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The transparency of the sinner

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INTRODUCTION

Being deviant and being observable are intimately related in Western culture (Sachs, 1972) and social transgressions have precisely this consequence: the actor is aware that he is observable and sees himself in terms of how others would judge him (*cf.* Scott and Lyman, 1968; Semin and Manstead, 1981; Tedeschi and Riess, 1981). In fact, even if the transgression is unintentional, such as reaching for a can of food in a crowded supermarket and in doing so accidentally upsetting a whole tier of cans, the actor behaves 'out-of-role' and assumes that the observer will make negative dispositional inferences. If the act is unintentional it can be assumed that the observer has no evidence on which to base any dispositional inferences. In an experimental study Semin and Manstead (1981) demonstrated that albeit the fact that the actor has a neutral self-image as a consequence of an unintentional social transgression and the public image held by the observer is also neutral, the actor assumes to have conveyed a negative public image. The social emotion characteristically reported in such unintentional social transgressions is embarrassment (*cf.* Goffman, 1956; Modigliani, 1968, 1971; Sattler, 1965; Semin, Reference Note 1; *inter alia*), and both in a correlational (Semin and Manstead, 1981) and an experimental study (Manstead and Semin, 1981) it has been demonstrated that the negative public image that the actor assumes to have conveyed through the transgression is the main factor responsible in evoking the particular social emotion of embarrassment.

The study reported here sought out to examine first of all the contention that the above-mentioned discrepancy between the subjective-public-image (SPI) held by the actor and the public-image (PI) of the observer which is found for unintentional social transgressions is also retained when the transgression is intentional. From an observer's perspective the actor's image will become negative as a function of the intentionality of the act. Whereas in the case of unintentional social transgressions the observer has no evidence on the basis of which dispositional inferences of either a positive or a negative kind can be made, in the case of a social transgression which

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is clearly intentional the observer can make negative dispositional inferences. Depending on the degree to which the act is negatively sanctioned the observer's inferences will be correspondingly negative.

In considering the actor's perspective the following properties become apparent. A transgression automatically leads the actor to become self-conscious through being individuated, which is regarded as a process through which the actor becomes aware of being the focus of other's attention (*cf.* Semin and Manstead, 1981). One inevitable consequence of this is the actor's consideration of how he/she is evaluated by others¹. Even in the case of an unintentional social transgression the actor regards him/herself not simply as a part of the background of routine activities, but as a figure with *personal identity* against the background of such activity, who fails to fulfil normative and/or moral standards on this occasion and potentially on future occasions as well. Consequently, it is expected that the negative discrepancy between the actor's subjective public image and the observer's public image will be maintained not only in the case of unintentional transgressions but also in the case of intentional transgressions.

The second question related to the one above and examined exploratorily was: Does the type of social emotion reported from the actor's perspective as a consequence of a social transgression change in its connotation from embarrassment to guilt as a function of the degree to which the act is evoked intentionally?

METHOD

Subjects

Two hundred subjects participated in this study, of whom 162 were males and the remaining 38 females. All subjects were paid volunteers and were undergraduate and graduate students at the University of Mannheim. There were 20 subjects per condition and subjects were allocated randomly to conditions.

Material

Five vignettes were employed, each depicting a situation in which a social transgression was involved and each situation was described from one of two social perspectives, i.e. the actor's and the observer's. The five vignettes, selected on the basis of pilot studies, enabled to manipulate the degree of intentionality for the social transgression from unintentional to intentional. Thus the design of the study was a 2 (perspectives) by 5 (situations)².

¹While this formulation resembles Duval and Wickland's (1972) objective-self-awareness model there exist some differences. Their model holds that negative affect results from a discrepancy between self and ideal-self. This results from simple awareness of oneself as an object. The present formulation (*cf.* Semin and Manstead, 1981) suggests that negative affect is a result of the discrepancy between the actor's self-image and subjective-public-image which in turn is assumed to be elicited by committing a social transgression.

²The five situations used in this study were respectively: (1) Being in the theater on a Saturday evening. Dropping the programme during the interval and splitting the trousers at a critical place while picking it up. (2) Knocking a bowl of soup at a dinner party. (3) Being caught while picking one's nose. (4) Being caught for not having paid one's fare on the tram. (5) Being caught at a lie during a chat with friends.

Dependent variables

Each vignette was followed by three sets of questions which were (actor condition): (1) 'How do you think a bystander would describe you in terms of what type of person you are, having witnessed the above incident?' This question was followed by a number of seven-point rating scales which were: *friendly-unfriendly*; *mature-immature*; *intelligent-unintelligent*; *sincere-insincere*; *decisive-indecisive*; *reliable-unreliable*; *tolerant-intolerant*; *trustworthy-untrustworthy*. (2) 'How would you describe your feelings in this situation?' The crucial rating scales employed here to test the second contention were: *embarrassed-unembarrassed* and *guilty-not guilty*, which were embedded in a number of filler scales known to tap social emotionality (Semin and Manstead, 1981). And finally, (3) 'Assuming that you are in this situation, how much do you think that the situation was brought about intentionally by you?' Again a seven-point scale was employed with the ends labelled *not at all-completely*.

Vignettes described from the observer's perspective contained the same questions, were however, worded in a manner appropriate to this perspective.

It may be objected that the present study is limited by virtue of the fact that a role-playing methodology is employed. Aside from earlier criticisms of this methodology (e.g. Aronson and Carlsmith, 1968), Nisbett and Wilson's (1977) argument would suggest in broad terms that subjects do not have access to cognitive processes affecting their behaviours. Recent criticisms of Nisbett and Wilson suggest however that this conclusion is too extreme and that subjects under certain conditions are able to report accurately on their mental processes (*cf.* Ericsson and Simon, 1980; Rich, 1979; Smith and Miller, 1978; White, 1980). Furthermore, one could argue that what is of concern here is the interpretation of such situations, and the examination of such interpretations can proceed reasonably successfully with the particular research strategy adopted here (*cf.* Semin and Manstead, 1979). Finally, no alternative means of testing the present hypotheses is apparent.

RESULTS

Manipulation check

In order to test that the intentionality of the act was systematically and independently varied across the five situations the perceived intentionality of the act was analysed as a function of the two independent variables, i.e. perspectives (actor versus observer) and situations (5 levels). Only a main effect for situations was expected. This would constitute both a test of the manipulation effectiveness as well as an indication for the similarity of the situation interpretations from both actor's and observer's perspectives. The analysis of variance revealed only a significant main effect for situations, $F_{4,199} = 23.55$; $p < 0.001$, as expected. An analysis of the means for the predicted linear trend was obtained through partitioning the between-groups sum of squares into linear trend components. As can be seen in Table 1 the predicted trend was significant, $F_{1,199} = 58.81$; $p < 0.001$, and the proportion of unexplained variance was non-significant, $F_{3,199} = 1.66$.

Table 1. Perceived intentionality for the act by situations

Situations	1	2	3	4	5
\bar{X}	5.03*	3.78	3.08	2.25	2.23

*Low values indicate high intentionality.

Public-image versus subjective-public-image

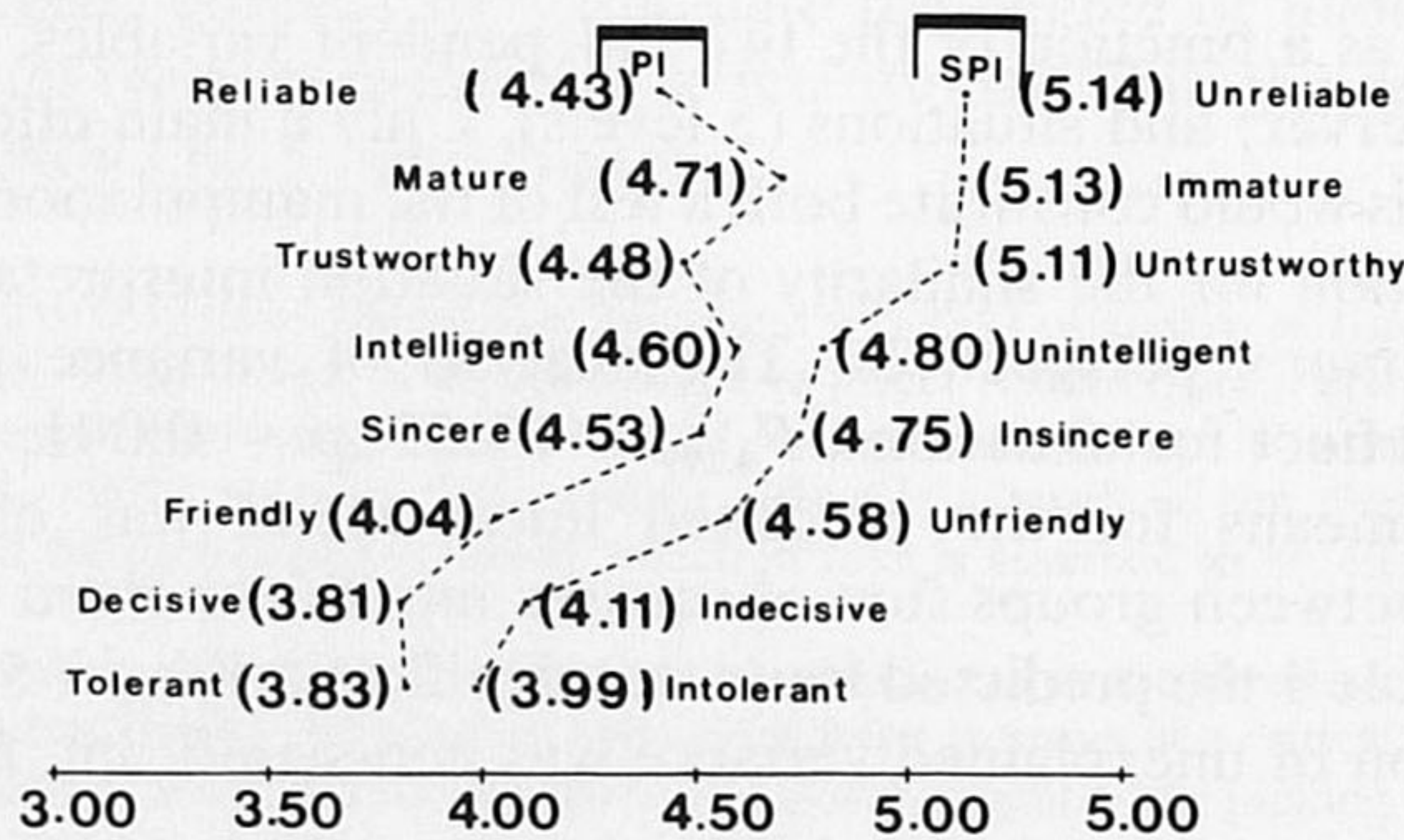
In order to examine whether the SPI is negatively discrepant from the PI the eight person scales were combined by summing. Scale values were first adjusted so that the poles were consistent with regard to the evaluative connotation. These summed scores were analysed as a function of perspective and situations, with the prediction that there should only be a main effect due to perspective, if the actor consistently overestimates the negativity of the image he assumes the observer to hold. Furthermore a situation main effect was also expected, since the degree to which the transgression is sanctioned was varied through the intentionality manipulation, i.e. the higher the intentionality for the act, the more negative the image. The two-way analysis of variance of this data provided support for the perspective prediction, $F_{1,199} = 28.64; p < 0.001$, and as expected the second main effect for situations was also significant, $F_{4,199} = 25.23; p < 0.001$, and as an inspection of Table 2 shows the means were all in the expected direction, which was further

Table 2. The actors image as a function of perspective and situations

		Situations				
		1	2	3	4	5
Perspective	Subjective-public-image	32.95*	35.35	37.10	40.05	42.57
	Public-image	31.05	32.20	33.25	35.80	39.58

*High values indicate a negative image.

Table 3. The overestimation bias across situations for dimensions



confirmed by the significant linear trend, $F_{1,199} = 98.07$; $p < 0.001$, whereby the proportion of unexplained variance was non-significant, $F_{3,199} < 1$. Finally, to illustrate the perspective main effect by each individual person scale Table 3 below is provided which shows that actors overestimate observer's inferences on the basis of the incidents on all dimensions.

Connotation of social emotionality

The changes in the connotations of emotionality was introduced as exploratory variables in this study. With respect to embarrassment as a dependent variable one could potentially expect either an increase as a function of intentionality for the act, or alternatively, that a ceiling effect is obtained and thus no effects are detectable statistically. Alternatively, one could argue that embarrassment would not change over situations, because embarrassment is only associated with unintentional social transgressions, and there is some tentative evidence suggesting this latter alternative (*cf.* Semin, Reference Note 1). These last two alternatives are however not distinguishable in the present case. A two-way analysis of variance for perspectives and situations revealed only a main effect for situations, $F_{4,199} = 2.61$; $p < 0.05$. A Duncan's multiple range test indicated that this was due to the reported embarrassment in situation 4 ($\bar{x} = 2.75$) being significantly higher from that reported in situation 2 ($\bar{x} = 2.17$; $p < 0.05$).

An analysis of the guilt question revealed a significant interaction term for perspectives and situations, $F_{4,199} = 2.83$; $p < 0.03$, as well as two significant main effects, i.e. $F_{1,199} = 12.97$; $p < 0.001$ for the perspective manipulation and $F_{4,199} = 15.26$; $p < 0.001$ for situations. The interaction and perspective main effects, as an inspection of Table 4 illustrates, were due primarily to the fact that the observer attributed overall greater feelings of guilt to the actor, with the exception of situation 5. Furthermore, in contrast to the observer the actor subjects displayed a much more acutely graded self-ascription of guilt which is a function of the degree to which the transgression is intentionally evoked. This was further confirmed by the predicted linear trend, which was significant for the actor's perspective, $F_{1,199} = 38.59$; $p < 0.001$, and the proportion of variance unexplained by this linear trend fitting was non-significant, $F_{3,199} < 1$. However, in the case of the observer's perspective no trend could be fitted in without a significant proportion of unexplained variance, as can also be seen from Table 4.

Table 4. Mean ratings of actor's guilt as a function of perspectives and situations

		Situations				
		1	2	3	4	5
Perspective	Actor	3.20*	3.85	4.70	5.15	5.91
	Observer	4.15	5.40	5.20	5.90	5.53

*High values equal high guilt.

DISCUSSION

In the present study we find that the overall public image, whether it be the one assumed by the actor or the one held by the observer becomes increasingly negative as a function of the degree to which the transgression is intentionally evoked. Furthermore, the main contention, namely that subjects taking the actor's perspective systematically overestimate the negativity of the public-image they assume to have conveyed irrespective of whether the transgression is unintentionally or intentionally evoked, finds experimental support.

One of the main implications of this finding is that subjects in the actor's perspective actually employ Jones and Nisbett's (1972) broad proposition concerning attributional differences between actors and observers in situations involving social transgressions. Even if the situation is evoked accidentally the actor assumes that the observer makes negative dispositional inferences about himself as a person. This is also in line with the general theoretical argument advanced, for example, by Tedeschi and Riess (1981) in their work on social predicaments and impression management. They argue that when actors engage in behaviours which may be considered by others as 'morally blameworthy, or failing to meet some standards of achievement' then the actor assumes to have conveyed a negative public-image which is at variance with the image he would like to convey. These authors suggest that the actor as a naive attribution theorist draws conclusions about the inferences others make about their behaviour.

In fact, one might argue that the broad proposition made by Jones and Nisbett (1972) is one which constantly accompanies everyday interaction, but that we remain unaware of it in the normal execution of everyday routines. Only when there is a transgression, or when we violate the expectations that others have of us, or convey an impression we do not wish to, do we become keenly aware of the fact that others make inferences about us on the basis of our behaviour. It would seem that the actor-observer perspective is an essential ingredient in the execution of social control in everyday life, and available to any actor as an implicit theory. As Mills (1940) has already pointed out, 'men live in immediate acts of experience and their attentions are directed outside themselves until acts are in some way frustrated. It is then that awareness of self and of motive occurs' (p. 905).

According to Mead (1956), the self is a constantly shifting outcome of a social process and has two distinguishable components: 'the "I" is the response of the organism to the attitude of others; the "me" is the organized set of attitudes of others which one himself assumes. The attitudes of the others constitute the organized "me" and then one reacts towards that as an "I"' (1956, p. 230). The symbolic interactionist therefore takes it as axiomatic that the individual has access to and makes use of two social perspectives, his own and that of an observer. The observer's perspective is therefore potentially available to the individual whenever he embarks on social action, and it is one of the distinguishing properties of social control.

Finally, the examination of the change in the connotations of social emotion as a function of the intentionality of the transgression showed that although reported degree of embarrassment was consistent for most of the examined situations, in the case of the reported feelings of guilt the increase of this social emotion was only found to hold in the case of the actor's perspective. The observer appears to judge

the actor relatively indiscriminately on this dimension and consistently high irrespective of whether the situation is unintentionally or intentionally evoked. This difference may potentially occur because the actor's perspective involves a more detailed judgment of the circumstances within which he finds himself, since he is the one to find himself in a social predicament and the feeling of guilt is associated with an act which is ostentatively immoral by social standards.

In conclusion, the main findings of the present study, namely the actor's systematic overestimation of the strength and negativity of his public-image appears to be associated with a sense of transparency which is nicely captured by Emerson: 'Commit a crime and the world is made out of glass' (cited by Sachs, 1972, p. 444).

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