

Why I study ... embarrassment

As a keen observer of human behaviour I have always been fascinated by one peculiarly human emotion. An emotion which frequently causes personal distress and yet, paradoxically, often provokes laughter in those who see our discomfiture. Embarrassment is a social disease to which no-one is immune. Most of us can recount a personally embarrassing experience, and recalling it may well result in further embarrassment. Embarrassment is contagious, often spreading from one person to another within a group. Embarrassing moments also have an unpleasant habit of developing rapidly — a small mishap seems inexplicably to lead to a second and a third in a very short period of time.

Imagine the scenario — a coffee cup slips on your tray, your immediate reaction is to attempt to catch it, this of course sends the rest of the tray flying and who should be passing at that very moment but someone you are keen to impress and who is now covered in your food. Such embarrassing moments have been compiled in books for our amusement and frequently serve as the basis for various forms of entertainment. There is often a very thin dividing line between laughter and embarrassment; embarrassing acts or embarrassing stories that we can laugh at frequently form the basis of comedy. Indeed, the art of extracting oneself from an embarrassing experience is to turn it into a joke so that people laugh with us rather than at us. While there is inevitably an amusing element to some embarrassing moments, embarrassment can have a disruptive effect on our everyday social behaviour and indeed, for some people, a chronic fear of embarrassment and the associated reaction of blushing can lead to anxiety about and avoidance of social situations.

Thus, not only is embarrassment a subject of immediate interest to the population at large, it is also an emotion of theoretical and practical importance which can be studied from the vantage point of almost any of the sub-disciplines within psychology. From the perspectives of both social and cross-cultural psychology, it is intriguing to note how embarrassment is systematically built into our social systems. From an early age, within both cultures and sub-cultures, we learn the rules of behaviour; we also learn the sanction for breaking those rules which frequently involves being shown up, humiliated and indeed embarrassed in front of our peers and elders. Embarrassment is part of the socialization process. It is not difficult to imagine what it would be like to live in a world free from embarrassment — most people would find it an extremely unpleasant experience to live in a world populated by completely disinhibited and totally outrageous individuals!

The importance of embarrassment during socialization also highlights its developmental significance. Feelings of embarrassment are unlikely to occur in early childhood, but

their frequency then gradually increases until they reach their peak during adolescence. Embarrassment is associated with self-presentation concerns, self-consciousness and knowledge of and motivation to comply with the rules of social behaviour. No doubt most of us can recount some excruciating experience during our formative years. It is not difficult to understand why adolescence is a peak period of embarrassment. No longer children but not yet adults, the adolescent has an image of what they would like to be like but are not yet proficient at managing it. Rather more difficult to answer is the question of the function it might serve at this age.

Such a question has also frequently been asked in relation to the display of blushing which is generally assumed to be the hallmark of embarrassment. While the physiological process of facial reddening has been documented, it is still unclear why human beings blush with embarrassment.

Theorists from a sociobiological perspective have argued that its function is akin to an appeasement gesture in animal species — I am at your mercy so please do not attack me. However, appeasement gestures are generally under voluntary control, while blushing is not. We also tend to feel that blushing reveals something about us which we would rather hide. As I mentioned, some people have a chronic fear of blushing, and recent clinical research has been directed towards gaining a clearer understanding of the aetiology and treatment of such difficulties. Within recent psychiatric classification schemes, one of the defining features of social phobia is a fear of behaving in a way which is humiliating or embarrassing.

Unfortunately, all of us, not just social phobics, can be inappropriately constrained in some situations by a fear of embarrassment. Embarrassment is inherent in many medical

encounters. There is evidence that some women may delay having a cervical smear because of embarrassment at an intimate physical examination. Fear of embarrassment can also inhibit the extent to which we provide help to others or seek help for ourselves. Because many situations involve a degree of ambiguity or uncertainty we are often reluctant to offer help just in case we make an error of judgement, and rush in to help when no help is actually required.

Embarrassment then is a gripping subject — not only because it is a topic most people can relate to, but also because of its theoretical and practical importance psychologically. It has been the subject of a growing research literature over the past two decades and will no doubt continue to fascinate. I trust I have given some flavour of this fascination.

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