The Self

Two Extreme Views of the Self:
2. Erving Goffman's Theory: *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*

What kind of self do we try to advertise?
- “Beneficent”:
  - Beneficent
  - Effective

The Motive to Present Oneself as Beneficent
- Reciprocal altruism: Punish cheaters, help altruists.
- Tit for Tat in the Iterated Prisoner's Dilemma: Cooperate with those who cooperated with you on the last turn (or who look likely to cooperate)
- Therefore: Present self as nice, honest, generous, caring, trustworthy (so others will cooperate with you, extend you favors, etc.)

The Motive to Present Oneself as Effective
- Dominance: I can hurt you.
- Status: I can help you.
  - authority, cachet, dignity, dominance, eminence, esteem, face, position, preeminence, prestige, rank, regard, repute, respect, standing, stature, status.

The Psychology of Status
- Status: The public knowledge that you possess assets that allow you to help others should you wish to, e.g.:
  - beauty
  - irreplaceable talent and expertise
  - knowing powerful people
  - wealth.
- Status is relative.
Physical Advertisements of Status

- The handicap principle in animal displays.
- Thorstein Veblen:
  - Conspicuous consumption. (Potlatches, sumptuosity.)
  - Conspicuous waste.
  - Conspicuous leisure.

But what happens when status symbols are too easy to copy?

Fashion:

- Quentin Bell: The psychology of fashion.
  - Try to look like those above you.
  - If you're at the top, try to look different from those below you.

Modern Status Symbols:

- Conspicuous outrage:
  - “I'm so talented, wealthy, popular, or connected that I can afford to offend you.”
- The psychology of hip and cool.

Why No One is as Beneficent and Effective as They Pretend to Be
• Conformity effects:
  – Milgram: obedience
  – Asch: simple judgments

• 75% at least once
• 37% on average

– Darley: Bystander apathy & the Kitty Genovese case
– Candid Camera

**Attribution Theory:**

• Why did he do it?
  – That’s the kind of person he is, versus
  – Anyone would do the same in that situation

• Fundamental attribution error:
  – People overestimate the importance of the person
  – People underestimate the importance of the situation

• Actor-Observer discrepancy:
  – I am controlled by the situation
  – He is controlled by his personality

**The Problem of Lying:**

• Jerome K. Jerome: "It is always the best policy to tell the truth, unless, of course, you are an exceptionally good liar."
• Why it's hard to be a good liar.
  – 1. Autonomic responses as guarantors of sincerity (ordinarily).
  – 3. Consistency of reality as a check against lies. "A liar must have a good memory."
• Lie detectors: mechanical and human.

**Triviers:**

A “Solution”: Self-Deception.

1. One part of the mind believes the self is pure and powerful.
2. Another part of the mind registers the truth.

• (cf. Freud's defense mechanisms, e.g., repression, denial.)
• Orwell in 1984:
  – "The secret of rulership is to combine a belief in one's own infallibility with a power to learn from past mistakes."

**Possible Examples of Self-Deception**

• 1. Gazzaniga: Left hemisphere confabulations.
Possible Examples of Self-Deception, cont.:
The Lake Wobegon Effect

- Lake Wobegon: “Where the women are strong, the men are goodlooking, and all the children are above average.”
- Usual finding: 60-70% say "above average"; 25% say "below average."

Results of the Class Survey:
5=worse than avg., 3 = avg., 1=better than avg.

- athletic ability: 2.7
- driving skill: 2.6
- general knowledge: 2.8
- generosity: 2.4
- honesty: 2.1
- intelligence: 2.7
- looks: 2.7
- neatness: 2.8
- popularity: 3.0
- politeness: 2.3

Other Self-Serving Biases:

- Rigged games: My successes are due to skill; my failures are due to luck.
- Derogating the victim (e.g., Milgram experiment)
- Twist: Depressed people are more accurate about their performance than happy people!

Cognitive Dissonance (Festinger)

- When people hold two inconsistent beliefs, it causes an unpleasant mental state: “cognitive dissonance.”
- People reduce dissonance by changing one belief to make it consistent with the other

Evidence for Dissonance Reduction:

1. Rationalizing choices after the fact.
   - Rate 12 records; choose between two equally rated ones in middle; rate again.
   - Now people give a lower rating to the unchosen one.
     - “Record #2 is good.
     - I didn't choose Record #2.
     - Therefore, Record #2 is not so good.”
2. Believing one's own lies.
   • Lie about boring task for $1 versus $20; then rate how enjoyable the task was.
   • People rate the task higher if they were paid $1
     – "The task was boring.
     – I said the task was interesting (without good reason).
     – Therefore, the task was interesting."
   • Same effect for writing an essay arguing for a position you disagree with: People change their minds more when paid $1.

3. Resisting temptation: “Sour grapes” or “Wanting what you can’t have”?
   • Kids: Put second-favorite toy on table, leave room, threaten child not to take it.
   • Then ask child to rate the toy.
   • Mild threat: lower rating than severe threat.
     – "The toy is great.
     – I didn't take the toy, but I could have.
     – Therefore, the toy is not so great."

CONSEQUENCES OF LYING are found to vary, depending on whether the justification for the lie is large or small. In this experiment students were persuaded to tell others that a boring experience was really fun. Those in one group were paid only $1 for their cooperation; in a second group, $20. The low-paid students, having least justification for lying, experienced most dissonance and reduced it by coming to regard the experience favorably.
9.00 Introduction to Psychology  
Professor S. Pinker  
Week 13, Lecture 2: The Self

4. Initiations (hazing).  
- Recite mildly versus severely embarrassing passage; rate discussion group.  
- The racier the passage, the better the rating.  
  - “The activity isn’t so great.  
  - I suffered to be allowed to do it.  
  - Therefore, the activity is great.”

Why Cognitive Dissonance is the wrong explanation!  
- Dissonance is **not** triggered by logical inconsistencies. Why don’t people just say:  
  - “I had to choose one of them, so I picked at random.”  
  - “I was pressured into lying.”  
  - “I was too scared to take the toy.”  
  - “I was pressured into doing something stupid.”

Why Cognitive Dissonance is the wrong explanation, cont.  
- Because:  
  - Those answers make me look weak, dishonest, stupid, easy to manipulate.  
- **Self-presentation** as the real motive for dissonance effects (Aronson).  
- **Dissonance reduction:**  
  - Not: “A contradicts B, so I better change A.”  
  - Rather: “A contradicts the belief :‘I am nice and in control.’ so I better change A.”

VI. The Tragedy of Self-Deception  
- **Criticism.** When does it sting?  
- **Arguments.** Trivers:  
  Consider an argument between two closely bound people, say, husband and wife. Both parties believe that one is an altruist of long standing, relatively pure in motive, and much abused, while the other is characterized by a pattern of selfishness spread over hundreds of incidents. They only disagree over who is altruistic and who selfish. It is noteworthy that the argument may appear to burst forth spontaneously, with little or no preview, yet as it rolls along, two whole landscapes of information processing appear to lie already organized, waiting only for the lightning of anger to show themselves.  
- **Villainy.** Was Hitler an actor?  

Wisdom:  
**Wisdom:** The recognition of self-deception.  
Mark Twain:  
  - “There’s one way to find out if a man is honest: ask him; if he says yes, you know he’s crooked.”
Francois La Rochefoucauld:  
  - “Our enemies’ opinion of us comes closer to the truth than our own.”
Robert Burns:  
  - “Oh wad some power the giffie gie, us To see oursel ses as  oth ers see us!”