Embarrassment: Personal Pain for Social Gain

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Abstract

Embarrassment is a self-conscious emotion felt by individuals after they commit a social transgression and that transgression is exposed to others in the group. This is evolutionarily advantageous for humans as social animals, because social standards and rules need to be constantly maintained for a social group to function efficiently. Embarrassment not only makes the individual feel negatively about violating the social norm, but it also initiates a series of action tendencies that facilitate repair of social damages caused by the transgression. With specific non-verbal displays, the transgressor is able to communicate that they acknowledge their transgression and apologize for it. These displays increase positive feelings from observers toward the source of the actions, even if they are independent of an embarrassing situation. Because of this, embarrassment displays are used to maintain good social interactions, regardless of whether there has been a social violation or not.
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No one likes to feel embarrassed, but no socially functional human has ever been able to avoid it. Take Jordan, for example. On her first day of her junior year of high school, she confidently walked through the hallways, smiling at everyone. She felt someone tap her shoulder, and turned to see her Spanish teacher who whispered, “Honey, your skirt is caught on your backpack, I can see your underwear.” Jordan quickly tugged at her skirt as she looked down. Her face flushed red and her cheek muscles tightened as she fought a tiny embarrassed smile from coming to her lips. She thought of all the people she had walked past, wondering if they had seen her skirt and what they had thought. She wanted to crawl into her locker and hide. In a word, she was embarrassed.

Everyone has experienced that moment where they feel overly exposed, although, perhaps not quite as literally as Jordan. Why would such a simple faux pas cause such a negative reaction? What about her situation was so “embarrassing,” and why did she react the way she did? The answers to those questions lie in the evolution of human behavior and social affiliation. Jordan is not just a high school girl who had an unfortunate wardrobe malfunction; she is a member of a social group who violated a social standard. As a member of her society, she is not supposed to show her undergarments in public. If no one had witnessed her faux pas, Jordan could have easily moved on without feeling bad about her mistake. However, it is the exposure of that social violation to others in the community that caused her embarrassment.

Her reaction is a typical one, and if you had walked past her at that moment you would have known precisely what she was feeling based solely on her non-verbal displays. What is the point of that? One would think that it is bad to be embarrassed, solely because it feels bad to be embarrassed. However, imagine if Jordan had shown no signs of embarrassment. What would
that teacher think of her? It would look like Jordan has no modesty and no inclination to follow the social rules that govern exposure. Furthermore, when Jordan displays her embarrassment, the teacher may actually feel more socially affiliated with her. Perhaps the teacher remembers a similar embarrassing moment of her own, or she just really feels good about helping this student. Instead of “losing face” through this embarrassing situation, Jordan is actually maintaining, even strengthening social bonds. Because she is embarrassed, she is saving face. This is how embarrassment works. Embarrassment is a social emotion with specific non-verbal displays, and it is key to maintaining good social interactions between humans whether they are in a situation characterized by social distance and awkwardness or they have transgressed a social norm.

Before discussing embarrassment any further, it is important to distinguish the emotion of embarrassment from the emotion of shame. Embarrassment and shame are both hedonically negative social emotions, meaning that they are both based on social interactions and feel “bad” to the individual experiencing them. This is why they are often treated as interchangeable terms, or different levels of the same emotion. However, the most basic distinction that can be made between these two emotions is that shame is moral and embarrassment is amoral (Katchadourian, 2010). One will experience shame after a violation of something truly important personally or socially but a violation of less important standards results in embarrassment (Miller, 1996). Shameful acts also cause more negative evaluations from others. Katchadourian (2010) explains that when an action is embarrassing, it is common for observers to laugh and if the individual chooses, they may join in as well. However, after committing a shameful act, observers look on the transgressor with disapproval, even disgust because there is an ethical burden present in shameful acts that is not present in embarrassing acts. The focus of blame is a key difference in these two emotions: shame is felt about who you are, while embarrassment is felt about what
you did (Katchadourian, 2010). Miller (1996) says that embarrassment is associated with “goofs” and “accidents,” isolated instances of violations, but shame is associated with “intrinsic, personal faults” (p. 21). Social appraisal of shame can cause lasting damage to an individual’s social identity, because shameful or “evil” actions are often attributed to individual faults (Miller, 1996). Both embarrassment and shame motivate people to hide and avoid further exposure, but because shame is often attributed to stable, personal factors, it is far more personally damaging. Embarrassment, on the other hand, motivates a series of action tendencies that allows the embarrassed individual to physically retreat from the uncomfortable situation but also begin to remedy the social damage that has been done.

In a general sense, the emotion of embarrassment occurs when an individual perceives a difference between their desired self-presentation and the actual self-presentation that observers see (Edelmann, 1987). Put simply, embarrassment is an emotional response to unwanted exposure (Katchadourian, 2010). For example, a high school-aged girl, Molly, may feel very embarrassed while her parents tell stories about her childhood while eating dinner with her new significant other. Her parents are exposing her, and that alone could be reason enough for her embarrassment. However, Molly may be extremely embarrassed because the information her parents present may not be congruent with the self-image she wishes to portray to the new significant other. A feeling of embarrassment is also particularly common after one has violated a social standard, or committed a faux pas such as forgetting an important person’s name when you try to introduce them, burping in class or showing up to a party completely underdressed. The exposure of the faux pas puts you in a “bad light” by indicating that you are either not concerned with fitting in to the social standard or are ignorant about the standards that dictate membership of the “in-group” (Katchadourian, 2010).
This is why embarrassment is so common during adolescence; the rapid changes that happen in body, mind and social standing during this time create huge discrepancies between desired and actual self-presentation (Edelmann 1987). During adolescence there is often a new focus on “fitting in” and any deviation from that is extremely embarrassing, even if it is as simple as the type of socks one wears. Girls may feel embarrassed by their bodies, as their newly developed feminine body parts attract attention from those around them and by extension, unwanted exposure (Edelmann 1987). Exposure is the key factor in the emotion of embarrassment, but in order to fully understand the emotion, we must also understand the physiological expressions/actions, subjective experiences and cognitive appraisals that go along with it (Tangney & Fischer 1995).

Edelmann (1987) states that there are three constant factors in an embarrassing situation: exposure to others, concern for one’s reputation and desire to escape the situation. First of all, embarrassment is a self-conscious emotion, meaning that it depends entirely on our capacity to acknowledge and be concerned with how others evaluate us (Miller, 1996). This requires the individual to have “theory of mind”, which allows them to understand that individuals’ behaviors are influenced by personal thoughts, beliefs, desires and knowledge (Tangney & Fischer, 1995). Theory of mind allows people to understand that others can evaluate them differently than how they wish to present themselves. With this sense of what Charlesworth and Kreutzer (1973) refer to as “self attention”, the individual has enough cognitive development to understand when they do not meet a social standard and that others can witness that failure. Embarrassment is based on cognitive evaluation. It is the understanding that somehow you are incongruent with your desired self-image and the fact that it is exposed to others that causes embarrassment. This exposure does not even necessarily need to be literal, imagining what others might think is
enough to cause embarrassment, even in private (Miller, 1996). Second, to be embarrassed, the individual must have a personal investment in self-presenting in a certain way. The extent to which the individual is concerned with their goal of self-presentation indicates the extent to which they will feel embarrassment if that goal is not reached. Lastly, embarrassment is discomfort. If one feels embarrassed, they are acknowledging that they are in an undesirable position. Through that hedonically negative feeling of discomfort, individuals are motivated to remedy or withdraw from the situation as quickly as possible. The embarrassed individual is able to begin doing this naturally through the action tendencies that have evolved to accompany the emotion of embarrassment.

The emotion of embarrassment has a very specific set of action tendencies, which include typical avoidance behaviors: blushing, hiding/lowering of the face, rapid blinking and gaze aversion (Charlesworth & Kreutzer, 1973). Children display similar action sequences as early as 18 months of age, but true embarrassed behavior is not usually displayed until a child is at least two or three years old. Until that time, the individual does not have enough cognitive development to have theory of mind, which is required before you can care about what others think or even know that others think differently than you do. However, once that level of cognitive development is reached, the non-verbal display of embarrassment is a universal and easily identifiable sequence of actions (Keltner & Anderson, 2000). Keltner (1995) presented a sequence of facial displays that characterize embarrassment by calculating the average timing of facial actions that at least 50% of embarrassed participants displayed in his study. Embarrassed participants were quick to direct their gaze and head down and to the left. This was also accompanied by and overlapped with multiple gaze shifts, non-Duchenne smiles and smile controls, which are defined as an attempt to counter the zygomatic muscle’s upward pull, an
embarrassed smile or both (Keltner, 1995). There was also frequent face touching and self-
grooming presented by embarrassed individuals (Keltner, 1995).

Although individuals feel “bad” while performing the actions typical of embarrassment, the actions actually have a positive effect on their social situation and increase positive feelings toward them. This non-verbal display of embarrassment is a physical apology, a conciliatory gesture or mechanism that has evolved to allow the violator to remedy the damage they may have done through their violation (Katchadourian, 2010). The typical action of looking down and to one side (typically left) is a submissive action, because it exposes the neck and visually decreases one’s physical size (Keltner & Anderson, 2000). The embarrassment action sequence is specifically aimed at observers. The embarrassed individual may want to retreat and may even feel like they are by performing actions typical of embarrassment, but all of those actions also serve to increase social affiliation. Darwin pointed out that gaze aversions indicate a desire to avoid the gaze of others, but their eyes continually drift back to the source as they also attempt to look at the person (Charlesworth & Kreutzer, 1973). This only further indicates that embarrassment is about maintaining connection, even when that connection is challenged by a social violation.

For the individual, embarrassment is a hedonically negative emotion, but for the group, it is an extremely positive social emotion because it motivates the social violators to appease the observers with a non-verbal display that acts as an apology for the transgression. Darwin stated that in order for social species to survive, they have to have highly regulated social behavior and maintain order within the group (Charlesworth & Kretuzer, 1973). Embarrassment is a useful evolutionary tool used to socialize new members of the group and teach them what is right and wrong (Miller, 1996). Social violations are potentially very dangerous for a group, because an
individual that violates a group rule threatens the validity of the rule (Keltner, 1995). This is why such violations often cause anger and negative feelings toward the transgressor from other members of the group. However, when humans are embarrassed, they naturally display a set of non-verbal cues that have evolutionarily come to communicate acknowledgement of their violation and also act as a submissive apology (Keltner, 1995). Humans, as observers, see the non-verbal expression of embarrassment as a sign that the transgressor is still committed to a positive social relationship with the rest of the group and although they have fallen short, they still acknowledge the importance of the standard (Feinberg, Willer & Keltner, 2012).

In one study presented by Feinberg et. al (2012), observer’s reactions toward individuals who committed a faux pas and displayed embarrassment were compared to observer reactions when there was no embarrassment displayed by the transgressor. Observers were more likely to respond with social affiliation behaviors such as increased trust, desire to affiliate and willingness to share resources when the transgressor displayed embarrassment (Feinberg et al. 2012). In fact, if a transgressor displays no sign of embarrassment, observers are less likely to like or forgive the transgressor for their violation. This is because the absence of embarrassment as an appeasement display indicates that the individual is unable to or uninterested in fitting into the group’s standards (Keltner & Anderson, 2000). Keltner and Anderson (2000) presented further evidence of this preference through studies that show someone who looks lost and embarrassed is more likely to draw volunteered help than people who look lost but unembarrassed, and parents punish their children less if the child displays embarrassment after a transgression.

Embarrassment displays still have the same positive social consequences even when they are displayed independently of an embarrassing situation. Because embarrassment displays have
evolved to increase social affiliation behaviors, these displays can be applied in other, unembarrassing situations where increased social affiliation is desired (Keltner & Anderson, 2000). This is often seen in the process of flirtation, specifically in women, who, in western culture, are traditionally more submissive. The woman may want to increase liking, trust or social affiliation between herself and a potential mate, so she will display the slight gaze aversion along with a non-Duchenne smile and slight head tilt down and to one side. This is a stereotypical display for what is termed as “coy” (Keltner & Anderson, 2000). She may even disclose a slightly embarrassing piece of information to the potential mate, simply to allow an arena for that coy/embarrassed display. Historically, embarrassment displays, such as blushing, were seen as a positive feminine indication of modesty (Katchadourian, 2010). To prompt social affiliation or repair, it is even fairly normal to use strategic embarrassment in the form of teasing (Keltner & Anderson, 2000). If you evoke embarrassment in another, they will likely go through the natural appeasement displays which will allow for reconciliation and social bonding between the two of you (Keltner & Anderson, 2000).

Although embarrassment feels negative for individuals feeling it in the moment, it is an incredibly positive force for maintaining good social relationships within a group. The specific displays that go along with embarrassment work like a well-choreographed dance, simultaneously communicating internal feelings, apologizing for transgressions, and initiating social repairs and affiliation. Without a single word being spoken, social bonds can be repaired, even strengthened following what could have been a socially negative interaction. Embarrassment is essential social glue for the classically fallible human race. As Alexander Pope famously wrote, “To err is human…” For humans, as social creatures, social mistakes are unavoidable. Embarrassment acts as a path towards forgiveness, and even stronger social bonds.
References


