Integrative Essay 1: A Real Case of Self-Presenting – The Blind-Date

“Gregory has plans to meet Beth at the new, swanky restaurant uptown. His friend Tom met Beth at the gym and set up the blind date thinking she and Gregory would hit it off. Gregory, who arrives before Beth, finishes off his mixed drink at the bar; he figures some liquid courage would be helpful, being a little nervous for the blind date. Gregory has never been set up before and doesn’t exactly know how to act with a blind date.”

When an individual enters the presence of another, he or she commonly seeks to acquire information about the other person and bring into play information they already possess. In the blind date situation, Beth will be interested in things such as Gregory’s economic status, his goals in life, and perhaps his preferences in family matters. More importantly, Beth will be interested in Gregory’s own conception of himself. Information about Gregory helps define the situation, and it enables Beth to know in advance what he will expect of her and what she will expect of him. Self-presentation is projecting who we would like others to believe we are. Self-presentation is evidenced through the social desirability view, which claims that people will answer personality items so as to be regarded in a favorable light, regardless of the item content and the truthfulness of their responses. Frank language could be critical and threaten the public self that the individual is trying to project. Johnson’s study of self-presentation is defined as “the attempt to control self-relevant images before real or imagined others” (Johnson 1981). When an individual appears before others he or she will have numerous motives for trying to control the impression they receive of the situation. Self-presentation strategies are particularly important at the beginning of relationships.

Imagine how Gregory is feeling right before his blind date. Would he be nervous? Excited? Dreading the experience? His answers to that question certainly correlate with his personality: certain people are simply more outgoing and confident, allowing them to thrive in such a situation. Those individuals would report feeling better directly before a blind date than more timid people, but neither group may be considering the effects of self-presentation on their mood. According to the research by Dunn et al., most people largely underestimate how good they’ll feel in situations requiring self-presentation, regardless of their personality.

Say Tom calls Gregory and asks him how he is feeling about his impending date. Two days before the blind date, Gregory admitted to feeling nervous about interacting with a stranger of the opposite sex and expected to feel more uncomfortable in this situation than he would if he were meeting an old friend or a long-term girlfriend. Tom expects Gregory to express his anxiety now since Beth will be arriving any moment. However, to his surprise, Gregory tells Tom that he feels cheerful and confident. Why? Because even prior to the blind date Gregory is engaging in self-presentation. As the study shows, we tend to try harder to impress people who are less familiar to us. By prepping himself to put his best face forward on the date and appear pleasant to Beth, he is elevating his self-esteem and actually feeling more pleasant.

The experiments carried out by Dunn et al. suggest that people are generally ignorant of the benefits of self-presentation and therefore “may underestimate how good they would feel in situations that demand high levels of self-presentation” (Dunn et al., 2007). The blind date is a perfect example of such a situation. It offers the condition of high self-presentation because both
individuals are strangers and because it is in their interests to come across as attractive and pleasant. The studies indicate that Gregory and Beth would feel significantly better before the interaction than they or others would have anticipated.

“After ordering their food, Gregory and Beth settle into casual conversation. Beth nonchalantly asks him, ‘What do you do for a living?’ He stops to think for a moment. Does he simply tell her that he works at a marketing firm or does he tell her he was just recently promoted to head marketing manager of the department?”

Research suggests that when individuals expect to meet a potential dating partner for the first time, they will alter their self-presentational behavior in accordance with the values desired by the prospective date. Even when interacting with strangers, individuals tend to engage in self-enhancement (Johnson 1981). Another study done by Tice et. al. found that we self-present differently depending on whether we are with friends or strangers. According to the results, people tend to act more modest when they’re around their acquaintances and more flattering when they’re around people they do not know. In the case of Gregory’s blind date with Beth, the findings of the study would argue that Gregory’s automatic self-presentation style would be to take the more boastful route, telling Beth that he was recently promoted. Since they are only meeting each other for the first time, it makes sense to want to make a good, lasting impression on that new acquaintance, as opposed to appearing mediocre. Additionally, Gregory’s positive self-presentation should affect the way Beth portrays herself to him as well. If he is playing up his accomplishments, she will unconsciously attempt to equally self-present herself in a flattering manner. Finally, the study looked at the memory recall of participants’ interactions and found that when people self-presented automatically, i.e. modestly towards friends and boastfully towards strangers, they had much better recall of the social interaction (Tice 1995). Therefore, since Gregory and Beth are strangers at this point in their relationship, if they both self-presented in a more self-enhancing manner, they would ultimately remember the date, and each other, more. How about that for making a lasting impression!

“Gregory pauses for a minute; he has something on his mind. He likes Beth, and doesn’t want to ruin things by telling her about his strong political beliefs in case it turns her off. Now that they’ve been sharing superficial information for a while, he’s ready to go a little deeper.”

Self-disclosure is an important part of bringing two people closer together, however as with many things there has to be limits. Some people do not respond well to certain information; therefore complete self-disclosure does not necessarily lead to a favorable impression. For a couple to become closer to each other they need to share general information but they also need to share deeper values, thoughts and feelings to a partner. Therefore, if Beth and Gregory aspire to begin an intimate relationship, their desire to feel understood by their interaction will motivate self-disclosures that are open and honest as opposed to deceptive. In making decisions about what and when to self-disclose, individuals often struggle to reconcile opposing needs such as openness and autonomy (Johnson 1981).

“Gregory suddenly becomes aware that he’s been smiling for the past hour. While Beth freshens up in the bathroom, he sends a text to Tom: ‘this date is 2 cool!’ He’s surprised at how good he feels, considering he was nervous when Tom originally set up the date.”

Further experimentation by Dunn et al. provides an explanation of self-presentation and mood during the date itself. Following their hypothesis, Gregory and Beth should be engaging in self-presentation throughout the date and feeling fairly pleasant and cheerful (unless they are
simply incompatible). One example of how the authors tested this was by behavioral coding for the interactions between participants in the study. The coders rated the level of self-presentation using behavioral cues and also recorded how the participants appeared to be feeling, finding a correlation with those numbers as well as with responses by the participants themselves. According to this information, Gregory and Beth should be experiencing inner emotions that reflect their positive affect as they self-present and try to impress each other.

“Gregory waves down a taxi for Beth and they say their good-byes. As he watches the taxi leave, he recounts the date, amazed at how well it went. Gregory can tell that this could be the start of something good and he can’t wait for their next date.”
References

