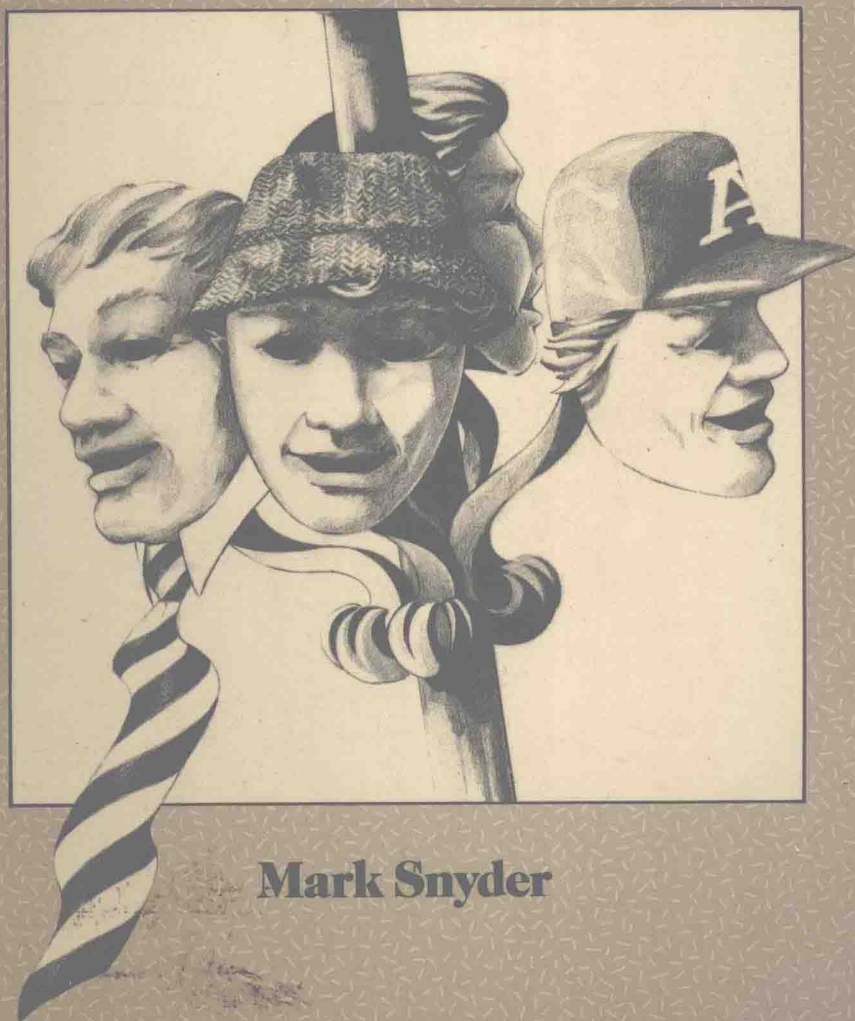# PUBLIC APPEARANCES

PRIVATE REALITIES

The Psychology of Self-Monitoring

Mark Snyder

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The Psychology of Self-Monitoring

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PUBLIC APPEARANCES / PRIVATE REALITIES

A SERIES OF BOOKS IN PSYCHOLOGY

Editors

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Preface

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"Shall we clap into it roundly, without hawking or spitting or saying we are hoarse, which are only prologues to a bad voice," suggested Shakespeare in *As You Like It*. I agree, and so this preface will be brief. There will be no hawking and spitting here to explain what this book is about or why I wrote it. Not to fear, though. These matters of explanation will be dealt with soon enough, in the first few pages of the book, actually. Let me instead use this space to acknowledge debts of gratitude and offer words of appreciation. Having only one author, this book is something of a single-parent child. But, it does come from a large family whose members have contributed, each in their own way, to its nature and its nurture.

I could not have written this book without the insights gleaned from research on the nature of the self. Some of this research has been my own; some was the work of other investigators, including the many talented and dedicated graduate students who have joined me in my studies. Over the years, thousands of people have generously volunteered their time to participate in these studies and have bravely allowed us to peer through the windows of their lives. Not incidentally, more than a little financial support from the University of Minnesota, the National Institute of Mental Health, the National Science Foundation, and the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences has helped me do my research and write this book.

As the book went through its drafts, and there were more than a few, its form and substance have been shaped by the advice and counsel of students and colleagues. My editors and publishers join me in expressing special thanks to Phillip Shaver of the University of Denver and William Ickes of the University of Texas at Arlington, who read the manuscript and provided those most precious of commodities—constructive criticisms and tactful suggestions.

Mark Snyder

PUBLIC APPEARANCES / PRIVATE REALITIES

Contents

An Introduction to Self-Monitoring

The image of myself which I try to create in my own mind in order that I may love myself is very different from the image which I try to create in the minds of others in order that they may love me.

—W. H. Auden

THE GAPS AND contradictions between the selves we allow other people to see and the more private self only we personally are allowed to know have been the focal points of my explorations into the nature of the self. For well over a decade now, I have sought to understand the often tangled web that is woven of the public appearances and private realities of the self. Why, I have asked myself, do some people follow Auden's example, appearing to be living lives of public illusion, when others are content just to "be themselves," without constantly assessing the social climate around them? Why do the public and private person seem to mesh so well for some, when others project a kaleidoscope of changing appearances?

My attempts to answer these questions have grown out of a long-standing fascination with the differences between reality and illusion. I was struck by the contrast between the way things often appear to be

and the reality that lurks beneath the surface—in novels, on the stage, and in people's actual lives. In J. D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye,* 16-year-old Holden Caulfield found himself repulsed by the pretense of adults who talked as if they loved each other but whose unloving actions spoke louder than their words. For centuries now, theatergoers have been charmed by *Tartuffe,* Moliere's comedy about a man who changes from one self to another with the ease of a chameleon changing colors, masquerading as a paragon of religious virtue while busily robbing other men of their property and their wives.

These contradictions between public appearances and private realities appealed to both parts of my dual professional identity—the social psychologist and the personality psychologist. As a social psychologist, I wanted to understand the world of appearances as it operates in social relationships: How is the appearance built up? How is it maintained? What are its effects on the person who projects it and those around him or her? As a personality psychologist, I wanted to know where personality resides: Is it in the *persona*—the public face—or in the underlying private reality? I was also interested in exploring an older, more philosophical question: Is there a "real" me, an essential self beneath the various images that people project?

My concerns led me to develop the concept of *self-monitoring*. I have applied this concept both as a theoretical guide for asking questions about the nature of the self and the ties that bind personality and social behavior and as an empirical vehicle for answering these questions. I will begin this chronicle of my journey of investigation at the beginning—with an introduction to the concept of self-monitoring.

The Construct of Self-Monitoring

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There is a pretty woman on my television screen. Her name appears. It is Lauren. Lauren looks pensive. "I'm very into attitudes," Lauren says. "I have dozens of them sort of hovering in the closet in my room. They're all part of a world I created for myself. But I'm never really sure who I am in that world. Is there a real me inside, or am I only what you see?" (*Minneapolis Star and Tribune,* April 28, 1983)

ALTHOUGH FEW OF us explicitly ask the question Lauren did in an advertisement for Calvin Klein jeans, most people share an interest in discovering who that one true self is that underlies the many roles they play in the course of their lives.

For some people, discovery of the self comes easily; they have no difficulty fulfilling the Socratic exhortation, "Know thyself." For others, a sense of identity is not so readily available. Many people turn to the self-help sections of their favorite bookstores in search of paperbound recipes for discovering themselves, for liking themselves, for respecting themselves, and for living up to the Shakespearean injunction, "To thine own self be true." For still others, the road to self-understanding is torturous: They may undergo year after year of painful self-examination in psychoanalysis. Yet, as difficult as the quest for the self may be, there are few people in this culture who would ques-

tion the assumption that there exists a self that is uniquely one's own, that distinguishes each person from all others, gives meaning to experiences, and brings continuity to life.

The Self: Public Appearances and Private Realities

Assumptions about the self, particularly that there is a true self, are some of our most cherished beliefs about human nature. But these beliefs are being challenged by the discoveries of researchers who study the self. Most people assume that each of us has one and only one true self, but this is not always so. Some people act as if they have not one, but many selves. Moreover, in spite of the widespread belief that the self is an integral feature of personal identity, for many people, it seems to be largely a product of their relationships with other people. These people exhibit striking gaps and contradictions between the *public appearances* and the *private realities* of the self. The public appearances created by a person's words and deeds may be the result of deliberate attempts to create images appropriate to particular circumstances in an attempt to be "the right person in the right place at the right time."

Just about everyone acts to control the impressions conveyed to others to some extent. But for some people, this strategy is a way of life. Some people are particularly sensitive to how they appear in social situations—at parties, job interviews, professional meetings—in circumstances of all kinds where they might be motivated to create and maintain an appearance. These people carefully observe their own performances and skillfully adjust their behavior to convey the desired image, acting like different people depending on the situation and their audience. It is as if they are actors for whom life itself is a drama in which they play a series of roles, choosing the self that best fits the circumstance at hand. Like Lauren, of the Calvin Klein ad, they have a closetful of "attitudes" they use to create public appearances that may or may not be backed up by the private reality of the "real me" on the inside.

The Concept of Self-Monitoring

There are differences in the extent to which people *monitor* (observe, regulate, and control) the public appearances of *self* they display in

social situations and interpersonal relationships. The Laurens of the world are what I call *high self-monitors*. They monitor or control the images of self they project in social interaction to a great extent. *Low self-monitors,* in contrast, value congruence between who they are and what they do. Unlike their high self-monitoring counterparts, low self-monitors are not so concerned with constantly assessing the social climate around them. Their behavior is quite consistent: They typically express what they really think and feel, even if doing so means sailing against the prevailing winds of their social environments. They take the injunction, "To thine own self be true," seriously.

These self-monitoring propensities have profound effects, influencing people's views of the world, their behavior in social situations, and the dynamics of their relationships with other people. Although I began my research on self-monitoring by examining the extent to which people manage their *public* appearances of self, it has become apparent that self-monitoring is intimately associated with people's *private* beliefs about what constitutes a "self" as well. Accordingly, theory and research on self-monitoring have been able to provide some perspectives on the very nature of the self.

The Conceptual Ancestry of Self-Monitoring

Two questions provided the impetus for my explorations of self-monitoring: Do people actively attempt to control the images they convey to others during social interaction? What are the consequences of adopting or not adopting this strategic orientation to interpersonal relationships? When I began thinking about these questions, it very quickly became apparent that they had a rich and venerable heritage, one that was by no means confined to the annals of psychological inquiry. Indeed, the assumption that people try to influence their public appearances has cropped up time and again, both in literary allusion and in scientific discourse.

The "Life as Theater" Metaphor   "All the world's a stage," we are told by Jacques in Shakespeare's *As You Like It,* "and all the men and women merely players" in a theatrical performance in which they act out many parts in their lifetimes (II, viii, 139). In Cervantes' *Don Quixote,* the title character asks his companion, Sancho Panza (and us, as well):

"Tell me, have you not seen some comedy in which kings, emperors, pontiffs, knights, ladies, and numerous characters are introduced? One plays the ruffian, another the cheat, this one a merchant and that one a soldier. . . . Yet when the play is over and they have taken off their players' garments, all the actors are once more equal."

"Yes," replied Sancho, "I have seen all that."

"Well," continued Don Quixote, "the same thing happens in the comedy and intercourse of this world, where some play the part of emperors, others that of pontiffs—in short, all characters that a drama may have—but when it is all over, that is to say, when life is done, death takes from each the garb that differentiates him, and all at last are equal in the grave." (Part II, Book iii)

No less an authority on the theater than Sir Tyrone Guthrie has claimed that "we all spend a great deal of our lives in acting" (1971, p. 7). As for the form of this acting in the theater of life, Guthrie believed that it involved "pretending to be someone or something other than yourself, or even, while retaining your own identity, expressing thoughts or feelings which do not in fact correspond with your own thoughts and feelings at a particular moment" (1971, p. 7). As for the motivation behind this offstage and out-of-theater acting, Guthrie suggested that "most of it is done in a good-natured endeavour to lubricate the creaking mechanisms of social intercourse" (1971, p. 7):

Employees have to make a show to employers of being industrious and respectful, while employers have to make a show of being kind and just and taking an interest. "How's *Mrs*. Wetherbee? . . . Oh, not *again* (in a tone of extreme concern) . . . that's her second this winter." (With even deeper concern) "*Has* she tried those sort of inhaler things?" Fortunately at this moment the telephone rings and the actor can switch from the role of Considerate Employer to that of Jolly Fellow Rotarian and by the time the "kidding" and the roars of assumed laughter have run their dreadful course, old Wetherbee, thank God, has slipped out of your office and Miss Scales is ready to take dictation. Whereupon yet another Act begins: the iron-clad, ice-cold Man of Affairs creating order and profit out of chaos; and, at the same time, yet another impersonation: the Dominant Male allowing a Female to help him. . . . (1971, p. 7)

The Impression-Management Tradition   That people can and do control their public images is also a basic tenet of most, if not all, psychological and sociological theories of the self in social interaction. At the end of the nineteenth century, William James offered this psychological perspective on the social nature of the self:

> *A man has as many social selves as there are individuals who recognize him* and carry an image of him in their mind. . . . But as the individuals who carry the images form naturally into classes, we may practically say that he has as many different social selves as there are distinct *groups* of persons about whose opinions he cares. He generally shows a different side of himself to each of these different groups. Many a youth who is demure enough before his parents and teachers swears and swaggers like a pirate among his "tough" young friends. We do not show ourselves to our children as to our club companions, to our masters and employers as to our intimate friends. From this there results what practically is a division of the man into several selves. . . . (1890, vol. 1, p. 294)

James's notions have been echoed by successive generations of theorists (for reviews, see Gordon and Gergen, 1968; Schlenker, 1985). Symbolic interactionists—following in the footsteps of Cooley (1902), Thomas (1923), and Mead (1934)—have argued that the self is defined and "negotiated" through social interaction (for reviews, see Stryker, 1979, and Stryker and Statham, 1985).

Sullivan, a proponent of a brand of psychoanalytic theory called interpersonal psychiatry, suggested that "every human being has as many personalities as he has interpersonal relations" (quoted by Perry, 1982, p. 108). And, in a similar vein, role theorists have proposed that the self is a reflection of the social roles people perform (e.g., Biddle and Thomas, 1966; McCall and Simmons, 1978; Sarbin and Allen, 1968). As one theorist writing in this sociological tradition said:

> The self consists, from one point of view, of all the roles we are prepared to take in formulating our own lines of action, both the roles of individuals and of generalized others. From another and complementary view, the self is best conceived as a process in which the roles of others are taken and made use of in organizing our own activities. (Becker, 1968, p. 197)