

Self-monitoring

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Self-monitoring is a theory that deals with the phenomena of expressive controls. Human beings generally differ in substantial ways in their abilities and desires to engage in expressive controls (see dramaturgy). People concerned with their expressive self-presentation (see impression management) tend to closely monitor themselves in order to ensure appropriate or desired public appearances. People who closely monitor themselves are categorized as high self-monitors and often behave in a manner that is highly responsive to social cues and their situational context. High self-monitors can be thought of as social pragmatists who project images in an attempt to impress others and receive positive feedback. Conversely, low self-monitors do not participate, to the same degree, in expressive control and do not share similar concern for situational appropriateness. Low self-monitors tend to exhibit expressive controls congruent with their own internal states; i.e. beliefs, attitudes, and dispositions regardless of social circumstance. Low self-monitors are often less observant of social context and consider expressing a self-presentation dissimilar from their internal states as a falsehood and undesirable.

Historical context

During the 1970s when the self-monitoring concept was introduced it became part of two larger ongoing debates. Within personality research there was the tension between traits and situation; one could think of this as the nature versus nurture debate. Were people more inclined to behave consistent with innate personality traits or were they shaped by their environment? The self-monitoring construct offered a resolution to this debate because there was no need to argue that humans needed to fit entirely into the nature or nurture paradigm. High self-monitors were better predicted by their environment (situation/nurture) while low self-monitors were better predicted by their traits (traits/nature). Another debate that was raging during this time period within social psychology was whether or not attitudes were good predictors of behavior. The self-monitoring construct offered a resolution to this debate as well because it posited that low self-monitors would behave largely consistent with their attitudes, while attitudes would be poor predictors of behavior for high self-monitors. The self-monitoring construct fit neatly into the arguments of the day where high self-monitors affirmed the situation-oriented view typically associated with social psychology, while the low self-monitors affirmed the trait-oriented view typically associated with personality psychology.

Self-monitoring scale

Snyder originally developed the scale in 1974 as a 25-item measure. In his original study he found that Stanford University students scored significantly higher on the scale than did psychiatric inpatients, but significantly lower than people in the acting profession. The scale was revised into an 18-item measure that is considered psychometrically superior to the original scale and has been used extensively in self-monitoring studies. There has developed great debate over whether or not

the self-monitoring scale is a unitary phenomenon. During the 1980s, factor analysis postulated that the self-monitoring scale was actually measuring several distinct dimensions. The three-factor solution was the most common and usually interpreted as Acting, Extraversion, and Other-Directedness (see willingness to communicate). There has developed consensus about the multifactorial nature of the items on the self-monitoring scale; however, there remains differing interpretations about whether or not that jeopardizes the validity of the self-monitoring concept.

Applicability to social psychology theory

There are several theories within social psychology that are closely related to the self-monitoring construct. Icek Ajzen argues that subjective norms are an important antecedent to determining behavioral intention in the Theory of Reasoned Action/Theory of Planned Behavior. High self-monitors tend to weigh subjective norms more heavily than low self-monitors. Studies that evaluate private attitudes and public actions include Ajzen, Timko & White, 1982; and DeBono & Omoto, 1993. Informational cascades theory is related to observation learning theory which was developed by Bikhchandani, S.; Hirshleifer, D. & Welch, I. (1992) and describes how people will follow, sometimes blindly, the actions of others. The self-monitoring construct would identify that high self-monitors may be more susceptible to informational cascades and herd mentality. The difference between high self-monitors and low self-monitors has also been studied in relation to advertisements congruent with the Elaboration Likelihood Model where high self-monitors are more prone to react favorably to peripheral processing of images consistent with high social status.