ACES AND BOMBERS: THE POST-EXAM IMPRESSION MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES OF STUDENTS

Daniel Albas*
Cheryl Albas
University of Manitoba

In this study we attempted to develop a classification of the strategies students employ to manage self-impressions after grades have been awarded and examination papers returned. These encounters between students are of three types: first, when students who have scored a top grade in this exam (Aces) encounter other students who received a low or even failing grade (Bombers); second, when Aces encounter other Aces; and, third, when Bombers encounter other Bombers. The impression management strategies employed in these encounters are constrained by well-known rules of modesty in regard to one's own achievements and considerateness for lesser achieving peers, dictated by the particular encounter type described above. These rules are spelled out and an attempt made to generalize the findings to a wider universe of interactions.

Goffman (1959) in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* graphically describes how, in the drama of everyday life, people constantly send messages to others with whom they interact concerning their wishes, feelings, intentions, and selves. Some of these messages are intended by the sender and are referred to as "impressions given." Other messages sent are those that are not intended—they escape inadvertently and may even embarrass actors if they are aware of them. These are referred to as "impressions given off." Accordingly, people constantly manage their behavior to communicate impressions that are favorable and advantageous to themselves. In other words, through strategies of concealment and revelation,[1] they practice impression management—a form of communication that employs not only verbal language but also face work, gestures, gait, posture, and the whole panoply of body language. In this article we detail the post-exam impression management strategies students employ either to conceal poor grades or reveal good ones.

*Direct all correspondence to: Daniel Albas, Department of Sociology, University of Manitoba, Winnipeg, Manitoba, R3T 2N2, Canada.

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By far the majority of empirical studies of impression management deal with strategies of concealment; however, in this article we attempt also to document strategies of revelation. Whether, in the course of impression management, people elect to employ concealment or revelation or a mixture of both depends largely on the total situation and its objectives, dangers, or opportunities; for example, whether the aim is salesmanship, undercover work, or courtship. However, also involved most of the time and constituting a condition more to be coped with than capitalized on are the intense emotions that so often engulf us in so many everyday life situations.

Stebbins' (1972) "expressions of self esteem" can be translated in our present context of "impression managment" as attempts to convey the image of a highly estimable person. He describes how actors engage in modest, proud, or conceited behavior with reference to their "accomplishments in lines of activity regarded by [them] and certain others present as major forms of positive self-identification" (Stebbins 1972, p. 463). In essence, the form of behavior presented to other people whose opinions are valued will depend on the particular situation. Thus, a person may "speak proudly of an accomplishment before one group of people and modestly of it before another." Accordingly we have come to recognize that impression management is a universal and constant process of social interaction; that the problem of coping with emotions and the necessity to obey largely implicit but nevertheless binding rules are the parameters of every actor's role in the impression management act.

A particularly revealing arena for the observation of impression management under emotionally stressful circumstances, and one that is subject to well-known but seldom voiced rules, is the frequently played out drama of returning their papers to students after a test has been graded but the grades have not been posted or in any way publicly revealed. The first intimations students have of their grades is when they go to the front of the classroom and receive the graded paper from the instructor. It is usually a situation highly charged with the emotions of excitement, eagerness, apprehension, and anxiety. Those who have studied thoroughly and think they have done well almost burst with anticipation of an excellent grade, whereas those who were largely unprepared cringe at the almost certain prospect of a low or even failing grade. Students somewhere between these two categories dither in doubt as to whether their hopes will be dashed or their fears will be turned to delighted surprise. As a consequence of the grade they actually receive, all of them, the "Aces," the "Middle of the Roaders," as well as the "Bombers,"[2] know that they must manage the impressions they give if others are to see them in a positive light and if they are to see themselves as highly estimable people. Aces know that if they reveal their marks (as they probably ache to do and so acquire kudos) they must still appear modest and help those who did not get good grades to save face. Even Bombers, who probably wish to conceal their grades know that they must appear to be "gracious losers" and assist others like themselves to save face. In effect, the drama of returning graded exam papers to students is one in which their student identity is very much on the line. It is a competitive situation wherein the awareness context is closed or at least one of suspicion (Glazer and Strauss 1981). That is, students are unaware of their positions relative to their

competitors. We might even think of it as a kind of information vacuum that induces pressure both to find out one's situation relative to that of others and at the same time to project messages which may or may not be accurate but which will protect ego (impression management).

Miall and Herman's (1986) computer search of the literature on impression management revealed that the vast majority of such studies are quantitative in nature and were carried out in laboratory (artificial) settings. The fewer qualitative studies, which are carried out in natural settings, focused heavily on deviants (for example, the mentally disturbed, physically handicapped, or sexual deviants) to the relative neglect of normals. This promotes a situation where a major concept is relegated to "the status of respected little islands of knowledge" (Strauss 1970, p. 53). Accordingly, in this article an attempt is made to extend the applicability of the concept of impression management beyond the "abnormal" focuses of the past to "normal" life situations such as examination behavior. Some wider applications to other everyday life situations are also suggested in the conclusion.

METHODS

This article is part of a larger study of student life and exams conducted over the past 14 years (Albas and Albas 1984) at a large provincial unversity in Western Canada. The data come from over 300 individuals who comprise four "generations" of university students. The data originate from three principal sources:

1. Examination logs—These are written accounts by students in which they described in detail how exams influenced their daily lives and noted aspects of exam related events which they perceived as problematic. More specifically, students wrote about what caused them particular difficulty, anxiety, or trouble. The accounts were to be arranged in terms of the what, when, where, and how of examinations as events in their daily lives throughout the academic year. This process incorporated an early in the term pre-examination phase, through the immediate pre-examination phase, the examination itself, its immediate aftermath, and the eventual return to students of their grades. If portions of the logs were unclear or seemed incomplete we attempted to contact the students involved (usually by telephone) to supplement their accounts. Since these logs included descriptions of thoughts, sentiments, and behavior students considered significant, they served as a valuable source of information about student's inner lives we were in no position to observe. The logs also provided an additional base line against which data obtained from observations and interviews could be cross-checked.

2. Interviews—These were conducted by us mostly at the examination site where we intermingled with students before and after exams, and in classrooms after test papers were returned. We attempted to get from students their spontaneous explanations of behavior and practices about which we had questions but had not yet verified. For example, in one class after the grades had been returned we noted a student who persistently tapped his pencil on his desk. We surmised it was a ploy on his part to attract attention to his exam paper, which lay face up on his desk with the grade clearly visible. Of course the tapping could have been a response to a nervous tic or the rhythmic response to a musical motivation. When it is possible to question him a little later, after most other students had departed, he verified our earlier hunch that he was attempting to draw attention to his high grade. In sum, the content of such interviews was prompted by particular "hunches" on our part, suggestions made by students in their logs, and by theoretical implications derived from reviews of relevant literature.

3. Comprehensive observations—To complete the triangulation process information derived from logs and interviews was combined with careful observations of strategies guided by categories that seemed theoretically and semantically apt (e.g., concealment, revelation, or selective revelation).

   To ensure that we did not fall into the trap wherein our hypothesized results would come to guide our data-gathering process we scrupulously adhered to the following guidelines: (1) No quotation from logs was used to illustrate any point unless it was replicated (in essence) by at least three others. Most of the time dozens of students reported the same thing in more or less similar words, and (2) We attempted to avoid "leading" students in any responses they recorded in their logs or provided for us in interviews. In all cases we attempted to maintain the integrity and originality of the students responses. Also, careful attention was paid to deviant cases. For example, we did not merely assume that norms were responsible for many of the regularities observed, but rather we paid close attention to deviants to see if they were sanctioned or at least if they broke the sense of social rapport. Deviant cases (from the norms and emerging propositions) led to further reformulation of propositions and the development of a more complex categorization of impression management techniques employed by students.

THE DATA

General Encounters

Use of Revelation

As stated earlier, this study includes strategies of revelation as well as concealment. The first strategy of revelation is "repressed bubbling" wherein students who obtain an unexpectedly good grade are so elated that their joy seeps out in spite of themselves:

> When I have done very well and especially if its a surprise, I feel like telling everyone, but I know its not right [proper]. I try to keep it to myself but I think it shows because I feel this smile all over me—not just my mouth but everything else inside of me is smiling too.
>
> I usually find it hard to conceal my happiness. I sit through class wriggling and trying not to smile but my friends told me that I had a smile from ear to ear—I just cannot help the seepage.

The norm of modesty forbids overt exaltation and so the elation is expressed in such a way that it is obvious that the person is very happy but, at the same time, could not be accused

of "crowing" over the success. These situations test the "dramaturgical discipline" of students almost to the limit because even though they are "immersed and given over" to the action of the moment most remain sufficiently in charge of themselves to be able to "cope with dramaturgical contingencies as they arise" (Goffman 1959, p. 216). However, some students who receive unexpectedly good grades are unable to muster the self-discipline required and respond by "flooding out" or crying. One male student, unable to contain his joy, clenched his fist, raised it above his head and shouted "All right!"

As a strategy of revelation, repressed bubbling deals with impressions given off by students almost in spite of themselves. At the same time, though, they also employ more intentional techniques to "dramatically realize" identities that otherwise might not be apparent to others. The other strategies we describe subsequently require more "dramaturgical circumspection"—more planning and foresight—if the performance is to be successful (Goffman 1959, p. 218).

A second such strategy of revelation can be referred to as "accidental revelation." In this situation students return to their seats after they have received the graded test and then permit an "accidental display of the grade" by leaving the test paper face upward as they appear to check through it, all the while appearing to be deep in thought and portraying the general image of humility. Other "accidental revelation" strategies include "very briefly placing the test paper [with grade face upward] sideways on the desk facing in the direction where other students are sitting," or "holding the test paper at arms length while reading it [as if one were far-sighted] thereby exposing the grade to as many others as possible . . . without shoving it in their faces." Another student goes almost as far by "pretending to need to stretch and yawn while I hold the [test] paper in my hand thus displaying the grade for the entire length of the stretch."

A third strategy of revelation involves "passive persuasion." Students who are less bold than those described up to this point but who are nonetheless impelled by an equal desire to make known their "good" or perhaps "unexpectedly good" fortune invoke a strategy of passive persuasion. It involves:

> smiling broadly, or giving some positive sign and then saying nothing. Your rather unusual actions raise the curiosity of other students and friends who will ask you how you did. Once asked it is then O.K. to "crow", but only for a very short time. The real beauty of this method is that you can move from student to student, or friend to friend . . . smile, "crow", and then move on without appearing to be a braggart or a gloater.

A fourth strategy of revelation is "active persuasion." "Active persuaders" solicit a response from the others by looking about themselves, catching others' eyes, raising their eyebrows in a manner that unmistakably signals inquiry, and perhaps even inclining their bodies toward another in order to initiate conversation. The message is usually so clear that others almost always respond. However, interaction is always a gamble and despite the best of planning it may fail to materialize, as the following example shows. Two male students were classmates in two of their university courses. One student consistently outscored the other, usually by about five to 10%. In the incident described here the student who usually scored higher received his test first. When he went to sit down in his seat the other person "sneaked" a peak at the grade and saw that it was 32 points out of a

possible 40. When the student who usually scored lower received his test, he was elated to find that he also had scored 32 out of a possible 40 points. Here is his description:

> However, nobody seemed interested in my mark and I was just dying to tell someone, anyone, but especially this one person. I not only sat beside him, I also angled my body toward him and asked him what he got (as a score). He didn't answer. I spoke even louder and said 'I did a lot better than I thought, I got 32 (out of 40)'. He just kept on reading his test and pretended he didn't hear me [I think]. It was very embarassing.

This student's identities of "friend" and even as "person" were suddenly and unqualifiedly discredited (Gross and Stone 1981). However, he went on to note that when he looked around no one was looking at him and those who might have been observing the interaction were turning away. In effect, they were practicing "studied nonobservance" or "tactful inattention" (Goffman 1959, p. 230).

A fifth strategy of revelation is the use of the "Question-Answer chain rule" (Speier 1973). Earlier we described how students practice "passive persuasion" by evoking responses from others. This technique assumes that they are able to elicit the curiosity of others and that they are well supplied with friends and acquaintances who will volunteer the question "How did you do?" However, most students find that they must make the first verbal move by asking others how they fared (Q) and then wait for their response (A), which in turn sets the stage for the next question "How did *you* do?"

> It is common knowledge that when you ask another student how well he/she did on a test, that person will not only answer but almost always return the question.

In sum, the tactic is to ask others a question, which, when answered, puts the onus on them to ask a similar question that the initiators of the first question are only too pleased to answer. Thus, the initiators cannot be accused of aggressively bragging about their grade; rather, they are merely modestly complying with a request for information!

Since most students seem to be aware of this tactic, there are also many descriptions of how to cope in the event that they do not wish to respond. This counter-strategy is normally employed when students feel that the grade they received is somehow inadequate and not a good reflection on them. It most frequently takes the form of responding to the first question "How did you do?" in very general terms, such as: "I did O.K."; "not as well as I hoped"; "let's just say that I passed", and so compelling the initiators of the sequence to reveal their grades in similarly vague, if less self-gratifying terms. Students who do not abide by these rules of etiquette and persist to pry into the 'information preserves' of others are disliked and often rebuffed:

> Most of my flaunting of marks occurred during my first year at university. After a test was returned the first topic was always "How'd you do?" In mixed company [Aces with Bombers] most people would simply respond 'good' or "not so good'. I didn't understand that specific replies were not wanted. I would insist on getting an exact mark from them so that they in turn

would ask me how I had fared, and I was provided the opportunity to say '90%' or 'A'.

This student is now in his senior year and his reputation for flaunting his good grades has resulted in a situation "where it is now difficult for me to do so because few of my classmates are willing to interact with me after we get our test papers back in class." In other words, he has become somewhat of an isolate because of his inappropriate behavior.

A sixth strategy of revelation involves "the foot in the door approach." This more subtle strategy provides a variation on the previous Q-A chain. In this instance actors initiate inquiry, not by asking about another student's total grade but about a specific exam question. They may even use a touch of flattery by suggesting that they flubbed the question and wonder how the other person answered it. This inquiry provides the "foot in the door" for further queries about total grades, and, when the question is returned, they are able to reveal in modest fashion, after an appropriate time of humming and hawing, their own good grades.

A seventh strategy of revelation is termed "selective revelation." While some students make it a rule never to reveal their grades to classmates, they are only too happy to share news of their good fortune with other selected audiences, usually friends, parents, or spouses.

> I usually hide my feelings of excitement when I am with classmates and competitors. I remain aloof until I can tell friends who are not in the class and especially my family. After all, they are the only ones who are truly interested in how well I do.

One particularly interesting case is of a student who, in order to ensure maximum revelation (and approbation) of her good grades, involves her mother as a part of her performance team. A "team" refers to "any individuals who cooperate in staging a single routine." An essential moral requirement for teammates is "dramaturgical loyalty," that is, not . . . "betraying the secrets of the team" (Goffman 1959, p. 212). In this case, considerable dramaturgical circumspection is evident in the student's careful thought that goes into staging the routine as well in her choice of her mother as a team member because, of course, parents have every reason to be dramaturgically loyal; in other words, not to reveal to others that they are really cooperating in staging a performance. This is how she describes it:

> I call my mom right away because she tells all of the people she works with. Then when I go home on the weekend and everybody asks 'How are you doing at school?' I respond 'O.K.' In turn, they say 'I heard you were doing really well.' In this way I sound modest and I don't brag because I wouldn't want to say 'Oh, great! I got mostly A's and a couple of B+'s. That sounds conceited.'

Along somewhat similar lines, but a case that defies clear categorization involved a student who retired out of sight of his classmates with his unexpectedly good grade, and then made sure that his "private" revelation—"a big cheer and holler of joy"—would be sufficiently loud to reach a considerable audience!

Use of Concealment

Goffman shows that discreditable behavior on the part of actors may not discredit them if it is concealed and unknown. Though discreditable behavior is always potentially discrediting, it is only actually discrediting if it is revealed and the actors stigmatized. Given the normal distribution of grades, then, it is no wonder that some students will seek to conceal their grades and escape stigmatization by their peers. In the words of one student "we become schemers who employ a large repertoire of concealment strategies."

The first technique of concealment involves absenteeism or early departure from class. Students who expect the worst (i.e., a low grade) may not attend class on the day the test papers are to be returned:

> If I know I did poorly on a test and I know on what day it is to be returned I plan to 'accidentally' be away from that class. This way I can prevent others from knowing my mark and so save myself a lot of pain and embarassment. Later I go to the professor's office and pick up my paper when none of my classmates are around.

Clearly this student is much more concerned with the response of other students than he is with the reaction of the professor. However, there are other students who hate to have the professor identify their face with a low grade. Students who do attend class on the day tests are returned only to find that their assigned grade is one that leaves them shame-faced, usually attempt to avoid communication with their classmates. A tactic widely employed is to leave the classroom at the first available opportunity and assume a manner that conveys that they are not open to conversation:

> I quickly gather up my books and depart in a 'rushed' manner. This allows me to escape from anyone who might attempt to find out how I fared because it appears as if I'm late for something and can't stay around for idle chatter.

The second technique of concealment is "lying about one's grade." Students who are questioned about their grades before they have an opportunity to escape can still conceal their unhappy results by lying about them:

> When I received my grade I felt very ashamed of it because it was the lowest in the class. So, when other students asked me what grade I got, I took it upon myself to lie. I added eleven percentage points to my actual score.

One student, who is also a nun, confesses that she no longer asks others what grade they got because, from her own experience, she knows that she is forcing them to lie.

A third technique of concealment may be described as "emphatic concealment." Students sometimes attempt to convey to others that they are totally "closed" to interaction by assuming a rigid posture, angling their shoulders away from the persons they usually sit beside and interact with in the class, and "rivetting" their eyes to their papers to remove any chance that they will be forced into a position where they have to reveal their grades.

Somewhat less dramatic but nevertheless quite effective strategies students employ to conceal their grades "from the prying eyes of others" include: (1) folding the test paper so that the grade is not visible; (2) keeping the paper literally "close to the chest" and, of course, directly in front of them; and (3) returning to their seats and emphatically putting the paper inside a book or binder, thus implying that the grade received is not a topic open for discussion.

> As soon as I get back to my desk I shove my exam paper into my binder. This action signals to others that I do not want my mark to be public knowledge, and that I am not willing to engage in a discussion concerning it. The message is usually received and obeyed.

One student attempts to convey this message more emphatically by placing her book bag on top of the binder into which she has shoved her test paper! Even these seemingly clear ploys, nevertheless sometimes have unplanned outcomes. One student, despite her body work aimed at dissuading others from interacting with her, was approached by a friend who asked how she had scored. This shock led to an uncontrollable bout of coughing on her part, so that the questioner was forced to switch the question from "how did you do?" to "how are you?"

A fourth technique of concealment might be termed "subtle concealment." More subtle students casually veil their mark by strategically placing their elbow over it, or by "accidentally" losing their test paper in the shuffle of other papers. Thus, the grade is effectively hidden from the view of others but the actions are not blatant:

> A too obvious 'cover' fails to serve its purpose because others know you're trying to hide something. So, I descretely cover the grade by draping my arm over it or conceal it by having another sheet of paper over top of the test paper so the grade is just barely (but completely) hidden. In this way it appears as though my arm or the paper just happens to be there by accident.

Students such as these not only conceal, but conceal the fact that they are concealing and thus create the impression that they are behaving "naturally" and that they are open to interaction with others.

A fifth technique of concealment is to "adopt an air of nonchalance." Students who adopt this role-distancing stance do not even bother to look at their grades and attempt to appear as if they couldn't care less about the results: "This tactic is usually successful because if you don't know your mark it's virtually impossible for others to force it out of you."

One exceptional case involved a student who expected to receive a low grade but instead received what in his estimation was an excellent one. At first, his impulse was to advertise his good news. Immediately though the thought struck him that the grade must be a mistake and the professor would certainly notice it if he showed undue excitement. Therefore, his strategy was "to lay low" and "with clenched teeth" and a "disappointed expression" on his face, to read through the test questions and assess the grading. It was only when he found that he had actually done very well and that the grade indeed was correct, that he relaxed and visibly enjoyed his good fortune.

Specific Encounters

Ace-Ace Encounters

These encounters are characterized by an atmosphere of considerable openness because "it's much easier to admit a high mark to someone who has done better than you , or at least as well." A certain amount of bragging is even acceptable because there is no danger of anyone's feelings being hurt. Everyone realizes that everyone else in the group has done well and so the norms of modesty can legitimately be stretched. Bragging often centers on how easy the exam was "so then you can allude to your intelligence without having to appear conceited." In this setting exact grades are likely to be revealed and the "revelation" may be accompanied by a certain staging. One student preceded his announcement of the exact grade to his friends with the following: "I was ripped off on one question where I lost 4 marks, and I lost another 5 (marks) on another question." He paused for a moment and then declared "Still, I pulled off a 90%."

These students almost always critically review each question on the exam. Particularly among students who have been friends for some time, there is an open exchange of the various study tactics they used. And, "whoever gets the highest mark is declared the unofficial winner of the my-way-is-better-than-your-way-of-studying contest." This is an interesting example of a "group culture" (Fine and Kleinman 1979), which is "anchored in their situationally relevant identity" (Kleinman 1983, p. 203).

Ace-Bomber Encounters

After a test is returned in class, Aces are almost always willing to interact with Bombers. Most frequently Aces attempt to sense just how poorly the Bombers have performed before the interaction begins. If the Bomber approaches the Ace and appears to be relatively composed, the Ace is likely to respond to the question 'How did you do?' in a very matter of fact fashion. If, on the other hand, the Bomber appears downcast, the most usual response by the Ace will be concealment of the actual grade or revelation "in an apologetic tone and rather quietly so that other students do not hear." Aces are also ready to offer face-saving accounts by immediately commenting on the difficulty and unfairness of the test, denying its significance "its only worth 10% of the total grade" or reminding the Bombers of their disclaimers before they wrote the exam: "As you said, you hardly had any time at all before the test to study." In general, Aces tend to display an attitude of sympathy, commiseration, and support for the dissatisfied Bombers. Aces often go so far as to provide accounts for their own 'lucky' outcomes. Incidentally, such an Ace is the same person who in a group composed of only Aces was heard to remark that the exam was 'a piece of cake.'

Bomber-Ace Encounters

In general, Bombers try to avoid encounters with Aces because the result is usually a feeling of status degradation. "When marks are exchanged you (Bomber) emerge looking like the dumb one" or "you (Bomber) feel like you are lazy and unreliable." Bombers become particularly sensitive to signs of success displayed by Aces, for example, "sitting tall" in their desks, displaying "glittering eyes," "broad grins" or a "jaunty walk," and these signs are often used as cues to identify who to avoid! However, when forced into interacton with Aces, Bombers strive to be gracious and congratulatory. One states that he learned from his parents to "lose graciously and win modestly."

Bombers explain their shortcomings through various accounts and disclaimers, many of which are designed to save face. "I say things like 'I guess it doesn't pay not to study' but my real message is 'I'm not dumb and I could have a mark like yours (Ace) if I did study'." Other Bombers openly admit their guilt: "Given my pathetic effort its just what I deserve." These statements leave the Bombers open to the graciousness and face-saving skills of others.

A dramatic example of the sanctions encountered by an Ace from a Bomber when the Ace breached the norms of modesty, consideration, and courtesy comes from a junior high school setting. This student is now at the university but she will never forget the episode!

> I got 100% on a difficult French test. A not too dedicated student approached me and asked me what my grade was. I openly (and naively) revealed it to her. She displayed her disgust with me and my performance with a swift kick in my shin. I stood there, in front of the class, in disbelief. Then I sat down in my desk and felt very guilty!

Bomber-Bomber Encounters

Gatherings of Bombers tend to be closed encounters. Sometimes they even stand in a circle or cluster together so that their backs are turned towards Aces who may be nearby. Bombers are quite willing to talk about their disappointment with others who are equally wounded by their poor grades. In fact, they often engage in orgies of mutual self pity that they themselves termed "pity parties." In this setting, the discussion takes the form of accounts, most frequently "excuses" (Scott and Lyman 1968) wherein students attempt to negotiate an identity which does not make them responsible for the final outcome (grade). "I look for someone or something to blame so that guilt can be shared and punishment spared." Many accounts focus on the impossibility of meeting the various obligations that come from having multiple identities. This rather extreme example concerns a husband-father who has a full-time job and who is also taking two university classes: "As soon as class is finished, I have to rush off to catch a bus home or go to work. With all of this going on I can hardly take time off to eat, forget finding enough time to study." Some of the more typical excuses include: 'I had four mid-term exams plus a term paper all due the same week." "I studied the wrong stuff . . . I didn't realize the stories [edited, social science book of readings] would be that important." "I wasn't feeling well for that entire week . . . I had a splitting headache." Many of the excuses given are attempts to elicit sympathy from others and the process is sometimes taken so far that students discredit themselves completely. For example, a student who was just below the passing line was commiserating with two of her friends who had "just made it." In one particular interchange she clearly exaggerated her plight: "I'll probably fail my first year and end up being a bum for the rest of my life." Her friend immediately countered with "Don't feel so badly, you know you can do better. You are actually very intelligent." The second friend present nodded his head in agreement. The student reflected on the conversation for a moment and then stated: "I felt so much better after my friends denied the assertions I inflicted upon myself."

There is a larger proportion of Bombers and correspondingly larger interactonal circles of them huddled together seeking mutual support when the grade distribution in a class is very low. The talk often turns from that of a pity-party to scapegoating, which takes the

form of a "hate-the-prof-fest." In this instance, professors are portrayed as sadists who enjoy inflicting identity damage on students, slave drivers who demand too much work in a particular course, or just plain incompetents. "I thought the test was totally unfair." "There is no way that test reflects what I know . . . If only she had asked questions on what I know, I could have passed." "The bugger asked all the wrong questions . . . He enjoys seeing us suffer." "She has too many tests and assignments, she thinks this is the only class we have to study for." "I sure would like to give the prof a piece of my mind." Each of these proclamations is usually followed by a round of "yeh's" from the other students present.

CONCLUSION

As we implied in the introduction there are two major facets of the universal phenomenon of impression management. The first is to project a favorable image of self, a process that involves identity protection as well as identity enhancement. The second is an expectation that successful people display an appropriate level of modesty when they interact with others and especially that they help those less successful than themselves to save face. These two essential elements of impression management are borne out in our data concerning student behavior when they receive their graded tests. For example, within their own group, Aces did indeed revel in their successes, even to the extent of bragging a little to enhance their egos. However, they also showed remarkable consideration for the Bombers. Clearly, the emphasis is on management, that is, managing the impression to fit the context of the interaction. For example, the Ace who called the test 'unfair' to comfort a Bomber who had scored poorly referred to the same test as 'a piece of cake' when he was with other Aces. We also found that although Bombers certainly do seek solace they also comfort others like themselves during "pity parties."

The converse aspect of the apparently "two faced behavior" of the Ace described above, is that of a student who gave the impression of being disappointed with a grade of 64% but privately hugged herself with delight and relief, since she had not expected even to pass. It was as if she had one role for the public "front stage" and another for the private psychological "back stage." However, she confessed to feeling dishonest, which is perfectly understandable since she had no norm to justify the deception, as did the Ace who was attempting to comfort the Bomber. It is clear from the examples given of the tentative stage by stage feeling out of others before disclosure of their own grades, that most students were not only considerate of others but also manifestly modest-seeming (when circumstances warranted it) in regard to their own grades.

The emphasis of this article has been explicitly on the concealment or disclosure of one's own grade and the management of the impressions given about the relevance of the grade to one's own identity. The counter activity of finding out other people's grades—a kind of "identity search" to locate one's own academic status—is also an important activity, heavily laden with impression management. The kind of impression management involved here would come under the rubric of "espionage" (Wilsnack 1980) where one seeks "to obtain information from people who do not wish you to have it." To do this one needs a "cover," i.e., a carefully managed set of impressions given that will induce disclosure rather than concealment on the part of others. Our present data do not permit a comprehensive or systematic discussion of "espionage" but they will serve as a basis for further investigation of this topic.

The dramaturgy described in the return to students of their graded examination papers has implications for a much wider universe of situations, some of which we have already tentatively explored. For example, we have noticed that faculty members, who receive replies from journal editors concerning acceptance or rejection of submitted papers tend first to hasten to their offices to open the letter. Rejections are rarely revealed, but in the event that they are, professors tend to evaluate them with the same kind of nonchalant "couldn't care less" attitude of some of the students described earlier. Acceptances are usually advertised in ways also reminiscent of student strategies, for example, covering the general departmental office mail counter with galley proofs.

We also noted that waiters and waitresses manage the impressions they give to their colleagues concerning the "tips" they receive by allowing particularly large ones to lie on the table for a longer than usual time before they are collected, arranging bills in "tip jars" so that the largest ones are on the outside of the roll and so clearly visible, and conspiring with bus boys to exclaim with enthusiastic whoops over large tips so as to ensure the widest possible advertisement of them.

Another situation in which impression management occurs is in those industries where salary raises are not subject to union specifications so workers at the same level may receive unequal increments. Interestingly enough, and contrary to the student mentioned earlier who flaunted his good grades, workers who receive large raises seldom state the exact amount they receive but are more likely to complain (bitterly) about now being in a higher income tax bracket. In effect they reveal their good fortune by implication only.

In sum, all of the situations just noted as well as the student behavior described earlier involve people competing with each other in a more or less closed awareness context where the outcome greatly affects their identity. Perhaps the most important aspect of identity is social status. However, whereas in an open awareness context there tend to be reasonably clear indices of status such as wealth, lineage, knowledge, etc., in closed awareness contexts where status is dependent on grades, salary, or success at publishing individuals will manage impressions to achieve the optimal level of status.

On the basis of the findings in this work we formulated the following proposition. Wherever there exists an ongoing tension between competition and ascendancy on one hand, and approbation and rapport with others on the other hand then individuals will be led almost inevitably to practice various forms of impression management. In the case of students, Ace-Ace and Bomber-Bomber encounters involve minimal status differencs so there is little tension between competition for status and the pressure for rapport. Consequently, there is little need for and practice of techniques of impression management. Conversely, Ace-Bomber encounters involve considerable status differences between the interactants that must be balanced against the strong pressures from the student culture for mutual congeniality. As predicted, this opposition produces a considerable amount of impression management.

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NOTES

1. Wilsnack (1980) identifies four cardinal strategies of information control. They are espionage, secrecy, persuasion, and evaluation. Of these four strategies, the two most germane to the present study are secrecy, i.e., "keeping other people from obtaining information you do not want them to have"; and persuasion, i.e., "making sure that other people obtain and believe information you want them to have." In this article we will refer to secrecy as "concealment" and persuasion as "revelation." These changes in terminology seem appropriate because secrecy is really more of a state than it is behavior, and what is being described is behavior. Revelation is the opposite of concealment and though it is achieved through persuasion, revelation is the actual process described.

2. These are terms used by students themselves. The terms "Aces," "Middle of the Roaders," and "Bombers" refer, respectively, to top performers, average performers, and low scorers on any particular examination. Accordingly, an "Ace" in one exam may be a "Bomber" in another. However, high scorers tend to be habitually high scorers, and the same goes for the other two categories. The focus of this article is on the clear differences in patterns of revelation or concealment displayed by Aces and Bombers. The category of students referred to as "Middle of the Roaders," though constituting a numerical majority, are not a focus of this particular article because they do not show consistent differences in patterns of behavior; that is, some of them act like Aces while others act more like Bombers.

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