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# Being Yourself: How Much is Too Much?



By Michael Jarrett , INSEAD Senior Affiliate Professor of Organisational Behaviour

**How much of “yourself” you put on display should be dependent on the situation and those around you.**

How many times have you prepared for an interview, a meeting with a new client, or a presentation and you get the rallying calls to: ‘just be yourself’, ‘be authentic’, ‘show people who you really are’ and ‘be totally honest’? It reflects our viral existence where ‘public privacy’ is the norm. It’s another part of the growing social revolution to ‘let it all hang out’. I would suggest that nothing could be further from the right thing to do.

My comments are not just for effect or to be controversial, although they do fly in opposition to current wisdom. Instead, they are inspired by an often underappreciated scholar, Erving Goffman, a Canadian sociologist and writer and one of the most cited authors of books in the humanities sitting with Foucault, Derrida and even more quoted than Freud. He has influenced much of what we now take for granted in the fields of impression management, how we frame our context and rituals in social interaction and groups. Inspired by his works, I add caution.

## Reasons why being yourself is flawed

Let's look at the research. For instance, take people who are high on self-monitoring, a personality preference defined as 'active construction of public selves to achieve social ends'. A highly cited [study by Ajay Mehra, Martin Kilduff and Daniel Brass](#), found that "chameleon-like high self-monitors" were more likely than true-to-themselves "low self-monitors" to occupy central positions in social networks, which affords them greater levels of social capital and influence. Together these characteristics predict individual workplace performance.

There is also considerable evidence to suggest that people who present themselves as warm and competent are more likely to be liked and conferred higher levels of social status. Furthermore, those who **act** with higher levels of confidence are given greater credence in the eyes of others.

Thus, it appears that just being yourself has some distinct drawbacks. In fact, naive authenticity may do more harm than good. It presumes you know who you are; it puts the focus on the intrapersonal rather than the contextual interaction; it seems to set you up for a narcissistic injury.

## Read the room

Goffman also believed that social exchanges are forms of rituals and these take place in a situated context. Here he argues that we should study "*situations and their men*" rather than "men and their situations". Thus, it reframes interpersonal exchanges in terms of social, interactional processes rather than purely on individual motives and dispositions. We can elaborate by using three of Goffman's further ideas: ritual interactions, face work, and the notion that we have a front stage and back stage to our lives.

*Rituals*: The possibility that each social encounter is a form of ritual, a series of prescribed or formal activities, sets the stage for explicit and implicit norms. 'Being yourself' can upset the rituals and may create disappointment and anxiety. It's called a social faux pas. An example might be your mobile phone ringing in an interview. No doubt there will be an immediate loss of face, which tarnishes the positive social values a person effectively claims for themselves.

*Face work* is the continual interpersonal negotiation of personal status within this ritualised context. When we succeed in this social dance, we maintain

face for both ourselves but more importantly others, who are part of the ritual. For instance, shaking hands (or not in some countries) is part of the ritual context of a good start. But when we fail it affects the whole context, people become embarrassed on our behalf. That's why we all cringe when the TV character, David Brent, from *The Office* makes a social gaff. He's crossed the line.

*Front stage and back stage work:* Brushing teeth is usually back stage work, performing in an interview or presentation is front stage. Being your naïve self can sometimes be like teeth cleansing in public. Something best avoided.

### **Take the middle ground**

It may not be natural for you to be high on self-monitoring or to 'fake it until you make it'. I am not proposing that we all become sociopaths: even though they are pretty good at presenting themselves. Neither, should you betray your ideals and beliefs. The point is simple: being yourself, lauding naive authenticity, is a potential recipe for disaster (in the worst case) and perhaps some disappointment. Not just for you but also the people around you. Instead I propose a twist, and act from the position of situated authenticity, which means think about the context and others, not just you.

I conclude with a quote from William Shakespeare.

"All the world's a stage,

And all the men and women merely players.

They have their exits and their entrances,

And one man in his time plays many parts".

William Shakespeare. Act II Scene VII, *As You Like It*

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