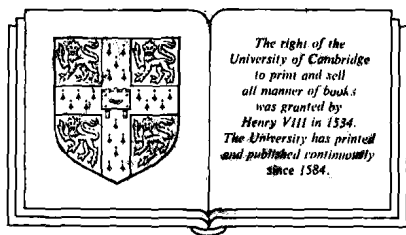


Shyness and Embarrassment

SHYNESS AND EMBARRASSMENT

PERSPECTIVES FROM SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY

Edited by
W. Ray Crozier



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To Sandra, John, and Beth

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Preston, July 1989

Ray Crozier

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Contents

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	<i>page</i>	ix
<i>Contributors</i>		xi
Introduction		I
W. RAY CROZIER		
 Part I Theoretical issues in the study of shyness and embarrassment		
1 Social psychological perspectives on shyness, embarrassment, and shame		19
W. RAY CROZIER		
2 Shyness and embarrassment in psychological theory and ordinary language		59
PETER R. HARRIS		
3 The expression of shyness and embarrassment		87
JENS ASENDORPF		
4 The impact of focus of attention and affect on social behaviour		119
FREDERICK X. GIBBONS		
5 The evolution and manifestation of social anxiety		144
PAUL GILBERT AND PETER TROWER		
 Part II An emphasis upon embarrassment		
6 Embarrassment: A conceptual analysis		181
ROM HARRÉ		
7 Embarrassment and blushing: A component-process model, some initial descriptive and cross-cultural data		205
ROBERT J. EDELMANN		
8 Blushing as a discourse: Was Darwin wrong?		230
CRISTIANO CASTELFRANCHI AND ISABELLA POGGI		

Part III An emphasis upon shyness

9	A definition of shyness and its implications for clinical practice	255
	HENK T. VAN DER MOLEN	
10	Shyness and self-presentation	286
	JAMES A. SHEPPERD AND ROBERT M. ARKIN	
11	Shyness as a personality trait	315
	JONATHAN M. CHEEK AND STEPHEN R. BRIGGS	
12	Social anxiety, personality, and the self: Clinical research and practice	338
	LORNE M. HARTMAN AND PATRICIA A. CLELAND	
	<i>Name index</i>	357
	<i>Subject index</i>	361

Introduction

W. RAY CROZIER

The terms *shyness* and *embarrassment* are familiar to us all and describe experiences that are widely shared in our culture. My 6-year-old daughter can use both words in the appropriate context. Incidents can be embarrassing, or someone can appear to be embarrassed, whereas “shyness” can describe a person (“He’s shy”) or a reaction to a situation (“Why were you shy when we visited so-and-so?”). Some interesting descriptive research, such as that of Zimbardo, Pilkonis, and Norwood (1974) and Zimbardo (1986), has established that the experience of shyness is indeed widespread and is not restricted to any one age group, gender, or class of persons (shy people). Similarly, surveys have provided useful insights into the experience of embarrassment (see Edelman, this volume).

Nevertheless, as is so often the case in psychology, closer scrutiny of routine social experiences shows that these are much more problematic than they at first appear, and the states of shyness and embarrassment raise fundamental and difficult questions about the social psychology of interpersonal behaviour. Indeed, as this volume demonstrates, there is scarcely an area of contemporary psychological enquiry that is not recruited in an attempt to classify and explain the experiences of shyness and embarrassment, and researchers in this field find that they have to draw upon concepts from personality theory, social psychology, psychophysiology, sociobiology, and clinical psychology, in relation to the self, the nature of emotion, social norms, group dynamics, and the study of language, to take but a sample. A major objective of this volume is to bring together for comparison and reflection a range of different perspectives upon shyness and embarrassment. We have imposed some order on the arrangement of chapters, in that part I includes chapters that tend to consider shyness and embarrassment together, whereas the remaining two parts focus on one or the other, but this is not a rigid classification, and indeed one of our principal objectives is to bring together phenomena that usually have received separate attention.

The meaning of shyness and embarrassment

It might be thought that it would be useful to begin to meet this objective by providing definitions of the subject matter of the volume, but here, too, we are quickly into controversy: There is as yet no consensus as to definitions; indeed, there is dispute whether or not it is appropriate to offer definitions at all (Harris, 1984; see also Harris, this volume). Harris has argued that because “shyness” (and a similar argument could be made for “embarrassment”) is in the lay vocabulary, psychologists have no business to define it and are only storing up conceptual confusion by doing so. Psychologists are free to invent and define technical terms where appropriate, but their job is to attempt to understand the lay use of personality terms, not to prescribe their use. The relationship between implicit and explicit conceptualisations of shyness and embarrassment is addressed in several contributions to this volume and remains an important issue. Ortony, Clore, and Collins (1988) have addressed a related question in their discussion of the vocabulary of emotions, in which they distinguish between emotion *types* and emotion *tokens*. There is a very large number of words that refer to emotions, but these may provide an incomplete or misleading guide to the structure of emotions:

Thus, instead of selecting as its theoretical terms particular English emotion words (e.g., “fear”), the theory purports to be a theory about emotions themselves – what we have called “emotion types” – characterized in terms of their cognitive eliciting conditions. Having characterized emotions in this way, it then becomes possible, as a separate enterprise, to investigate the degree to which and the way in which the emotion words in any particular language map onto the hypothesized emotion types. (Ortony et al., 1988, p. 173)

Inspection of a thesaurus or dictionary of synonyms reveals a large number of “tokens” of shyness and embarrassment – bashfulness, humiliation, mortification, shame, self-consciousness, timidity, wariness, and so on – and we can pose the question of what emotion types might underlie this diversity. Crozier (chapter 1) has approached this empirically in an analysis of similarity relationships among these words and has proposed that there are four discernible clusters in overlap in meaning, as operationalised in terms of shared synonyms and antonyms in a dictionary: guilty, penitent, and repentant; ashamed, embarrassed, and humiliated; afraid and anxious; bashful, self-conscious, shy, and timid.

Although such exploratory studies will have their place, it is apparent that progress must be made on many fronts, including conceptual analysis of the kind recommended by Harré in his chapter on embarrassment (chapter 6) and the development of a theoretical framework that can

underpin empirical enquiry. We can identify several enduring influences upon the development of theory and methodology in this area: personality trait theory, social skills theory, approaches to the classification of human emotions, and the study of social encounters. We may also identify more recent perspectives from the social psychology of the self, drawing in particular upon the burgeoning interest in self-awareness and impression management.

Theoretical approaches to shyness and embarrassment

The personality trait approach

Although the trait approach, in association with multivariate statistical techniques, has achieved some ascendancy in the study of personality, there is dispute as to its productivity in the investigation of shyness and embarrassment; for many years it led to the neglect of shyness (Crozier, 1979), and more recently it has encouraged a proliferation of trait labels and ultimately scepticism among many psychologists as to the value of studying shyness. Nevertheless, psychologists are understandably reluctant to relinquish this approach: It can have useful classification and clarification functions on the one hand, and on the other hand there is considerable support from everyday understanding and from surveys that people are willing to attribute a disposition towards shyness to themselves and to others. Several questionnaires purporting to measure shyness have been constructed, and a considerable body of findings about individual differences is now emerging (Jones, Cheek, & Briggs, 1986). Cheek and Briggs (chapter 11) argue that there is now considerable evidence to support the status of shyness as a personality trait and that criticisms of this approach have been targeted at a very impoverished version of trait theory. They review a large number of studies on the development of shyness and on its correlates, proposing that a clear picture of shyness is emerging. Although a trait of embarrassability has been posited (Edelmann, 1987), it has not attracted as much attention, and its relationship to shyness is unclear: Shyness may *be* embarrassability. There has been some dispute whether or not the underlying trait is social anxiety, and that is examined in a number of chapters in this volume. Leary (1986, pp. 28–31) has defined shyness as a syndrome of social anxiety and inhibited social behaviour, or, rather, he has suggested that it would be less ambiguous and of greater heuristic value to distinguish these two components. Cheek and Briggs counter that it is necessary to distinguish three components of shyness: somatic anxiety, cognitive symptoms, and awkward or inhibited social behaviour. Many of our contributors share the assumption that individual differences in

the potential to be shy can be accounted for in terms of differences in social anxiety, but problems do arise when we flesh out what is meant by this term and in particular if we assume, as does Leary, that the affective experience of shyness is anxiety or nervousness. Crozier (chapter 1) and Harris (chapter 2) propose that this assumption is at the very least controversial and is in need of further investigation. Harris suggests that the balance of available evidence is against the proposition that "the affective experience underlying all states of social anxiety is anxiety". A further set of problems arises if the concept of social anxiety is extended to the experience of embarrassment (see Edelman, chapter 7, for a review of studies guided by such an approach); it has proved possible to provide meaningful accounts of embarrassment without recourse to the notion of anxiety (Babcock, 1988; see also Harris, this volume; and Harré, this volume), and this notion may be inappropriate in the explanation of vicarious embarrassment. Harris also points out that whereas embarrassment is essentially reactive, anxiety is generally believed to be anticipatory. The nature of the relationships among anxiety, shyness, and embarrassment is problematic and is examined from varied perspectives in this volume.

Social skills and intervention

Equally perplexing is the relationship between overt behaviour and shyness and embarrassment. It is integral, I think, to our common-sense understanding of shyness (and embarrassment) that overt behaviour is inhibited (or interrupted) and that this is accompanied by feelings of not knowing what to do or say, of awkwardness, of foolishness, or of being flustered. There is an immediate problem in identifying shyness or embarrassment with any behavioural display: Mr. Jones might plausibly report that he is shy or that he has been embarrassed when to an observer his appearance is one of poise and composure. That is why theorists like Cheek and Briggs have felt it necessary to postulate different components of shyness. Nevertheless, Asendorpf's thorough review of the literature on dispositional shyness (chapter 3) concludes that studies do show that "shy people appear to show less initiative during conversations; they speak less, let more and longer silences develop, and are less effective at steering the conversation through successful interruptions of the partner". For many psychologists, the notion that findings such as these are due to an inadequate repertoire of social skills has been a compelling one, as has the belief that such inadequacies may be remediated by teaching social skills. Two chapters discuss this question of intervention. Van der Molen (chapter 9) argues that shyness is multi-determined, and he proposes that the belief that one cannot cope with

social situations, anticipatory fear, negative affect and unwanted symptoms, unskilled behaviour, and avoidance of situations can together form a vicious circle from which it is difficult to escape. Consequently, therapy has to involve all these components of shyness, and the explicit teaching and practice of overt behaviours form only a part of the programme and need to be augmented by techniques aimed at reducing anxiety symptoms, altering self-defeating cognitions, and so on. Even where the focus is upon a more traditional notion of social skills, van der Molen distinguishes between behaviours that are not in the individual's repertoire and those that would be available were they not inhibited through lack of confidence. The first half of his chapter is devoted to developing a "working definition" of shyness, and this serves to demonstrate that definitions are not merely academic matters, because they can have a profound influence upon the design of therapeutic techniques. Hartman and Cleland (chapter 12) approach the question of intervention within the framework of social anxiety rather than of shyness, taking as their starting point the definition of the avoidant personality pattern as "hypersensitivity to potential rejection, humiliation, or shame; an unwillingness to enter into relationships unless given unusually strong guarantees of uncritical acceptance; social withdrawal in spite of a desire for affection and acceptance; and low self-esteem" (American Psychiatric Association, 1979). Again, these authors stress the need to break a vicious circle, this time a "closed loop of self-centred meta-cognition", and their approach utilises techniques designed to reduce such excessive self-focus by encouraging the practice of other-centred awareness.

The expression of shyness and embarrassment

An alternative approach to the link between overt behaviour and shyness and embarrassment is to consider that there may be behaviours that are *expressive* of these states of mind. Edelmann (chapter 7) cites three functional classes of non-verbal behaviour in embarrassment – nervous responses, disaffiliative behaviours, and attempts at impression management – and he reports survey data on the incidence of blushing, smiling and laughing, and gaze avoidance, among other physiological symptoms and behaviours. Each of these was reported by a significant number of respondents as characteristic of their responses to embarrassing incidents. The Stanford Shyness Survey (Zimbardo, 1986; Zimbardo et al., 1974) similarly identified non-verbal behaviours characteristic of shyness. It can, of course, be misleading to rely upon information gleaned from surveys; as Asendorpf (chapter 3) points out, there may be subtle cues of which we are not aware. He provides a review of published studies on the expression of shyness and embarrassment, avoiding those

that relied largely upon role-playing methods. Studies of adults who were videotaped while they were being asked potentially embarrassing questions converged on three reliable indicators: less looking while talking, more body motion, and more speech disturbances. Although little blushing or smiling was reported, Asendorpf's own experiments found evidence of both and demonstrated that these phenomena can be elusive and require very systematic investigation. Observations of behaviours in different social tasks revealed that blushing did occur, but in a situation intended to produce embarrassment, not one that was designed to elicit "stranger anxiety". Close scrutiny of the videotapes allowed a distinction to be drawn between embarrassed and non-embarrassed smiling; the timing of gaze aversion during the smile proved to be the discriminant factor. Such careful examination may provide answers to long-standing questions about the nature of the relationship between shyness and embarrassment and the functions of displays associated with them: Are they expressive and characteristic of a particular emotion (as many emotion theorists would argue), are they signs of a more generalised state like arousal or nervousness, or do they serve communicative functions?

Expression or communication?

This last explanation is stressed by Castelfranchi and Poggi (chapter 8), who dispute the Darwinian proposition that blushing is merely expressive. They analyse shame in terms of the assumptions that are made about the self and others, in order to produce a model that specifies the necessary and sufficient conditions for the experience of shame. Their account makes a distinction between feeling ashamed in one's own eyes and feeling ashamed in the eyes of others. Castelfranchi and Poggi argue that blushing occurs only in the latter case and has a specific communicative function; the person who blushes is indicating both sensitivity to the judgements of others and also adherence to others' values, and this signal has value both for the individual (in protecting him or her from aggression or rejection) and for the group. A blush is superior to a functionally similar signal such as an apology in that its involuntary nature attests to the ashamed person's sincerity.

Castelfranchi and Poggi also regard blushing as being linked to shyness and modesty, both involving, in their view, fear of falling short of some value. Blushing is also, as we have seen, associated with embarrassment (itself, of course, linked with shame by many theorists; see Crozier, chapter 1), and this model raises interesting questions about the survey data presented by Edelmann (chapter 7). There seem to be cross-cultural differences in several indicators of embarrassment, and

British respondents in particular were more likely to report responding to embarrassing incidents with blushing (55%, compared with a range of 21–34% for other European and Japanese respondents). Do these apparent cultural differences reflect linguistic considerations, in that words for embarrassment in different languages may not translate exactly? (Harré, in chapter 6, notes that French and Spanish do not mark a distinction between blushing and embarrassment; Castelfranchi and Poggi, in chapter 8, offer a similar comparison of the English and Italian words for embarrassment.) Or do responses reveal cultural stereotypes about the nature of embarrassment or about national personality “types”? Perhaps, as Harré suggests, there are cultural differences in embarrassability. Alternatively, there may be cultural variations in display rules (Ekman, 1972) guiding the expression of embarrassment. Castelfranchi and Poggi’s model implies that it might be fruitful to consider cultural variations in the communicative significance of blushing and in the use and meaning of blushing relative to alternative kinds of signals of apology and of public adherence to group norms and values; indeed, it might be thought a strength of their approach that it sensitises us to such variation, as opposed to seeing it as a problem (being embarrassed about it). Similarly, it suggests an alternative approach to the understanding and reduction of individuals’ anxieties over chronic blushing.

The cultural context of embarrassment

Comparison of these different approaches to blushing does highlight one of the polarities in shyness and embarrassment research – we can focus upon the individual and consider his or her experience and behaviour, or we can think more about the social significance of these phenomena and their communicative function. Certainly there has been a tendency among psychologists to study shyness in individualistic terms, while attending more to the social dimensions of embarrassment. This does reflect our everyday English use of these words, as may be demonstrated in the following example. What would be our reaction to hearing about someone who could never experience shyness, embarrassment, or shame? I suspect that whereas we might be prepared to attribute to the person who is never shy admirable qualities (being poised, confident, at ease with people) or even believe that never being shy is the norm, we might think that a person who is never embarrassed or ashamed is lacking some important human quality, is insensitive, thoughtless, or uncaring, a “brazen hussy” or an “arrogant son of a bitch”. A person’s shyness is in a sense his or her own concern, but a lack of embarrassment is of more social concern: It is Castelfranchi and Poggi’s point that offering evidence of embarrassment rescues the individual from the hostility of the

group, and many writers on shame and embarrassment have stressed the social control function of these emotions (see Crozier, chapter 1, Gibbons, chapter 4, and Harré, chapter 6: “not to display shame at a fault is also a fault, just as not to be embarrassed at an infraction of conventions is also an infraction of conventions”). It is clear that there is a moral dimension to embarrassment, and attention to this aspect of psychology, together with a denunciation of its putative individualistic bias, has characterised the approach of Harré (1983; see also chapter 6).

Harré is concerned with distinguishing shame and embarrassment, and he locates them at different points on a two-dimensional representation or “map” whose dimensions refer respectively to the seriousness of the transgression and to the extent of one’s fault for it. His analysis suggests that in writing about behaviour we have erroneously lumped together appearance and conduct. One source of the distinction between embarrassment and shame might be that one is embarrassed over one’s appearance but ashamed of one’s conduct, but Harré argues that while this would be a useful starting point, it would be an oversimplification in that, for example, one would be ashamed of one’s appearance if it could be taken as a sign of defective moral character. Harré argues further that the force and functions of these emotions are not fixed or universal but are subject to change in conjunction with variation in cultural context; he proposes that shame is being replaced by embarrassment as the major form of social control and that bodily exposure is becoming less a source of embarrassment than is one’s conduct, both of which trends are to be understood within the context of an alleged blurring of the distinction between manners and morality and of the changing place of women in society. In support of this thesis, Harré draws our attention to an *Oxford English Dictionary* gloss on “modesty” (clearly related to both shyness and embarrassment, but little studied by psychologists in its own right) as “womanly propriety of behaviour”: Modesty may be becoming a matter of convention rather than of virtue.

The evolutionary context

If the chapters by Castelfranchi and Poggi, Edelmann, and Harré stress the culturally variable and historically contingent, that of Gilbert and Trower (chapter 5) concerns cultural universals and is a necessarily speculative piece on the evolutionary significance of social anxiety. Just why should shyness and embarrassment be widespread? Why should embarrassment be so feared as to provide such a powerful constraint on behaviour? Darwin (1872/1965, p. 350) had indicated something of the paradoxical nature of sensitivity to the opinions of others in his example of the person bold in battle but timid in the presence of