THE PROSPECT OF EMBARRASSMENT MOTIVATES UNETHICAL BEHAVIOR

Sam Skowronek (with Maurice Schweitzer)
Society for Judgment & Decision Making
November 18, 2019
Embarrassment is Pervasive

500 Full-time Employees
Recruited via Prolific

Felt Embarrassment

80%

20%
Embarrassment is Pervasive

500 Full-time Employees
Recruited via Prolific

Taken Action

- 74%
- 26%
Embarrassment is Pervasive

500 Full-time Employees Recruited via Prolific

Taken Action

- Avoidance + Conformity
  - 74%
  - 26%
Embarrassment is Pervasive

500 Full-time Employees
Recruited via Prolific

Lied to Avoid Embarrassment

49%

51%
Lying to Avoid Embarrassment

“I messed up the count on the register so I blamed someone else for the error. It was my mistake. The manager accepted my story....”
Today

- Study 1: Reading *50 Shades of Grey* & Volunteering (N=304)
- Study 2: Reading *50 Shades of Grey* & Helping a Peer Win a Lottery (N=213)
- Study 3: Anagrams and Miming (n=241)
- Study 4: Dice, Condoms, & Bananas (N=251)
- Study 5: The Dictator Game & Miming (N=155)
Today

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- Study 4: Dice, Condoms, & Bananas (N=251)
- Study 5: The Dictator Game & Miming (N=155)
Study 1
Study 1

Will be randomly assigned to be an Actor or Observer

If you are assigned the role of Actor you will be escorted into the focus room one at a time. In the focus room, Actors will be handed three bananas [letters] and three condoms [envelopes]. Actors will place one condom [letter] on [in] each banana [envelope] in front of the observers. Actors will have 30 seconds to place all three condoms [letters].
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Study 1

Fair Die
Study 1

Fair Die

Odd Die
Study 1

Odd Die

Even Die

Fair Die
Study 1

Odd Die

Even Die
Study 1

Odd Die

Even Die

Dice Scoring Table

(The fewest number of points you can earn is 10, the largest number of points you can earn is 22)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dice Roll Combination</th>
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Study 1

Odd Die

Even Die

Each roll corresponds to a certain number of points.

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Each roll corresponds to a certain number of points.

The bottom half of point-holders will be assigned to the role of actor.

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Zero participants reported that they were skeptical of this procedure.
Study 1

% of Participants who lied about their dice roll

Control (N=127)  Prospect of Embarrassment (N=124)
Study 1

% of Participants who lied about their dice roll

- Control (N=127): 11.0%
- Prospect of Embarrassment (N=124):
Study 1

% of Participants who lied about their dice roll

![Bar Chart](image)

Control (N=127)

Prospect of Embarrassment (N=124)

Difference of Proportions: 15.6%

$z(249) = -3.16$, SE=0.05, p=0.002
Study 1

Reported Dice Score

Control (N=127)  Prospect of Embarrassment (N=124)
Study 1

Reported Dice Score

Control (N=127)  Prospect of Embarrassment (N=124)

10.7
Study 1

Control (N=127)  
Prospect of Embarrassment (N=124)

Reported Dice Score

Difference of Means: 1.5
\[ t(249) = -3.67, SE = 0.2, p < 0.001 \]
Summary and Implications
Summary and Implications

The prospect and experience of embarrassment are common in the workplace
Summary and Implications

The prospect and experience of embarrassment are common in the workplace

![Pie chart showing 74% and 26%][1]
Summary and Implications

The prospect and experience of embarrassment are common in the workplace.

Individuals are readily willing to engage in other-harming unethical behavior to avoid embarrassing events.
Thank you!
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