Is Embarrassment A Moral Emotion?
The Prospect and Experience of Embarrassment Promote Antisocial Behavior
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Research Question: How does the prospect and experience of embarrassment affect behavior?

Current Conceptualization of Embarrassment:
Embarrassment induces prosocial behavior (Tangney et al., 2007)
The prospect of embarrassment leads to avoidance (Miller, 2007)
Embarrassment is a moral emotion that improves social relations (Keltner & Haidt, 1999)

This conceptualization has not been directly tested despite embarrassment being an omnipresent emotion.

Procedures

1. Cheating: Participants completed an anagram task and then learned that those below the median score would walk to the front of the room and mime inanimate objects / pass out research supplies. Participants then self-reported the number of anagrams they solved.

2. Taking: Participants played a dictator game where they could take up to $5.00 from their partner. At the end of the game, participants who had less than the median amount of money earned nothing and mimed animate objects in front of the other participants / earned nothing at the end of the study.

3. Self-Serving: Participants read 50 shades of Grey / A Wrinkle in Time in front of their peers. Participants then returned to their cube and were asked by a third research for help on a project.

Cheating

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Control</th>
<th>Prospect of Embarrassment</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.08</td>
<td>1.89</td>
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Difference of Means: $0.81, t(237)=-2.16, SE=.188, p=0.031, d=.28

Taking

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<tr>
<th>Control</th>
<th>Prospect of Embarrassment</th>
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<tr>
<td>$4.38</td>
<td>$4.74</td>
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Difference of Means: $0.36, t(152)=2.42, SE=6.93, p=0.010, d=.42

Self-Serving

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<tr>
<th>Control</th>
<th>Experience of Embarrassment</th>
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<tr>
<td>88.88</td>
<td>52.31</td>
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Difference of Means: $36.58, t(148)=2.91, SE=6.99, p=0.004, d=.48

Conclusion

The current conceptualization of embarrassment is incorrect or incomplete.
The prospect of embarrassment promotes cheating and self-interested behavior.
The experience of embarrassment promotes antisocial behavior.
The trust we have in those who show embarrassment (Feinberg, et al. 2012) may be misplaced.
Embarrassment’s relation to shame and guilt requires considerable revision.

References

Questions and feedback welcome! Please email Sam Skowronek at samsko@wharton.upenn.edu.