better) than how they see themselves, most self-presentations are reasonably consistent with the person's own self-concept (Leary & Kowalski, 1990). Rather than involving conscious dissimulation, self-presentation usually entails a selective presentation of those parts of oneself that will make desired impressions on specific people within a particular social encounter, combined with the selective omission of self-relevant information that will create

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undesired impressions (Leary, in press). For reviews of the self-presentation literature, see Baumeister (1982), Leary (in press), Leary and Kowalski (1990), Schlenker (1980), Schlenker and Weigold (1992), and Tedeschi (1981).

Despite the fact that self-presentational motives are both pervasive and potent, few attempts have been made to apply a self-presentational perspective to the study of sport and exercise behavior. In this article, I will discuss the role of self-presentational processes in four aspects of sport and exercise: the motivation to engage in physical activity, people's choices of physical activities and the contexts in which they engage in these activities, the quality of athletic performance, and people's emotional reactions to engaging in sport and exercise. My goal is to show that self-presentational processes play an important role in exercise and sport behavior and that a self-presentational perspective reveals things about sport and physical activity that we wouldn't otherwise see.

## Motivation to Participate in Physical Activities

### *Motivating Influences*

People give many reasons for exercising that are clearly not self-presentational: They enjoy exercise, it enhances their physical health and psychological well-being, they like the social contacts that it affords them, and so on (Grove & Dodder, 1982; Wankel & Berger, 1990). But at least two reasons for exercising reflect self-presentational motives.

*Physical Appearance.* One of the primary reasons that people exercise is to improve or maintain a desired physical appearance, which clearly reflects a self-presentational motive. Many if not most people are motivated to be attractive (or to avoid being perceived as unattractive), at least by the standards of significant others in their social groups. From a social psychological perspective, this interest in being attractive is not misplaced (although some people are unquestionably overconcerned with their appearance). Research on the attractiveness stereotype shows that people form more positive impressions of attractive than unattractive people (Dion, 1986).

Because regular exercise can enhance one's appearance by reducing weight and body fat, enhancing muscle tone, and making one appear "healthier," many people who are motivated to be attractive engage in exercise that will improve their appearance. Thus, much exercise behavior is motivated by self-presentational concerns.

*Social Identity.* In addition, some individuals regularly engage in sport and exercise because they want to maintain the social identities of fit or athletic people (Grove & Dodder, 1982). Many persons gain a great deal of attention, praise, and other social rewards by being athletic. Aside from whatever benefits physical activity has for one's appearance, it may also enhance one's social image.

*Individual Differences.* People differ, of course, in the degree to which they are motivated by social rewards, such as being perceived as attractive or maintaining identities as athletes. Leary, Wheeler, and Jenkins (1986) found that people's reasons for engaging in sport and exercise were related to the aspects of their identities they valued most. People who most valued the personal aspects of their identities—those parts of self that exist independent of other people (such as beliefs, goals, memories, and abilities)—gave highly personal reasons for

being physically active, reasons involving self-satisfaction, improving health and physical fitness, and personal enjoyment.

In contrast, people who valued the social aspects of their identities—those aspects of self that are defined by one's relationships with others (such as group memberships, family relationships, and social reputation)—indicated that they exercised and played sports for primarily social reasons: enhancing their interactions with other people, improving their physical appearance, and establishing images of being physically active in others' eyes. Note that the latter two goals are explicitly self-presentational.

### *Demotivating Influences*

Just as self-presentational motives induce some people to exercise and play sports, some people's participation in physical activity is diminished by their concerns about others' impressions. First, many people worry about how they appear when engaging in physical activities. Many persons who think they are noticeably overweight may not wish to be seen in scanty athletic attire (shorts, leotards, swimwear) or to be seen exercising. Similarly, persons who think their muscles are underdeveloped may not want to engage in activities in which their lack of strength will be apparent, such as weight lifting.

In addition, even persons who are not concerned about the appearance of their bodies may be deterred from participating in activities if they have (or think they have) low levels of skill in those activities. People are sometimes concerned about appearing athletically incompetent, particularly if the requisite skill is one they think most people of their ages and social groups should possess (such as the ability to swim, hit a softball, or shoot a basketball). Concerns about appearing incompetent may lead people to avoid physical activities that require certain skills.

## **Choices of Activities and Contexts**

### *Choice of Physical Activities*

People who are motivated to exercise or play sports have a wide variety of options. What determines which activities a person chooses? Clearly, the primary determinants involve what the person most enjoys and thinks he or she is good at doing. However, I suspect that some people also consider the self-presentational implications of their choices.

People hold stereotypes about individuals who play certain sports. Sadalla, Linder, and Jenkins (1988) asked subjects to rate hypothetical target persons who participated in one of five sports—tennis, golf, snow skiing, bowling, and motocross racing. Subjects' impressions of these hypothetical people differed notably as a function of their sport preferences. Not only did subjects draw inferences that were reasonable deductions from the targets' activities (such that skiers and racers were more active and daring than bowlers), but they formed impressions about traits that were not directly related to various sports, such as inferences regarding how cultured, calm, and sensual the people were.

In a follow-up study, Linder, Farrar, Sadalla, Sheets, and Bartholomew (1992) examined stereotypes of female athletes who played one of five sports—basketball, golf, tennis, softball, and volleyball. Subjects' perceptions of target

individuals differed in terms of both athleticism (basketball players were rated as most athletic, whereas golfers were viewed as least athletic) and attractiveness (tennis players were thought to be most attractive). Overall, athletes were rated as more athletic (no surprise there) and attractive than nonathletes.

Three points can be made about these findings. First, not only do people draw inferences from others' involvement in sports, but some of these inferences are clearly more favorable than others. Put differently, people who participate in certain physical activities are perceived more positively than others. For example, in the Sadalla et al. (1988) study, subjects' impressions of bowlers were clearly less favorable than subjects' impressions of tennis players and golfers.

Second, like most stereotypes, stereotypes of athletes likely differ across societal subgroups. Although impressions of bowlers were least positive among subjects in the Sadalla et al. (1988) study, we can imagine samples in which this would not be true. Similarly, although Linder et al.'s (1992) undergraduate sample held positive views of female athletes, such findings might not be obtained among persons with more traditional sex-role ideologies.

Third, and most relevant to this article, given societal stereotypes about people who play various sports, people's choices of physical activities may be affected by their perceptions of the self-presentational implications of participation in various activities. This is not to say that people decide to participate in a particular sport simply to make a particular impression (although, on occasion, that may happen). Rather, self-presentational implications are one of many factors that affect people's choices.

Self-presentational concerns are likely to impact sport choices by deterring people from engaging in certain activities rather than by impelling them to choose certain sports. People are unlikely to devote themselves to activities that convey impressions that are inconsistent with their roles, others' values, or social norms (Leary & Kowalski, 1990).

One obvious example of the constraining effects of self-presentation on sport choice involves physical activities that are typically associated with one gender or the other. Men and women alike may forego certain physical activities because other people associate these activities with the other sex (Jackson & Marsh, 1986). For example, many men seem to be concerned about the images they would project if they became involved in aerobic dance or ballet, whereas many women worry that they will be perceived as unfeminine if they box or lift weights.

The tension between people's desires to engage in activities and their reluctance to do so because the impressions they would convey seem inappropriate for their gender has often been discussed in terms of "role conflict" (Goldberg & Chandler, 1991; Jackson & Marsh, 1986). However, the problem seems to be less a conflict between roles than it is a self-presentational dilemma. Such dilemmas arise when people want to engage in behaviors that they suspect will cast them in an undesired light.

### *Choices of Exercise and Sport Contexts*

People's concerns with others' impressions of them affect not only their selection of physical activities but also the contexts in which they engage in those activities. Many people are so concerned about how others will regard their physical fitness or athletic skills that they are unwilling to let others see them

exercise or refuse to participate in group sports. As a result, they exercise alone or not at all.

This has two important implications for the individual's well-being, as well as for efforts to promote fitness. First, exercising and playing with others provide an incentive for physical activity. People are more likely to maintain a regular program of physical activity if they exercise or play with others. Not only is the social contact itself rewarding, but others' expectations provide a powerful incentive that leads the individual to be active even on occasions when he or she would rather not. People who are worried about others' impressions of their fitness, physiques, or skills lose the benefits of this potent motive.

Second, self-presentational concerns may preclude certain activities. For example, people who are worried about their physiques may be unwilling to be seen bouncing around an aerobics class, jogging in a public area, or swimming at the local pool. Similarly, people who are self-conscious about their musculatures may refuse to set foot inside a weight room. Thus, the choice of particular physical activities may be constrained by the individual's self-presentational insecurities (Bain, Wilson, & Chaikind, 1989).

People have more difficulty getting and staying in shape when they are so concerned with others' impressions that they won't let others see them exercising. Such concerns limit both what a person is willing to do and where she or he is willing to do it.

### Quality of Athletic Performance

Self-presentational motives can either facilitate or debilitate athletic performance depending on a number of factors such as the complexity of the skills involved, the individual's expectations, the degree to which the performance has implications for valued social or material outcomes, and a variety of individual difference variables.

#### *Effort and Exertion*

Self-presentational considerations can affect the sheer amount of effort that people put into physical activities.

*Exertion and Exercise.* In the case of simple exercise (i.e., exercise in which performance is, within limits, a function of sheer effort), the existence of self-presentational motives enhances performance. Put simply, people tend to exercise harder when others are watching, and thus their behavior has self-presentational implications. For example, Worryingham and Messick (1983) surreptitiously observed solitary joggers as they ran along a running path. Runners who came upon a female confederate who watched them ran faster than runners who came upon the confederate facing in the opposite direction. I suspect this effect is quite common in activities such as running and swimming (people may run or swim faster, if not farther, when others are watching) and weight lifting (people may force themselves to do more repetitions when observers are present).

Two explanations of these so-called social facilitation effects—the evaluation apprehension model (Cottrell, 1972) and the self-presentation model (Bond, 1982)—emphasize people's concerns with others' impressions and evaluations. These two models differ in the presumed mediators of the effect. Whereas Cottrell emphasized the effects of arousal stemming from evaluation apprehension, Bond

noted that people may improve their performances simply to make a good impression. Although more than one process may mediate social facilitation effects (see Geen, 1991; Sanders, 1984), self-presentation is certainly one of them. Put simply, people work harder at things, including exercise, when they think that effort or exertion will create desired impressions in others' eyes.

The danger is that some people may exert themselves too strenuously when others are watching, resulting in exhaustion, muscle strain, heat stroke, or even death.<sup>1</sup> People may conceal or deny the fact that they are tired to show they are stronger and more fit than they are. Hardy, Hall, and Prestholdt (1986) found that subjects who exerted themselves in the presence of a coactor who appeared to find the task easy subsequently rated their own subjective efforts lower than did subjects who performed alone. Presumably, these first subjects wanted to show that they were as fit as the coactor. Interestingly, in some athletic contexts people who appear to exert considerable effort may be viewed more positively (Rejeski & Lowe, 1980).

*Social Loafing.* The effects of self-presentational motives become more complicated in team sports. For example, people tend to work less hard when they are working as part of a group (or team) than when they are working alone, a phenomenon known as social loafing (for recent reviews, see Geen, 1991; Hardy, 1990). One explanation of social loafing is that people naturally reduce their efforts on boring or tiring tasks unless their performances are being monitored by others (Geen, 1991)—that is, unless their behavior has self-presentational implications. Interestingly, recent research suggests that the least proficient members of a team may be more susceptible to social loafing than the more skilled members (Hardy & Crace, 1991).

The most effective way to minimize social loafing is to make the individuals' contributions to the team effort individually identifiable (e.g., Williams, Nida, Baca, & Latane, 1989), which supports the notion that loafing is largely the result of reduced self-presentational pressures in group settings. When others can't tell how hard a given group or team member is working, each person has less incentive to work at full capacity.

### *Choking Under Pressure*

When performance relies on fine motor skills (hitting a golf ball, shooting free throws) as opposed to sheer effort and gross motor skills (e.g., running, weight lifting), self-presentational concerns and their accompanying anxiety can cause decrements in performance. A good example involves choking under pressure—inferior performance that occurs despite "individual striving and situational demands for superior performance" (Baumeister, 1984, p. 610).

Two distinct processes seem to underlie choking (Baumeister, 1984; Martens & Landers, 1972). First, people choke when they devote excessive attention to the process of performing, paying conscious attention to behaviors that are normally mindless, habitual, and automatic. Experienced tennis players, golfers, or swimmers need not think consciously about the execution of routine movements. Indeed, if they do, their performances are likely to be impaired. Second, choking can occur when nervous, bodily tension interferes with the smooth and fluid motion needed for many complex motor behaviors. When a golfer is "uptight," his or her swing may be too rigid, for example.

We must ask, however, why athletes begin to pay conscious attention to

overlearned behaviors or become so tense that their behavior is impaired. The general answer to this question is that anything that increases the importance of one's performance can cause both of these effects and thus debilitate performance. Although many factors can increase the importance of a performance, one such factor is a concern with others' perceptions and evaluations. As the motivation to impress others increases, people are more likely to pay conscious attention to their behavior and to experience somatic manifestations of anxiety that may interfere with bodily movement (Baumeister, 1984; Buss, 1980; Carver & Scheier, 1981; Leary, 1983; Leary & Kowalski, 1990; Schlenker, 1980).

One manifestation of such effects can be observed in the home-field disadvantage. On most counts, playing "at home" conveys an advantage: Knowing the idiosyncracies of their own field, court, or green gives home players an edge; home players are desensitized to many potentially distracting stimuli on their home turf that may distract visiting players; home players do not have to travel as far to the game; and so on (Courneya & Carron, 1992).

However, from a self-presentational perspective it is not as obvious that playing at home is always an advantage. An interest in pleasing the home crowd may motivate better performance, but concerns regarding the crowd's reactions can cause excessive self-consciousness, anxiety, and choking. When athletes are playing before a home crowd, the self-presentational implications of the quality of their performances are more salient. Not only does the crowd respond more vociferously (with cheers, stony silences, and boos) to the performance of the home team, but the players may imagine the reactions of specific persons they know to be in the crowd. In contrast, when athletes are playing away from home, the crowd's responses are less often directly contingent on the visitors' play, thereby reducing the evaluative aspects of the game. Put simply, home players are likely to be more cognizant of others' evaluations of them than are visiting players.

Baumeister and Steinhilber (1984) reasoned that such concerns should be particularly salient in decisive games, such as tournaments and championships, when one's public image is most on the line. Any athletic win or loss has self-presentational implications regarding a player's skills, effort, motivation, ability to handle pressure, and so on, but few such implications are as subjectively important to players as winning or losing the "big one." If this is true, home players should show greater evidence of choking in key, decisive games than visiting players.

Baumeister and Steinhilber's (1984) analysis of data from the World Series and National Basketball Association tournaments supported this line of reasoning. For both baseball and basketball, home teams tended to win the early games in the competition but tended to lose the later, decisive games. Furthermore, this pattern seemed to be due to the performances of members of the home teams rather than those of the visiting teams. Compared to the visiting teams, the home teams had more fielding errors and lower free throw percentages in later games. A more recent study demonstrated the home course choke among competitive golfers; home golfers played better than visiting players early in a tournament but worse later in a tournament (Wright, Jackson, Christie, McGuire, & Wright, 1991).

The self-presentational explanation of this pattern is that self-presentational pressures are greater when an athlete plays at home, and these pressures are

particularly acute at key points in competition, points at which the player or team has the opportunity to establish an exceptionally positive public image by winning it all or to lose face in defeat (Baumeister & Showers, 1986; Baumeister & Steinhilber, 1984; Heaton & Sigall, 1989).

### *Self-Handicapping*

Social psychological research has shown that people faced with uncertain performances may self-handicap by creating impediments to their performances (Berglas & Jones, 1978). Although self-created impediments may lower the probability of success, self-handicapping ensures that the individual has a plausible explanation for subsequent failure that does not implicate his or her ability. People may self-handicap in a variety of ways, but one tactic relevant to sport involves failing to adequately prepare or practice for an upcoming test or competition (Pyszczynski & Greenberg, 1983; Tice & Baumeister, 1990).

In two studies of this effect, Rhodewalt, Saltzman, and Wittmer (1984) administered the Self-Handicapping Scale, a measure of the tendency to self-handicap, to intercollegiate swimmers and golfers. They then recorded how much the athletes practiced before both unimportant and important competitions. Swimmers and golfers who scored low in self-handicapping practiced more prior to important competitions than prior to unimportant competitions, whereas the practice of high self-handicappers did not differ as a function of the importance of the upcoming meet or match. By insufficiently preparing for competition (relative to their teammates), high-self-handicapping athletes created plausible excuses for poor performances that did not implicate their abilities.<sup>2</sup>

Initial discussions construed self-handicapping as a means of protecting one's self-esteem (Berglas & Jones, 1978; Jones & Berglas, 1978). However, research has demonstrated that self-handicapping has a strong self-presentational component. People are more likely to self-handicap when others will be aware of their handicaps, suggesting that people erect such handicaps, in part, to protect their social images in the face of failure (Kolditz & Arkin, 1982).

### **Affective Responses to Exercise and Sport**

When people are motivated to make certain impressions on others but doubt they will successfully make those impressions, they experience *social anxiety* (Leary, 1983; Schlenker & Leary, 1982). Although most studies of social anxiety have involved anxiety experienced in interpersonal interactions (such as speaking in public and conversations), persons engaged in sport and physical activity who become concerned with others' impressions may experience social anxiety as well. At minimum, social anxiety detracts from the emotional rewards of exercising, playing, or competing. For example, the widespread aversion to physical education classes among junior and senior high school students seems to reflect social anxiety. Many students are highly concerned with the impressions they project not only during gym class itself but in the locker room as well.

Worse, though, is the fact that some people may be so concerned about others' impressions of their bodies or skills that they avoid exercising or playing altogether so as to avoid social anxiety. Avoidance of self-presentationally threatening situations is a common tactic for avoiding social anxiety; for example, such

a tactic seems to underlie the reticence, social avoidance, and withdrawal of very shy people (Leary, 1986).

Social anxiety can crop up in a number of contexts related to sport and physical activity. Here I will mention four areas in which the study of social anxiety may be relevant to sport and exercise psychology.

### *Sport Competition Anxiety*

Sport competition anxiety refers to anxiety and apprehension experienced in competitive situations (Martens, 1977). Although a great deal of research has investigated the causes, consequences, and concomitants of both state and trait competition anxiety, relatively little attention has been devoted to the basic question of what people are really nervous about when they compete with others. In most cases, such feelings are not evoked by competition per se (though in rare cases people who have philosophical objections to competition may feel uneasy if induced to compete). Rather, sport competition anxiety, whether regarded as a state or a trait, revolves around the self-presentational implications of competition. Whenever people compete, they run the risk of conveying negative images of themselves—that they are unskilled, incompetent, unfit, unable to handle pressure, or whatever—to observers, teammates, coaches, opposing team members, and, often, the world at large.

### *Social Physique Anxiety*

Some people are quite concerned with how their bodies appear to others, and this concern can affect their willingness to engage in physical activities in which others might see them. When people are motivated to make a desired impression but believe that others are likely to judge their physiques negatively, they may experience social physique anxiety (Hart, Leary, & Rejeski, 1989). Although work on physique anxiety is quite new, initial findings show that scores on the Social Physique Anxiety Scale (SPA) are related to affect and behavior in exercise settings.

### *Benchwarming*

This article has focused on the self-presentational aspects of participating in exercise and sport activities. We should recognize, however, that self-presentational concerns may also arise from nonparticipation.

An example of this involves athletes who are relegated to a reserve status on the team—"benchwarmers," if you will. Being on the second or third string can be quite distressing, particularly for players who have been supplanted by newer members of the team. Some of the benchwarmer's distress results from simply not playing; after all, athletes who practice regularly and enjoy the thrill of competition are understandably disappointed when they do not get as much playing time as they would like.

In addition, however, some of the benchwarmer's plight is self-presentational. Staying on the sidelines conveys clear impressions to others regarding the player's ability and importance to the team (at least in the eyes of the coach). The chronic benchwarmer faces a self-presentational predicament in which his or her reserve status casts undesirable aspersions on the kind of image he or she would like to project (Schlenker, 1980). Given the large number of players who don't

receive what they view as adequate playing time, the social psychology of the benchwarmer would seem to be an important area for investigation (see Rotella & Newburg, 1989).

### *Failure*

Finally, sport competition invariably involves failure. Some losses have few serious self-presentational implications for the competitors, as when an admittedly superior team from a larger school beats an underdog or when friends play weekend tennis. Such losses may be unhappy events for players and fans alike, but their unpleasantness doesn't damage players' social identities. In fact, fans may praise the losing team's poise and performance against overwhelming odds.

In many cases, however, poor performance can be self-presentationally devastating. Sometimes, the entire team shares responsibility for a competitive fiasco, as when a vastly superior team is inexplicably trounced by the underdog. In other cases, the performances of particular players negatively affect others' impressions of those individuals, as when a football team loses because the placekicker misses an easy field goal at the end of the game. (Incidentally, the negative inferences others make in such cases may have little to do with the player's ability. Rather, the player is viewed as someone who chokes under pressure and thus can't be counted on to come through in the clutch.)

Athletic failures that result in self-presentational devastation are particularly painful events. Not only must the athlete contend with the sheer frustration of losing and with possible blows to his or her self-esteem, but the real and imagined evaluative reactions of others can be very distressing.

## Conclusions

Despite the potency and pervasiveness of self-presentational motives, little direct attention has been devoted to the self-presentational aspects of sport and exercise. In contrast, considerable attention has been devoted to the private self, as shown by the large number of references in sport and exercise psychology to constructs such as self-concept, self-schema, self-identity, self-esteem, and self-efficacy. Without denying the importance of individuals' perceptions of themselves, I assert that people's perceptions of others' impressions of them are at least as important. People are understandably concerned with what others think of them, and this concern can affect their behavior in sport and exercise settings.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup>I know of a runner who died of heat-related complications during a 10K race because he refused to quit, arguing that he had boasted of running in the race and couldn't face his friends and co-workers if he didn't finish. In this case, his self-presentational concerns literally killed him.

<sup>2</sup>One could argue that athletes who participate in sports that involve considerable muscular exertion, such as swimming, may actually perform better in competition if they do *not* increase their practice during the preceding week. Thus, athletes in such sports could conceivably self-handicap by overpracticing as well as by practicing insufficiently. In sports that involve a lower degree of exertion (such as golf), however, the best self-handicapping tactic is inadequate practice.

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