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The social implications of embarrassment displays and restitution behaviour*

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Abstract

The present study examines the evaluative consequences of two kinds of reaction to committing a social transgression. In an experimental study, embarrassment display and restitution behaviour were manipulated orthogonally in the context of a video-taped incident in which an actor was seen to upset a sales display in a store. Subjects were shown one of the four versions of this incident and asked to rate the actor responsible for the mishap. It was reasoned that both appearing embarrassed and engaging in restitution would have positive, but distinct, effects on social evaluation, and that the beneficial effect of restitution would be mitigated by embarrassment display. Results were consistent with these expectations. Discussion focuses on the implications of these findings for the social function of embarrassment displays.

INTRODUCTION

This paper examines the consequences of displays of social emotion—in this case embarrassment—that arise as a result of unintentional social transgressions. An example of such a transgression would be knocking over a glass of wine in a restaurant. Assuming that the actor displays signs of feeling embarrassed following such an incident, two questions arise: (i) what impression does the actor convey through appearing embarrassed? and (ii) what function, if any, might the display of embarrassment serve in everyday life?

Although embarrassment would seem to be a particularly suitable topic for social psychological inquiry, relatively little attention has been paid to this subject. What research there is tends to have been inspired by Goffman's (1955, 1956) analyses of facework and embarrassment. A case in point is Modigliani's (1968, 1971)

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model of embarrassment. He proposed (i) that the incident which is the immediate cause of embarrassment involves a failure on the part of the actor to fulfil certain expectations; (ii) that this failure leads to a diminution of the actor's perception of his/her situated public esteem; and (iii) that this loss of 'situational subjective-public-esteem' in turn results in a lowering of the actor's situated self-esteem. A correlational study (Modigliani, 1968) and an experimental study (Modigliani, 1971) yielded partial support for this model. Both studies showed that embarrassment is related to a loss of situational subjective-public-esteem, but neither study provided a clear demonstration that this relationship is mediated by a loss of situated self-esteem. Other work in this area has not really penetrated beyond the general notion that embarrassment results from inept or inconsistent public self-presentation (Gross and Stone, 1964; Scheff, 1977; Schlenker, 1980; Shott, 1979), or that it is a product of breaching social expectations (Archibald and Cohen, 1971; Brown, 1970; Garland and Brown, 1972; Sattler, 1965, 1966) and that such expectations are locally defined (Weinberg, 1968).

Semin and Manstead (1981) have recently proposed a model of social emotions which holds that states such as embarrassment which are experienced after an unintentional violation of social norms arise as a consequence of a discrepancy between the negative public image that the actor assumes he/she has projected and the actor's self-image which, it is argued, is unaffected by the incident. In an experimental study examining the perception of social transgressions, Semin and Manstead (1981) showed that the amount of emotionality attributed to an actor who commits a social transgression is a function of the perceived discrepancy between the actor's self-image and the public image the actor thinks he/she has projected. This model of social emotionality provided the framework guiding the present investigation of the social meaning and function of embarrassment displays.

Embarrassment occurs when there is some public violation of a taken-for-granted social rule which is part of the actor's repertoire. Furthermore, the rule in question must have been violated unintentionally¹ and the actor must be aware (a) that a violation has occurred, and (b) that this violation was witnessed by others. These are the conditions which are held to be necessary for social transgressions to result in embarrassment, as distinct from either no emotional state or other states such as shame or guilt. The overt signs which routinely or occasionally accompany embarrassment include blushing, aversion of gaze, and nervous smiling or laughter (*cf.* Buss, 1980; Edelman and Hampson, 1979, 1981; Goffman, 1956; Modigliani, 1971). What information about the actor do these signs convey to an observer? In our view the answer to this question is to be found in an analysis of *why* the actor became embarrassed in the first place.

The actor is aware of having breached a socially endorsed rule, and knows that he/she can perform it perfectly in accordance with the rule in the normal course of events. In this particular instance however, the performance fails and this failure is witnessed by one or more observers. The actor is also aware that routine failure on the part of an individual to perform in accordance with social norms would be likely

¹We are concerned here with instances of embarrassment in which the actor who violates the social rule and the individual who becomes embarrassed are one and the same person. There are, of course, other instances of embarrassment (e.g. teasing, practical jokes, puncturing false fronts) in which violations are *intentionally* perpetrated by one or more persons in order to induce embarrassment in another or others (*cf.* Gross and Stone, 1964, pp. 13-15).

to lead observers to evaluate that individual negatively. According to the present model of social emotionality, the actor's perspective on the situation following a social transgression is peculiarly egocentric. The actor is aware of being the focus of the observer's attention, and becomes unduly concerned with how he/she is being evaluated by the observer. The actor's egocentric perspective leads him/her to imagine that those who witnessed the transgression construe the actor not simply as a 'figure' against a background of routine activity, but rather as a figure with personal identity, who has failed to perform appropriately on this occasion and who may so fail again. From this egocentric perspective it is not unreasonable for the actor to assume that he/she is being negatively evaluated by the observer(s). As explained above, it is the discrepancy between this negative public image that the actor assumes to have projected and his/her self-image which is thought to give rise to embarrassment.

Consider now how the actor would appear to an observer should no sign of emotion follow his/her social transgression. It is evident that such a lack of apparent feeling would encourage the observer to assume that the witnessed violation is a regular occurrence for this actor, and therefore that the actor either has no respect for the rule in question or lacks the basic competence required to comply with it. Either way, the observer would be inclined to make negative dispositional inferences about the actor. Correspondingly, if the actor does appear to feel embarrassed following the transgression, this display should serve to indicate to observers that the witnessed transgression is an exceptional occurrence, and may therefore stem the flow of negative attributions which might otherwise be made. A similar point is made by Goffman (1956), who notes that a display of embarrassment '... demonstrates that, while he (the actor) cannot present a sustainable and coherent self on this occasion, he is at least disturbed by the fact and may prove worthy at another time. To this extent, embarrassment is not an irrational impulse breaking through socially proscribed behaviour but part of this orderly behaviour itself' (pp. 270-271).

Thus, it could be argued that an actor who shows signs of feeling embarrassed after committing a social transgression is in effect providing a non-verbal apology for his/her behaviour. According to Goffman (1971), 'An apology is a gesture through which an individual splits himself into two parts, the part that is guilty of an offence and the part that dissociates itself from the delict and affirms a belief in the offended rule' (p. 143).

If a display of embarrassment does effect this dissociation of the individual from the transgression, then it can be predicted that an actor who shows signs of feeling embarrassed following a transgression should be evaluated more favourably than an actor who apparently remains unemotional.

If embarrassment displays can be construed as non-verbal apologies for social transgressions, one interesting question that arises is how such apologies compare with other gestures or reactions on the part of the transgressor, the effects of which are also to acknowledge the offence and to affirm commitment to the violated rule. Engaging in restitutive behaviour is a case in point. It is clear that an actor who is seen to engage in restitution following his/her transgression is likely to be evaluated more favourably than an actor who makes no effort to repair any damage done.

While there are grounds for anticipating that both embarrassment displays and restitution behaviour will have beneficial effects on the way in which a transgressor

is evaluated, there are also grounds for thinking that the nature of these effects will differ. The most prominent difference between a transgressor who simply engages in restitutive behaviour and a transgressor who only displays embarrassment is that the former reacts calmly while the latter appears to be flustered. Although both reactions acknowledge the occurrence of the transgression and thereby indicate the actor's commitment to the violated rule or norm, they differ markedly in the manner in which the actor is seen to be dealing with the situation. The actor who engages in restitution appears to have composure, and is therefore more likely to convey an impression of maturity and reliability. By contrast, the embarrassed actor appears to have less command over self and setting (*cf.* Goffman, 1956). Thus, the individual who appears to be embarrassed following his/her transgression, while acknowledging the transgression, also displays some negative attributes. The calmness and coolness of the actor who simply engages in restitution are markedly absent. Thus, the attributes in terms of which the apparently embarrassed actor will be evaluated more favourably are most unlikely to be ones involving reliability and maturity. Rather, it seems likely that an actor who displays embarrassment will be seen as a feeling human being, who suffers momentarily on account of the transgression and thereby evokes the sympathy of observers. The attributes most likely to be influenced favourably by appearing to be embarrassed would seem to be those pertaining to the actor's endearing qualities, such as likeability and warmth. The notion that embarrassment display and restitution exert differentially beneficial effects on social evaluation is addressed in the study reported below.

A further issue, also examined in the present study, concerns the evaluative consequences of a joint display of embarrassment and restitution—a conjunction that is, after all, quite likely to occur in the course of everyday interaction. There are grounds for thinking that the beneficial displays of restitution might be mitigated by a display of embarrassment. This is because appearing embarrassed may serve to undermine those very qualities which are enhanced by restitutive behaviour. However much an appearance of embarrassment might lead others to see the actor as a warm and likeable human being, it seems likely that it would also limit the degree to which he/she is regarded as mature and reliable, whether or not restitution follows the transgression. By manipulating embarrassment display and restitution behaviour orthogonally, the present study enables the examination of this notion that the evaluative benefits of restitution are limited to instances where the actor does *not* appear to be embarrassed by the transgression.

METHOD

Overview

Subjects were shown one of four videotapes, each of which depicted an incident which took place in the campus foodstore. The incident involved a male shopper accidentally disturbing a 5 foot display tier of toilet rolls with his shopping basket with the result that the rolls tumbled to the floor. The shopper's reaction to this incident was varied, such that he either did or did not engage in restitution. The orthogonal manipulation of these two reactions resulted in four stimulus videotapes, each lasting approximately 3 min. Subjects were asked to indicate their impressions of the actor depicted in the videotape by completing a number of dispositional rating scales.

Subjects

Forty subjects (20 males and 20 females) participated in this study on a voluntary, unpaid basis. All participants were undergraduates at the University of Sussex.

Stimulus tapes

With the permission of the manager of the campus foodstore, the investigators staged the occurrence of an embarrassing incident which befell a male 'student' who was apparently shopping for food. An actor was recruited to play this central role. The scenario, which had been carefully rehearsed, involved the actor entering the store, casually shopping for food, and then unintentionally disturbing the tier of toilet rolls with his shopping basket. The rolls tumbled onto the floor with some dramatic effect. The actor then either appeared embarrassed at this mishap, or gave no signs of feeling embarrassed. Orthogonal to this variation in apparent embarrassment, the actor either engaged in restitution, by rebuilding the display tier, or did not do so, i.e. he simply walked away and continued shopping. Several videotapes were recorded for each of the four conditions, and the final stimulus tapes were selected on the basis of a pilot study. The criteria used for selection were subjects' ratings of the actor's apparent embarrassment and the extent to which the actor made amends for his behaviour, in each case. The tapes which produced the largest discriminations on these dimensions, but which had no effects on ratings of how intentional the actor's behaviour was in causing the mishap, were those selected for the present study. The subjects were told that the tape they were going to view was a recording of an actual incident which had taken place recently in a supermarket and had been recorded via a concealed camera.

Measures

Dispositional ratings

The impression conveyed by the target person was measured by asking subjects to rate the actor on the following dispositional rating scales: *reliable-unreliable*, *immature-mature*, *warm-cold*, and *unlikeable-likeable*. These four scales were embedded in a set of ten further dispositional rating scales. These were as follows: *outgoing-reserved*, *intelligent-unintelligent*, *emotional-unemotional*, *stable-unstable*, *reckless-cautious*, *venturesome-shy*, *suspicious-trusting*, *insincere-sincere*, *friendly-unfriendly*, and *selfish-unselfish*. There were no grounds for anticipating that the experimental manipulators would influence ratings made on these scales. Subjects were asked to check on point on each 7-point rating scale.

Manipulation checks

Subjects were next asked to respond to the following question: 'How much disruption do you think the incident caused?' ('none'-'a great deal'); 'To what extent did the person try to make amends for his mishap?' ('not at all'-'completely'); 'To what extent was he responsible for the incident?' ('not at all'-'completely'); 'To what extent do you think that the person in the incident felt embarrassed?' ('not at all'-'extremely'); and 'To what extent did the person in the incident appear embar-

rated?' ('not at all'–'extremely'). These questions were all followed by 7-point rating scales, with endpoints labelled as indicated in parentheses after each question.

RESULTS

Manipulation checks

Scores on these measures were entered into two-way analyses of variance, with embarrassment display (present versus absent) and restitution (present versus absent) as the independent variables. The restitution manipulation exerted consistent effects in the expected direction. When the actor engaged in restitution he was seen as causing less disruption ($M = 2.05$) than when he did not do so ($M = 3.94$) ($F_{1,36} = 20.37, p < 0.001$); and as making more amends for the mishap ($M = 6.55$) than when he did not do so ($M = 2.25$) ($F_{1,36} = 118.44, p < 0.001$). The embarrassment display manipulation also produced strong effects on the relevant measures. When the actor was intended to appear embarrassed he was indeed rated as appearing more embarrassed ($M = 6.4$) than when he was not supposed to appear embarrassed ($M = 4.3$) ($F_{1,36} = 19.46, p < 0.001$); and he was also rated as feeling more embarrassed ($M = 6.3$) than when he was not supposed to feel embarrassed ($M = 5.0$) ($F_{1,36} = 9.97, p < 0.003$). Neither of the two manipulations significantly influenced judgements of the actor's responsibility for his mishap, and there were no other significant main effects or interactions on any of these manipulation check measures. Overall the manipulation check findings were considered to provide satisfactory indications that the two manipulations were effective².

Dispositional ratings

Initial analysis of the impression conveyed by displaying embarrassment or engaging in restitution following the staged transgression was performed by entering scores on the four key dispositional rating scales into a multivariate analysis of variance, using embarrassment display and restitution as independent variables. This analysis revealed significant main effects due to the embarrassment manipulation ($F_{4,33} = 3.99, p < 0.01$) and the restitution manipulation ($F_{4,33} = 4.20, p < 0.01$). The interaction between these two factors narrowly failed to achieve statistical significance ($F_{4,33} = 2.60, p < 0.06$).

The univariate effects associated with this MANOVA are shown in Table 1, along with the relevant treatment means. It can be seen that embarrassment display led the actor to be rated as more likeable than was the case when no embar-

²It might be argued that the results of the checks on the embarrassment display manipulation are more a reflection of the subjects' perceptions of how *they* would feel, were they in such a situation, than their perceptions of how embarrassed the actor appeared to be. Against this line of argument, it should be pointed out that responses to the question concerned with how embarrassed the actor *appeared* to be were influenced rather more strongly by the embarrassment display manipulation than were responses to the question concerned with how embarrassed the actor *felt*. This suggests that subjects were indeed sensitive to the actor's appearance of embarrassment, rather than simply attributing to the actor the feelings they imagined that they themselves would experience under similar circumstances.

Table 1. Mean scores and univariate effects for the main dispositional rating scales

Embarrassment display	Present		Absent		Main effect embarrassment display		Main effect restitution		Interaction	
	Present	Absent	Present	Absent	F^\dagger	P	F^\dagger	P	F^\dagger	P
Restitution										
Unlikeable-likeable*	5.30	5.10	4.80	3.60	8.00	<0.01	3.92	n.s.	2.00	n.s.
Warm-cold	4.00	3.80	4.40	4.70	3.45	n.s.	<1	n.s.	<1	n.s.
Immature-mature	3.40	3.60	5.00	3.30	4.12	<0.05	5.49	<0.05	8.81	<0.01
Reliable-unreliable	3.30	3.80	2.70	5.10	1.03	n.s.	17.73	<0.001	7.61	<0.01

* Lower scores fall nearer the first named adjective in each pair.

† Degrees of freedom are 1 and 36.

rassment display occurred. However, the tendency for embarrassment display also to result in greater attributions of warmth was not reliable.

It can also be seen that restitution behaviour led the actor to be rated as more mature and reliable than was the case when he did not make amends for his mishap, but the reliable two-way interactions suggest that these effects of restitution were qualified by the embarrassment manipulation.

The two interaction effects were analysed by computing the simple main effects due to restitution within each level of the embarrassment display manipulation. As expected, restitution resulted in higher ratings of maturity ($F_{1,36} = 7.05, p < 0.05$) and of reliability ($F_{1,36} = 14.05, p < 0.01$), by comparison with no restitution, when embarrassment was not displayed. Within the embarrassment display condition, however, restitution did not influence either set of ratings ($F < 1$ in both cases). One further point concerning the interaction effect in the maturity ratings is that the nature of this interaction fully accounts for the unanticipated embarrassment display main effect on these ratings, since the mean rating for the no restitution/no embarrassment display treatment did not differ reliably from either of the two treatment means within the embarrassment display condition.

For exploratory purposes, the scores on the remaining 10 dispositional rating scales were entered into a two-way MANOVA. This analysis revealed only one significant effect, namely the main effect due to the restitution manipulation ($F_{10,27} = 3.04, p < 0.02$). Examination of the univariate effects showed that restitution resulted in reliably higher ratings of sincerity ($F_{1,36} = 9.52, p < 0.005$), friendliness ($F_{1,36} = 10.30, p < 0.01$), unselfishness ($F_{1,36} = 33.8, p < 0.001$), and of how trusting the actor was ($F_{1,36} = 5.95, p < 0.02$).

DISCUSSION

The present findings provide a good measure of support for the notion that embarrassment displays and restitution behaviour would have beneficial, but differential, effects on social evaluation. Subjects estimated the actor who appeared to be embarrassed following his mishap more favourably than the actor who did not appear embarrassed, in so far as he was judged to be more likeable in the embarrassment display condition. However, the actor who appeared embarrassed did not attract reliably greater ratings of warmth than did his unembarrassed counterpart, although the results on this measure were in the expected direction. It remains for further research to establish the precise domain of social evaluation that is enhanced by embarrassment display following some mishap, but the present findings suggest that this domain is one of social affection.

The actor who engaged in restitution behaviour was evaluated more favourably than this counterpart who made no amends for the mishap, but only where the restitution was not accompanied by embarrassment display. As anticipated, it seems that the domain of social evaluation that is enhanced by restitution behaviour is one of social composure and maturity, and that an appearance of embarrassment undermines this beneficial effect. In fact the impact of restitution on social evaluation was rather broader than had been anticipated, in that the restitution manipulation resulted in reliable differences on four of the 'buffer' rating scales. In retrospect, it seems possible that these effects arose from the fact

that the staged mishap is one for which the person responsible is routinely expected to make amends. Simply to walk away from the scene, without making any attempt to replace the disturbed goods, runs counter to these expectations. The fact that the actor who did not make amends was seen as more selfish, more unfriendly, more insincere, and more suspicious than his counterpart who did engage in restitution may reflect his failure to conform to these expectations, as well as or rather than his counterpart's restitutive actions. The impact of restitution on social evaluation may be more specific in cases where the mishap is one to which restitution is a less obviously routine response.

The present findings suggest that the effect of appearing embarrassed after committing a social transgression may be analogous to providing an apology for one's behaviour. An appearance of embarrassment might therefore be particularly effective for warding off negative attributions where the audience is very large and/or composed of strangers, i.e. where it is difficult or impossible to proffer a verbal apology for one's behaviour. An appearance of embarrassment is easily communicated via non-verbal channels (*cf.* Edelman and Hampson, 1979, 1981) and is readily decoded by observers. This 'message' seems to indicate to observers that the actor's behaviour is out of the ordinary and unrepresentative of his/her 'normal' behaviour. That this message is effective is shown by the fact that appearing embarrassed following a transgression results in more positive dispositional attributions than does committing the same transgression without appearing embarrassed. At least in the circumstances examined in this study, an appearance of embarrassment clearly works to the advantage of the individual, whether he/she knows it or not.

However, it was also noted in the Introduction that control over one's emotions, particularly with regard to their overt expression, is positively valued in many cultures. As we have seen, the value attached to this self-control is not so great as to prevent the appearance of embarrassment following some blunder resulting in positive attributions, but in the present study displaying embarrassment was compared with making restitution as two forms of publicly acknowledging one's transgression. It was found that restitution for a mishap was also effective in forestalling negative attributions, but the effect was distinct from that of appearing embarrassed. Engaging in restitution without any display of embarrassment resulted in stronger attributions of maturity and reliability. The non-emotional reaction of replacing the disturbed objects was therefore seen as a more mature response to the situation, but because it did not result in the actor being seen as any more likeable, it cannot be concluded that making amends was a more effective means of apology than displaying embarrassment. It can only be said that the two responses produced differing patterns of positive effects.

A final point worth noting is that the present findings reveal a paradox in the social processes involved in the experience and expression of emotional states following the violation of social norms. As shown in a previous study (Semin and Manstead, 1981), the actor who unintentionally violates a social rule typically assumes that he or she will be negatively evaluated by those who witness the violation. The negativity of this 'subjective public image' and its discrepancy from the actor's relatively neutral self-image are closely associated with and perhaps directly responsible for the actor's negative emotional state following the transgression. However, the overt expression of this negative state, as seen in the present study, results in more positive evaluations of the actor by observers. If the actor

were aware of this fact, then the postulated reason for the embarrassment would evaporate, in that his/her public image would then be more positive and less discrepant from his/her self-image. However, this would be dysfunctional because it is through the expression of embarrassment that the actor forestalls negative attributions by observers. The violation-embarrassment-evaluation cycle can thus be regarded as a special case of Goffman's (1971) 'remedial interchange'. From the actor's point of view, the way out of this subjectively unpleasant interchange is apparent from the findings of the present study: making amends for a transgression appears on the present evidence to be an alternative and equally effective means of forestalling negative attributions. There are nevertheless a number of social transgressions, such as *faux pas*, where direct restitution may not be possible. Perhaps this is why *faux pas* almost invariably result in embarrassment.

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RÉSUMÉ

Cette étude examine les conséquences évaluatives qu'entraînent deux sortes de réaction lors d'une transgression sociale. Dans une étude expérimentale, la manifestation d'embarras et un comportement de restitution furent manipulés de façon orthogonale à l'occasion d'un incident—filmé au magnétoscope—au cours dequel un acteur renversait une pile de marchandises dans un magasin. Les sujets voyaient une des quatre versions de l'incident et devaient juger la responsabilité de l'acteur pour son faux-pas. On faisait l'hypothèse que l'embarras et la restitution auraient des effets positifs, mais différents, sur l'évaluation sociale et que l'effet bénéfique de la restitution serait nuancé par la manifestation d'embarras. Les résultats concordent avec ces hypothèses et les auteurs discutent leurs implications pour la fonction sociale qu'ont les manifestations d'embarras.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Die vorliegende Studie untersucht die Folgen zweier Reaktionsarten auf soziale Ueberschreitungen. In einer experimentellen Untersuchung wird Verlegenheit und Wiedergutmachungsverhalten orthogonal manipuliert und dies mit Hilfe einer gefilmten Episode, in der ein Kunde gezeigt wird, der in einem Laden ein Gestell mit ausgestellten Waren umstösst.

Den Vpn wurde eine der vier Versionen der Episode vorgeführt und man bat sie, den für das Missgeschick verantwortlichen Kunden zu beurteilen.

Es wurde angenommen, dass beide Verhalten, Verlegenheit und Wiedergutmachungsversuche positive aber unterschiedliche Konsequenzen auf die soziale Beurteilung zeitigen würde. Die Resultate entsprachen dieser Erwartung. Die Diskussion konzentriert sich auf die Implikationen dieses Befunds für die soziale Funktion von Verlegenheitsverhalten.

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