Self presentation in understanding the self

Much of the research on the self has focused on the importance of self-esteem. Although this property of the self is of great significance in understanding the self, it may be questioned if it is the most important. This essay will discuss the importance of self presentation as one of the many properties of self.

Self-presentation is the attempt to produce particular self images in order to influence public perception of the individual. The individual's own goals and beliefs have an impact on the type of impression they try to portray to others. Social desirability is a key factor in the creation of such self-presentations (Schlenker and Leary, 1982). Goffman (1959) described self-presentation as the way in which individuals attempt to generate positive and attractive peer appraisals. He proposed that people act differently in the public domain in an attempt to appear in a positive light to those around them. Individuals possess an idea of their ideal self (the self the ideally desire to be) and it is this self that they attempt to project and be seen as by others.

In a study by Baumeister and Jones (1978) participants gave an account of their personality traits to another individual who either did or did not already have information about the participants' personalities. If the information they had already received showed the participant in a negative light they subsequently counteracted by boosting their depictions of self. Participants coincided with their current reputations while simultaneously presenting positive information with the intention of balancing out the negative characteristics of the existing persona. If positive information was initially given, participants were more humble in the self-descriptions. Participants

who were in the private condition (in which they knew their information would not be viewed by the target) did not attempt to enhance their descriptions. The findings of this study imply that the presentation of a self-depiction is influenced by whether or not the evaluation is public.

Baumeister (1982) carried out another study subsequent to this investigating how chronic self-esteem has an effect on self-presentation. Male participants were given fictitious public reaction to a personality measurement. Those participants displaying high self-esteem reacted by trying to win the public over in employing contradictory behaviour to what their fictitious reputations implied. Those with low self-esteem coincided with the public feedback.

Baumeister outlined three main reasons why self esteem impacts self presentation in this instance. Firstly individuals are under the impression that the way in which they see and judge themselves is mostly accurate and therefore they believe that others will agree with their self appraisal. Those with high self-esteem anticipate high regard from their peers while those with low self-esteem expect negative feedback. Also, self-assurance leads to increased risk-taking. Individuals stake more when they expect to win so people who anticipate peer approval are more eager to declare complimentary traits, in spite of the risk that such claims could be refuted. Finally, individuals are more likely to be unaffected by the influences of their peers when they are self-assured and confident in their evaluations. Therefore self-esteem has a resounding impact on how an individual self-presents.

Conversely self-presentation has also been shown to impact self-esteem. Jones, Rhodewalt, Berglas, and Skelton, (1981) carried out a study investigating the effects of self-presentation on individual's self-esteem, looking in particular at self-enhancement and self-deprecation. During one of their experiments the participants were stimulated to imitate either self-enhancing or self-deprecating presentation during an interview. This influence was created by having participants watch others perform in an interview. Their presentation was subsequently reproduced in their self-esteem. Subjects who were influenced to demonstrate self-enhancing behaviours consequently demonstrated increased self-esteem. In contrast, those influenced to demonstrate self-deprecating behaviours exhibited decreased self-esteem.

Self-presentation is also linked to self-conscious emotions. Individuals who are self-conscious in the presence of others report being concerned about how they portray themselves in public, and are concerned by peer evaluation (Carver and Scheier, 1981). Doherty and Schlenker (1991) conducted two experiments in which it was found that those high in public self-consciousness and low in private self-consciousness portrayed themselves to a partner in a way that was in harmony with a prior measurement of social sensitivity that was publicly known. However, when their performance on this measure was confidential their self presentation was consistently positive. On the contrary, those participants who were either low in public self-consciousness or high in private self-consciousness presented themselves positively in all cases regardless of whether their social sensitivity score was public or private. Therefore those high in public

self-consciousness and low in private self-consciousness are the most likely to attempt to increase peer approval by means of self-presentation.

Schlenker and Leary (1982) looked at the links between self-presentation and social anxiety. They put forward the idea that individuals experience social anxiety when they doubt that they will make a desired impression on peers. This leads the individual to imagine inadequate appraisals from peers. Self-efficacy and self-esteem both play a role here in dictating the individual's confidence regarding their ability to convincingly present his or herself to others in a desirable way.

The self has traditionally been viewed as having two parts; the inner self being inflexible and constant while the outer ' interpersonal' self could be altered by how the individual wishes to be perceived (Tice and Baumeister, 2001). The importance of both of these parts of the self have been acknowledged however it has been posited that the outer public self seems to hold more credence. In fact public actions seem to have an influence of the inner self and statements made in the presence of others can lead to belief changes (Tice and Baumeister, 2001). Therefore self-presentation has a huge impact on the self and the opinions and attitudes of the individual. People become more and more similar to the person they wish to portray.

In essence, all of the above literature not only emphasises the importance of self-presentation but how all properties of the self are inextricably linked. In this paper, self-presentation has demonstrated links with self-esteem, self-consciousness, self-efficacy and social anxiety. Therefore it is ridiculous to attribute such significance to self-esteem alone without looking at the self

and all of its properties as a whole. This essay has focused on self-presentation in particular, however all properties of the self bounce off of and influence each other. In order to create a whole picture of the self these properties must not be neglected by focusing solely on self-esteem.