

Embarrassment and Social Anxiety Disorder: Fraternal Twins or Distant Cousins?

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You have almost certainly been embarrassed (Miller, 1996), but you probably have not experienced the more debilitating dread of Social Anxiety Disorder (SAD). A remarkable number of people—as many as 13% of us—experience SAD during their lifetimes (Bögels, Chapter 1, this volume), so it is a common psychological problem. Still, most of us never slip into its grasp, and in contrast, almost *all* of us have been embarrassed. Unlike SAD, a capacity for embarrassment seems to be ordinary and normal: A person who is genuinely immune to embarrassment, who cannot be embarrassed by anything he or she or others do, is odd, and possibly dangerous.

Indeed, the prevalence of embarrassment may result from its desirable functions in social life. Embarrassment may be commonplace because, unlike SAD, it is adaptive. In this chapter I suggest that, despite its unpleasantness, embarrassment is a useful social emotion that serves valuable interactive functions: It alerts one to unbecoming behavior, forestalls further transgressions, mollifies one's critics, and motivates desirable remedial responses. Embarrassment typically provides an efficient, efficacious way to overcome the minor mishaps that inevitably occur in our dealings with others. People who cannot be embarrassed may predictably be less proper and trustworthy than the rest of us, and they may seem implacable and remorseless; they are certainly less well-liked when they misbehave (Feinberg, Willer, & Keltner, 2012). In short, embarrassment is a beneficial component of social life.

In contrast, SAD impairs social life. Those suffering from SAD experience excessive, irrational tension and distress in social situations that can interfere with—or entirely preclude—many typical public behaviors (Henderson & Zimbardo, Chapter 4, this volume). Unlike embarrassment, SAD does not seem to serve any useful purpose. At best, it is inconvenient, and at worst, it is debilitating. To add insult to injury (and, again, unlike embarrassment), SAD is

often accompanied by other maladies such as depression, substance abuse, and obsessive-compulsive disorder (Wenzel, Chapter 8, this volume).

What, then, may be the relationship—if any—that links embarrassment to SAD? Obviously, if one is desirable and the other detrimental, they do not seem to be siblings that spring from the same stock. On the other hand, despite their dissimilarities, they do not come from entirely different families. They have a key ingredient in common: Neither would likely exist if people did not care what others thought of them. Embarrassment and SAD are notably different but they share a common ancestor—a grandparent—that places them on the same family tree without making them immediate kin. They are clearly related, but each has defining features that are not shared by the other. Call them first cousins.

This chapter addresses that assertion. It first considers embarrassment, surveying its nature, possible origins, and interactive effects. It then turns to social anxiety and SAD, delineating the differences between them and embarrassment.

THE NATURE OF EMBARRASSMENT

Embarrassment is an acute state of surprised, awkward abashment and chagrin that results from events that confound our expectations and increase the threat of unwanted evaluations from real or imagined audiences (Miller, 1996). It causes people to feel exposed and conspicuous, flustered and foolish, and inept and maladroit (Parrott & Smith, 1991; Tangney, Miller, Flicker, & Barlow, 1996). These are uncomfortable feelings, and although embarrassing circumstances are often humorous, embarrassment is—at its core—an unpleasant experience.

Feelings

Accounts of embarrassment (Miller, 2013) routinely find that most embarrassments are startling; the predicaments that cause them are unanticipated, often resulting from abrupt and accidental changes in fortune. Thereafter, when embarrassment strikes, sufferers ordinarily feel unhappily noticeable and conspicuous, and they often wish that they could escape or hide. Routinely accompanying this sense of exposure are feelings of awkwardness and nervous discomfort; people may feel ungainly and clumsy, incapable of any appropriate and graceful response to their predicament. Finally, underlying all of this is sheepish regret and chagrin. People are typically concerned about others' evaluations of them when they are embarrassed, and they usually suspect that they have made an unwanted impression. They rue this, are usually abashed, and are sometimes mortified.

Altogether, then, prototypical embarrassment involves startled, awkward sheepishness. These feelings ordinarily strike without warning, washing over people suddenly. Happily, however, they also tend to be short-lived (Miller & Tangney, 1994). Embarrassment does not persist for long periods of time, lasting only a few minutes instead of hours or days—a point nicely illustrated by the unique physiological marker of embarrassment, the blush.

Physiology

The visible reddening of the skin that typifies embarrassment (Drummond, 2013)—blushing—occurs only in the upper chest, neck, and face. In fact, facial veins are equipped with β -adrenergic receptors that are not commonly found in venous tissue and that cause them to behave differently than other capillaries in the skin (Mellander, Andersson, Afzelius, & Hellstrand, 1982); while other epidermal blood vessels are constricting in response to the activation of the sympathetic nervous system that underlies embarrassment (Darby & Harris, 2013), facial veins can dilate, bringing more blood near the surface of the cheeks (Drummond, 2013). All of this is entirely involuntary and cannot be consciously controlled—in fact, a sensation of warmth as one’s cheeks grow red is ordinarily one’s only clue that blushing has occurred (Drummond & Lazaroo, 2012)—but these reactions are short-lived; normal blushing lasts just a few minutes, fading gradually as one’s embarrassment wanes (Shields, Mallory, & Simon, 1990).

Blushing and embarrassment do not readily occur in patients with damage in the medial regions of the prefrontal cortex. Children with injury in these areas never fully learn the norms of gentility and politesse the rest of us observe, and deterioration of these areas leaves previously well-mannered adults oddly heedless of potential social peril; they can behave flagrantly and indiscreetly with placid equanimity, even when others clearly disapprove (Darby & Harris, 2013). Notably, normal functioning in these regions also appears to be necessary if one is to have a normal “theory of mind” (that is, an ordinary recognition of the likely content of others’ thoughts) (Heerey, Keltner, & Capps, 2003). Thus, a capacity for embarrassment is linked to the ability to comprehend what others are thinking of us. Absent the capability to recognize and to care about others’ evaluations of us, embarrassment is unlikely to occur.

This is a key point that speaks to the fundamental nature of embarrassment, and I will return to it later. Theorists also find it remarkable that, in being able to blush, our species is endowed with a distinctive physical capacity that is a reasonably reliable marker of embarrassment and that occurs only in the areas of the body that are most likely to be visible to others (de Jong & Dijk, 2013). Why should such a response exist? One provocative possibility is that it is advantageous for others to know that we are embarrassed, so that blushing may have evolved as an interpersonal signal designed to communicate that fact (de Jong & Dijk, 2013). We will return to that argument later, as well; for now, I need to note that blushing is not the only way we can tell whether or not someone is embarrassed.

Nonverbal Behavior

Embarrassment can be evident in static photographs (Tracy, Robins, & Schriber, 2009) but it is even more obvious in live interactions, where it unfolds in a dynamic *sequence* of facial and body movements that distinguish it from

other states. When embarrassment strikes, people ordinarily avert their gaze (usually looking down and to the left), and then restlessly shift their gaze from place to place while continuing to avoid eye contact with others (Keltner, 1995). They typically try not to smile—biting their lips or pulling down the corners of their mouths—but ultimately fail, breaking into ambivalent, self-conscious grins that are less intense than their usual smiles of genuine amusement (Ambadar, Cohn, & Reed, 2009). They then tend to lower their heads and bring a hand to their faces to cover their eyes or mouths (Keltner, 1995); they also exhibit exaggerated body movements, shifting posture and gesturing broadly (Edelmann & Hampson, 1981). Finally, they make more speech errors, stammering and stuttering more than they do when they are poised and calm (Edelmann & Hampson, 1979).

This entire sequence ordinarily takes about five seconds from start to finish (Keltner, 1995), and it makes a person's embarrassment plain to anyone who is watching. Indeed, when someone in their midst becomes embarrassed, people usually know it; in general, observers can accurately gauge how embarrassed someone else is (Marcus & Miller, 1999). Moreover, when gaze aversion, smile controls, head movements, and face touches are all apparent, observers can reliably distinguish embarrassment from related states such as amusement, shame, and guilt (Keltner, 1995). Add a noticeable blush to these cues and embarrassment may be hard to miss, no matter where one travels (Consedine, Strongman, & Magai, 2003).

Altogether, then, embarrassment is characterized by particular feelings, physiological responses, and nonverbal behavior that make it unique. It shares some physical and phenomenological elements with other self-conscious moods and emotions (such as social anxiety; Hofmann, Moscovitch, & Kim, 2006), but careful analysis can differentiate it from related states (such as shame; see Miller & Tangney, 1994, and Tangney et al., 1996).

Antecedent Events

Important distinctions also emerge from the events that elicit embarrassment. Embarrassment is, first and foremost, a *social* experience that almost never occurs when people are completely alone. Surveys of embarrassing incidents (e.g., Miller, 1992, 1996) demonstrate that embarrassment always involves some form of (real or imagined) unwanted attention from others. People do report occasionally becoming embarrassed when no one else is present, but those episodes inevitably involve a threat of imminent discovery (when a person realizes, for instance, that he or she has entered the wrong restroom) or conscious recognition of what others would think if they knew: If a person vividly imagines how others would react if they were present, solitary embarrassment is possible. This does not happen often, however: Only 2% of the embarrassments we encounter occur when we are alone, whereas almost a fifth of the shame we feel troubles us in private (Tangney et al., 1996).

Diverse events can cause us chagrin. Most embarrassments result from some mishap or misbehavior in which someone violates a norm of deportment, civility, self-control, or grace (Miller, 1996). There are many specific ways this may occur, ranging from physical pratfalls to more subtle cognitive errors involving forgetfulness and mistakes in judgment. Our possessions may also fail us, as pants rip or cars stall in busy intersections, or we may be abashed by doing others some minor inconvenience or harm. In such cases, embarrassment results from the sole actions of the embarrassed individual, and episodes like these account for almost two-thirds of all embarrassing circumstances (Miller, 1996). However, various other predicaments include other people and are more complex.

In particular, people need not misbehave in any way to become embarrassed. Abashed disquiet can result from interactions that take awkward turns even though no one is maladroit. Innocent victims may be targeted for teasing or practical jokes by others who are either playful or malicious (Hall, 2011). Even more often (in one of every 10 embarrassments; Miller, 1992), people become embarrassed even when their own behavior is unremarkable because they are associated in others' eyes with someone else who does something embarrassing (Fortune & Newby-Clark, 2008). (These are events with which most parents of small children will be familiar!) Obviously, embarrassment does not emerge only from personal transgressions; it can be thrust upon us by the actions of others and may occur when we are merely hapless bystanders to others' misdeeds.

Still, in all of the instances mentioned above, whether through personal misconduct or the actions of others, circumstances conspire to make people look bad. In all these situations, embarrassment follows some discrete event that communicates a negative image of the embarrassed person to others, and such damage is done in nearly all embarrassing events. There are, however, a few types of embarrassing circumstances that do not tidily fit this pattern.

For one thing, people can be embarrassed by excessive public attention even when desirable, praiseworthy images are in play. Simply being conspicuous and noticeable can cause embarrassment when there is nothing else at all to be embarrassed about (Leary & Toner, 2013); for instance, selecting a member of an audience at random and asking everyone else to gaze steadily at him or her invariably causes the hapless target some embarrassment although nothing is really wrong (Lewis, 1995). People may even become embarrassed when they receive too many compliments and too much acclaim; being singled out for excessive public praise is sometimes embarrassing (Miller, 1992). Relatively few embarrassments result from simple conspicuousness and effusive praise; together they account for only 3% of the embarrassments people experience (Miller, 1996). Nevertheless, the embarrassing potential of such events demonstrates that actual harm to a person's public image need not be done for genuine embarrassment to occur.

Furthermore, people may even be embarrassed by exposure to social predicaments that do not actually involve them at all. Merely witnessing from afar

a stranger's humiliating plight may engender a state of *empathic embarrassment* if observers envision how they would feel in such straits (Hawk, Fischer, & Van Kleef, 2011). Empathic embarrassment tends to be mild, but it is recognizably real embarrassment (Müller-Pinzler, Paulus, Stemmler, & Krach, 2012) that accounts for another 3% of the embarrassing circumstances people encounter (Miller, 1992).

In sum, then, embarrassment usually follows events that do actual damage (whether justified or undeserved) to a person's image in the eyes of the others. Occasionally, however, merely being the salient object of others' attention, or just envisioning another's predicament, can cause embarrassed chagrin. Theoretical efforts to explain the origins of embarrassment must encompass all of these antecedent events. Such efforts also need to explain why these antecedents do not trigger embarrassment until we are several years old.

The Development of Embarrassment

Experts differ in their estimates of when openness to embarrassment begins (Crozier, 2010). Most (but not all; see Barrett, 2005) studies find little evidence of rudimentary embarrassment in toddlers until they become self-conscious (usually around 1½ years of age) and are able to recognize themselves in a mirror (DiBiase & Lewis, 1997). When this developmental milestone is reached, one-quarter of the children who are confronted with their own reflections display gaze aversion, smiling, and nervous hand movements that resemble embarrassed behavior in adults (Lewis, Sullivan, Stanger, & Weiss, 1989). Thereafter, slightly more than half of all three-year-olds look embarrassed when they are asked to dance for an experimenter (Lewis, Stanger, Sullivan, & Barone, 1991). Behavior that resembles adult sheepishness and abashment thus occurs in rather young children.

What is indisputable, however, is that the sophistication and complexity of children's capacity for embarrassment continues to change and develop until they reach adolescence. Five-year-olds become embarrassed only when they are "caught in the act" and are actively rebuked by a disapproving audience (Bennett & Gillingham, 1991). Eight-year-olds react with embarrassment to any response—either derisive or supportive—to their predicaments from bystanders, but they remain unperturbed if their audiences watch silently. Only 11- and 13-year-olds are embarrassed (as adults are) by the mere knowledge that others are aware of their misbehavior, regardless of how those others react (Bennett, 1989). What makes this pattern compelling are studies of cognitive development and perspective-taking (e.g., Selman, 1976) that demonstrate that children's understanding of others' thoughts and feelings emerges in a manner that seamlessly complements the embarrassment data. Preschoolers have no idea what other people may be thinking of them, and until they receive overt correction from others, they will blithely do things in public that would mortify an adult. Only in the face of unequivocal disapproval do they become

embarrassed. By the time they are 11 or 13, however, they are capable of adult perspective-taking and can fully grasp what others may be thinking even when those others do nothing. Only then are they embarrassed by the assumed evaluations of others in the fashion of adults.

Thus, developmental studies suggest that embarrassment is rooted both in the self-conscious ability to hold oneself as the object of one's attention and in the complex cognitive ability to see oneself as others do. A third fundamental influence on the adult shape of embarrassment is socialization, the processes that teach children the social norms that will govern their public behavior (Saarni, 2008). Through painful experience, youngsters learn that certain behavior is likely to be met with teasing and ridicule. (Indeed, laughter at another person's embarrassing predicament is far more likely among fifth-graders, occurring more than half the time, than it is among adults [Miller, 1996]). In particular, children may come to dread excessive attention from others because it more often leads to disapproval and reproach than to acceptance and approbation. In this fashion, mere conspicuousness may gradually become embarrassing: "After hundreds of repetitions, conspicuousness becomes so closely associated with embarrassment that close scrutiny by others can cause embarrassment" (Buss, 1980, p. 233). Through modeling and social referencing, children can learn important lessons from others' predicaments as well. As they come to apprehend others' feelings and watch the rough treatment others receive for misbehavior, classically conditioned empathic responses and stimulus generalization may slowly make them susceptible to empathic embarrassment (Hatfield, Cacioppo, & Rapson, 1994).

Ultimately, when they have already undergone thorough social seasoning and can finally intuit what passive audiences may be thinking of them, youngsters enter adolescence. Teenagers face provocative new social dilemmas (Buss, 1980). Puberty brings extraordinary physical and social changes, and teens enter unfamiliar and challenging new roles just as social acceptance becomes especially valuable to them (Somerville, 2013). Certainly, "if God wanted to create a perfect recipe for embarrassment, the teen years might be it" (Miller, 1996, p. 87). In fact, teenagers do experience more intense embarrassments than adults do (Miller, 1992) and, as we will later see, most cases of SAD begin then, too (Albano, Chapter 10, this volume).

Individual Differences

Of course, by the time we are adults, some of us are more embarrassable than others. Individual differences in susceptibility to embarrassment, or *embarrassability*, can be readily assessed with a variety of measures (Miller, 2009). The best-known of these, Modigliani's (1968) Embarrassability Scale, contains one-sentence items describing a variety of potentially embarrassing situations; respondents rate how embarrassed they would be in each of these predicaments, and the resulting global score reliably predicts how strongly they will react to

the real embarrassments they encounter (Miller, 1996; Marcus & Miller, 1999). Highly embarrassed people do not experience different types of embarrassing predicaments than the rest of us, but they do become embarrassed more frequently and react more intensely than other people (Miller, 1992).

Embarrassability is related to public self-consciousness, so that people who are routinely attuned to what others are thinking of them are more susceptible to embarrassment than are people who tend not to monitor their public images (Miller, 1995). Importantly, however, embarrassability is even more closely related to fear of negative evaluation (Miller, 2009). Highly embarrassed people dread disparagement from others. They fret about potential disapproval, and worriedly anticipate unfavorable judgments when they come to others' attention. Obviously, this is one reason they react more strongly to a given predicament—their fear of negative evaluation ups the evaluative ante, making the potential damage done by an unwanted social image seem greater than the harm that appears to await people of lower embarrassability.

Interestingly, embarrassed people do not clumsily blunder their way into more awkward social situations than the rest of us; I found there to be no connection between embarrassability and one's global level of social skill (Miller, 1995). Although people with inhibited social skills tend to be shy and apprehensive (and relatively prone to SAD; Beidel & Turner, 2007) before anything goes wrong in an interaction, they do not manifest more embarrassment after some predicament occurs. Conversely, people with excellent social skills are evidently not immune to embarrassment; the various accidents and provocations from others that can cause embarrassment often entrap them, too.

On the other hand, if we break global skill into its constituent components (see Riggio, 1986), there is a noteworthy link between embarrassability and a certain specific skill, a sensitivity to social norms. Highly embarrassed people are especially aware of and concerned about the normative appropriateness of their behavior (Miller, 1995). They attend to social rules and dread violations of them, expecting more severe consequences to result. By comparison, people who are less susceptible to embarrassment are more easygoing; they are less attentive to norms and more placid if any are breached. This characteristic, combined with their higher fear of negative evaluation, places highly embarrassed people between a rock and a hard place: "They (1) hold themselves to stricter, less forgiving codes of conduct; and (2) chronically worry about what others are thinking of them, more than the rest of us do" (Miller, 1996, p. 101).

The Fundamental Cause of Embarrassment

Contemplation of embarrassment's antecedents, development, and individual differences informs consideration of the central cause from which it springs. Two main contenders vie for the honor. Silver, Sabini, and Parrott (1987) persuasively argued that, at bottom, embarrassment occurs when people find themselves bewildered and uncertain of what to do and say next in social

interactions (also see Sabini, Siepmann, Stein, & Meyerowitz, 2000). Silver et al. allowed that concerns over image often occurred during embarrassing predicaments, but they asserted that the only necessary stimulus for embarrassment was dramaturgical disarray that left “no character that one can coherently perform” (p. 51). The essential element of embarrassment, in this view, is the flustered awkwardness that results when unanticipated events disrupt one’s expectations in social life.

An opposing perspective, held by me and others (e.g., Crozier, 2010; Miller, 2013), counters that—although awkward uncertainty is certainly characteristic of embarrassing situations—the only indispensable catalyst for embarrassment is acute concern for what others may be thinking of us. Absent the acute threat of unwanted social evaluations that (almost) always underlies embarrassing predicaments, embarrassment would not occur.

Both of these models are valuable, heuristic perspectives rooted in prototypical, central features of embarrassment; after all, when people are asked to describe a “typical” episode of embarrassment, awkward indecision and social-evaluative concern are the two descriptors most likely to come to mind (Parrott & Smith, 1991). However, I favor the social evaluation model over the dramaturgic view for several reasons.

First, embarrassment springs from activity in regions of the brain that allow us to intuit what others are thinking of us. In particular, embarrassment is less intense or wholly absent in people who do not possess a normal theory of mind.

Second, as a mature capacity for embarrassment slowly develops during childhood, youngsters’ reactions to embarrassing predicaments are more closely tied to their knowledge of others’ evaluations of them than to the intrinsic awkwardness or silliness of the situation they are in. Young children may be completely unruffled by bizarre circumstances until they learn that others are critical of them; they get embarrassed only when others’ disapproval is plain.

Third, susceptibility to embarrassment covaries with fear of negative evaluation but is uncorrelated with global social skill. If flustered uncertainty is the fundamental cause of embarrassment, we should expect people possessed of superior social skills to be rather less embarrassable than those who are more inept. Instead, the specific skill that best predicts embarrassability is a sensitivity to normative appropriateness that supports a social evaluation position.

Finally, I think the social evaluation model can account more flexibly and parsimoniously for the wide variety of events that can elicit embarrassment. As we have seen, the vast majority of such events entail actual, imminent, or potential damage to one’s desired social identity. Almost all embarrassing circumstances create a real threat that others are about to form unwanted judgments of the unfortunate target. In my view, fewer embarrassing predicaments easily fit a dramaturgic approach. For example, envision yourself slipping on an icy patch in a parking lot and going down hard, spilling some groceries; further assume that a witness is visible some distance across the lot. This pratfall would readily embarrass most of us, but it is difficult to argue that our distress is rooted in

interactive uncertainty: clearly, we should get up and pick up the groceries. Instead, I think the active ingredient in this embarrassing event is our awareness of the unattractive, ungainly image broadcast to the watching stranger. The same fall would be much less—or not at all—embarrassing if we were certain that no else was present, not because our dramaturgic uncertainty would be reduced, but because there would be no unwanted social evaluations to dread.

But why should we care what random, distant strangers think of us? The social evaluation model suggests an evolutionary basis for the very existence of embarrassment that, although speculative, is another intriguing reason to prefer it to a dramaturgic perspective. Consider that, because they lived as members of small tribal groups, early humans would have been keenly motivated to maintain positive relations with the other members of their groups (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). In that early era, social rejection may have literally been an evolutionary death sentence, with solitary humans being much less likely to survive and reproduce. Selective pressures would have favored advantageous psychological mechanisms that (a) alerted early humans to worrisome events that could lead to abandonment by others, and (b) provided helpful means to forestall or prevent such ostracism or exclusion. Embarrassment may be such a mechanism (Miller, 2007): Despite its aversive character, embarrassment is an adaptive, propitious process in social life.

Behavioral Sequelae

They may feel discombobulated, but embarrassed people usually manage to respond to their predicaments in a conciliatory manner that helps them regain the acceptance of others. On occasion, they are so overwhelmed that they simply flee the scene without explanation. In rare instances, when they believe that others have intentionally caused their indignity, they counterattack with hostility and anger. Most of the time, however, people behave in humble, conciliatory, or jocular manners that are reassuring and pleasing to their audiences (Feinberg et al., 2012; Miller, 1996).

For instance, the most common responses to embarrassing events are efforts either to apologize, expressing regret and offering assurances of better behavior in the future, or to make restitution, actually repairing any damage or inconvenience that was caused. Together, these attempts at verbal or behavioral reparation occur in one of every three embarrassing situations (Miller, 1996). Another frequent response is humor, which is especially likely after physical pratfalls or failures of self-control; people may acknowledge their transgressions—and perhaps show that they are uninjured—by lightheartedly making jokes at their own expense (Miller, 1996).

In general, then, embarrassed people are usually contrite, friendly, helpful, and eager to please (see Apsler, 1975). Unlike (for example) shame, which can generate surly, self-serving behavior (Tangney et al., 1995), embarrassment appears to motivate polite, accommodating, and amicable behavior.

Others' Reactions

Significantly, the agreeable conduct of embarrassed people usually succeeds in impressing others favorably. This is a key point that is constantly misunderstood: After some public blunder, people routinely believe that observers are judging them more harshly than they really are (Savitsky, Epley, & Gilovich, 2001). In fact, however, displays of appropriate embarrassment do not rouse rejection and make matters worse; instead, they ordinarily elicit acceptance and support from others. If a predicament has occurred, “*others will like us and treat us better if we do become embarrassed than they will if we remain unruffled, cool, and calm*” (Miller, 1996, p. 152).

In a classic demonstration of this effect, Semin and Manstead (1982) showed research participants videotapes of a clumsy shopper whose cart knocks over a large stack of toilet paper rolls. In different versions of the tape, the shopper reacted with either evident embarrassment or unruffled poise and then either picked up the rolls or left them lying on the floor. Audiences liked the fellow better when he was abashed by his mishap than when he remained composed. He received the most favorable evaluations when he seemed obviously chagrined and picked up his mess, but, notably, he also got a more positive evaluation when he got embarrassed and simply fled than when he stayed cool and calm and picked up the rolls. After a blunder, when it fit the situation, embarrassment engendered kinder judgments from others than implacable aplomb did. In general, in the midst of a predicament, embarrassed people seem more trustworthy, cooperative, and principled than unembarrassed people do (Feinberg et al., 2012).

Blushing has similar effects. Even when they otherwise seem nonchalant, people who are apparently blushing after some clumsy mishap are judged more favorably than are those who seem unaffected by their actions (Dijk, de Jong, & Peters, 2009), and a blush makes one's misbehavior seem less severe (Dijk, Koenig, Ketelaar, & de Jong, 2011). Moreover, people behave as if they understand that blushing has interactive benefits; after inept performances, they become *less* distressed when they learn that their audiences have noticed their blushes and their evident chagrin (Leary, Landel, & Patton, 1996).

These data all support the intriguing possibility that embarrassment and blushing function as reliable gestures of appeasement—involuntary (and thereby sincere) nonverbal apologies—that palliate public predicaments (de Jong & Dijk, 2013). Embarrassment demonstrates that someone is aware of his or her misbehavior. It also communicates the person's authentic alarm and regret and thereby signals his or her eagerness to do better in the future. Thus reassured of the person's good intentions, audiences can afford to remain tolerant of behavior that would otherwise be worrisome.

Importantly, however, embarrassment does not make a good impression when it doesn't fit the situation and is disproportional to one's predicament. Overstated, extreme reactions to trivial mistakes do not elicit sympathy from

onlookers (Levin & Arluke, 1982), and blushing in the absence of any apparent predicament can be suspicious, signifying that one has a guilty conscience (de Jong, Peters, & De Cremer, 2003). Excessive embarrassability does not endear one to others, a point to which we will shortly return.

Nevertheless, when their chagrin is calibrated to its context, abashed actors usually receive supportive and kindly reactions from observers of their predicaments (Metts & Cupach, 1989). This was not typically so when we were children and our embarrassments were often met with heartless ridicule (Miller, 1996), and it is not always so now that we are adults either. Still, more often than not, adult audiences respond to others' embarrassment with empathy, explicit reassurance, or friendly humor (Metts & Cupach, 1989). Even when audiences do or say something that makes someone's embarrassment worse, they frequently have friendly intentions (Sharkey, 1993). Only rarely do adults respond to a person's obvious embarrassment with criticism, rebuke, or malicious laughter. What is more, this seems to be true all over the world.

Embarrassment Across Cultures

Embarrassment has been studied in diverse cultures across the globe (e.g., Edelman et al., 1989; Hashimoto & Shimizu, 1988), and it appears to operate similarly in all of them. The same sorts of circumstances elicit embarrassment, the feelings produced are the same, and the interactive consequences of the episodes are similar. Certainly, blushing is characteristic of embarrassment in all peoples of the world.

One cultural contrast may be meaningful: Embarrassment may be a somewhat more serious event in collectivist cultures such as Japan than it is in individualistic cultures such as the United States (Singelis & Sharkey, 1995). Members of collectivist cultures stress their interdependence and family ties, so a person's misbehavior may seem to have more wide-ranging consequences, involving others' images to a greater extent, than is the case in cultures that emphasize independence and autonomy. As a result, compared to North Americans, people in collectivist cultures may less often use humor to respond to embarrassment (e.g., Cupach & Imahori, 1993). Still, on the whole, people's responses to embarrassment—like the events that elicit it—are quite similar from culture to culture. Embarrassment appears to have reasonably consistent form and function around the world.

Reprise: The Nature of Embarrassment

Embarrassment takes years to develop, and its emergence coincides with the self-conscious ability to understand what others may be thinking of us. People also vary in their susceptibility to embarrassment, with those who are attentive to social norms and who dread social disapproval being more embarrassable. In a prototypical episode, unanticipated events that broadcast

undesired images of us elicit involuntary, distinctive physiological and behavioral changes that make our abashment plain to observers. Awash with these feelings, we typically seek reassurance and are met with empathy and friendly support from others. Various aspects of embarrassment converge in suggesting that if people genuinely did not care at all what others thought of them, they would not be embarrassable. People *do* care about social evaluation, however, and embarrassment may be an adaptive psychological mechanism that evolved to help us manage and overcome our inevitable small failures of grace and poise.

Two final prominent points about embarrassment remain to be made. First, embarrassment is unquestionably an *emotion*, not a mood. Emotions evidence (1) quick onset, (2) brief duration, and (3) unbidden occurrence, and appear to be the result of (4) relatively nonconscious, automatic appraisals (Ekman, 1992); that is, they emerge suddenly and spontaneously, without conscious consideration, but last only seconds or minutes, not hours or days. They are also characterized by coherent, particular patterns of feelings and behavior that distinguish them from other affective states (Roseman, Wiest, & Swartz, 1994). Embarrassment possesses each of these characteristics and thus is not simply a more diffuse and lasting mood.

Second, embarrassment is probably one of a small number of especially important, or basic, emotions that evolved to help people cope with fundamental tasks (Ekman, 1992). Such emotions—plausibly including happiness, sadness, fear, surprise, disgust, shame, and anger (Tracy et al., 2009)—are presumed to have (1) singular physiological signatures that result from (2) antecedent events that are universal across cultures and are accompanied by (3) distinctive, and universal, expressions and behavior (Ekman, 1992). As we have seen, embarrassment possesses each of these features, as well.

Embarrassment is thus a distinct, discrete emotion—perhaps of particular importance—that is elicited by specific events and that engenders idiosyncratic and distinctive patterns of behavior. Arguably, it exists because it has functional value, helping us cope with recurring predicaments that all humans inevitably face.

EMBARRASSMENT AND SAD

As a patient reader, you may now know more about embarrassment than you ever intended to know! All of these varied facts and assertions will serve us well, however, as we now delineate the similarities and differences between embarrassment and its relative, SAD. I will examine five differences emerging from the phenomenology, timing, development, behavioral sequelae, and normality of the two states before concluding with a look at the common ground they share. I share the popular presumption (e.g., Beidel & Turner, 2007; Bögels, Chapter 1, this volume) that social anxiety and SAD differ mainly in intensity, not in their qualities, so most of my assertions about SAD will pertain to social

TABLE 5.1 Distinguishing Embarrassment and Social Anxiety

Characteristic	Embarrassment	Social Anxiety
Phenomenology	Startled chagrin	Nervous trepidation
Nature of state	Emotion	Mood
Timing	Abrupt and reactive: after predicaments occur	Gradual and anticipatory: before predicaments occur
Duration	Short-lived	Long-lived
Onset of mature form	Early adolescence	Middle adolescence
Behavioral sequelae	Apologetic conciliation	Inhibited disaffiliation
Interactive result (in moderation)	Sympathy and acceptance	Mild disapproval
Proximal cause	Social-evaluative concern	Social-evaluative concern

anxiety, as well (see [Table 5.1](#)). Nevertheless, we will need to distinguish social anxiety from SAD when we address the normality of these states.

Phenomenology

Embarrassment and SAD *feel* different. As we have seen, embarrassment is primarily composed of surprise, awkwardness, and chagrin. In contrast, the predominant feature of SAD is fear ([American Psychiatric Association, 2013](#)). Important distinctions among subtypes of SAD lie in the specific threats that make one miserable ([Moscovitch, 2009](#)) and the particular physiological reactions that result ([McTeague et al., 2009](#)), but uneasy, exaggerated dread of potential peril in public places is always present.

Indeed, the mental lives of those who suffer from social anxiety differ from those who are not anxious in several notable ways (Amir, Chapter 16, this volume; [Miller, 2009](#)). When they enter social situations, they are burdened with intrusive thoughts of past failures and worst-case outcomes that lead them to anticipate unhappy results before they occur ([Vassilopoulos, 2005](#)). Then, they scan their environments and monitor their own internal reactions in a state of high alert; they are unduly vigilant for signs of rejection and overly sensitive to their own unease ([Schultz & Heimberg, 2008](#)), and both forms of preoccupation make their anxiety worse ([Zou, Hudson, & Rapee, 2007](#)). Further, they perceive disapproval where it does not exist ([Huppert, Pasupuleti, Foa, & Mathews, 2007](#)) and find fault even in positive events ([Alden, Taylor, Mellings, & Laposa, 2008](#)). Finally, when they are again alone, they ruminate, brooding over their perceived imperfections ([Brozovich & Heimberg, 2008](#)).

Thus, whereas embarrassment is comprised of startled chagrin, social anxiety is characterized by pervasive nervousness and trepidation. Importantly, social anxiety lasts longer, too.

Timing

Embarrassed emotion washes over people *after* they find themselves in a threatening situation and presumed damage to one's social image has already occurred. Surprised, flustered feelings characterize embarrassment because the reaction arises from unexpected events that often leave people at a loss for what to do. (For dramaturgic theorists, you may recall, bewildered uncertainty defines the emotion.) Embarrassing circumstances ambush people; in most cases, they are completely unanticipated.

In contrast, the situations that engender SAD are rarely surprising. Indeed, they are often entirely foreseeable, ordinary occurrences. Eating in a restaurant, using a public restroom, or signing a charge receipt while a cashier watches may all cause considerable distress to people with SAD (Beidel & Turner, 2007); clearly, such events are not painful because they are unexpected. To the contrary, SAD is often troubling long *before* a person encounters a frightening situation. The fear and apprehension that plague socially anxious people are typically anticipatory responses that occur in advance of any actual harm (Schlenker & Leary, 1982). SAD is a disruptive disorder not just because sufferers exaggerate the harm that may befall them, but because they are usually scared of harm that has not happened and never will.

This issue of the timing of embarrassment and SAD is meaningful because it speaks to the basic natures of the two states. Because it can occur long before one encounters a threatening situation and then persist in post-event processing after the peril is past, SAD may result in acute anxiety that lasts for some time. The duration of these episodes argues that they should properly be considered moods, not emotions. The distinction matters because moods usually have more lasting influence on cognition and behavior than emotions such as embarrassment do (Forgas & Eich, 2013). Embarrassment may often be consequential, but it is unlikely to have the pervading influence on a person's life that SAD can have.

Behavioral Sequelae

As a mood, social anxiety is less likely to be represented by coherent, unique nonverbal behavior than embarrassed emotion is, and, indeed, there are no distinguishing signals that a person is experiencing social anxiety *per se*. In fact, the behaviors that do tend to accompany SAD are often mistaken by observers for something else. When they experience intense social anxiety, people's interactive behavior is impoverished (Heerey & Kring, 2007); they either avoid troubling social situations altogether or behave in an inhibited, tentative fashion

that is characterized by submissive withdrawal (Weeks, Rodebaugh, Heimberg, Norton, & Jakatdar, 2009). They avoid eye contact, keep their distance, nod and smile infrequently, and speak less fluently, and instead of eliciting sympathy, their behavior often just seems unfriendly (Miller, 2009). Ironically, then, by behaving in an aloof, guarded fashion, socially anxious people may elicit from others the very disapproval they dreaded in the first place (Alden & Taylor, 2004).

In contrast, embarrassed people are more likely to try to maintain and repair their current interactions than they are to run and hide from them. On occasion, people are so overwhelmed by their predicaments that they simply flee them, exiting abruptly with no explanation (Miller, 1996). Far more often, however, embarrassed people stay put and try to regain the regard of their audiences with apologetic conciliation or humor. Once it occurs, embarrassment usually has a constructive effect on its social situations, but SAD is almost always destructive.

Development

Our mature capacities for embarrassment emerge hand-in-hand with our perspective-taking skills and appear to be complete by the time we are 11 years old (Bennett, 1989). The social experiences that accompany this growth probably help determine how conscientiously and/or fearfully we adhere to social norms, but the socialization of embarrassment seems to take place on a broad, and even cultural, scale (Buss, 1980). Embarrassment thus arises from developmental processes that do not vary much from person to person; all normal people are biologically and psychologically prepared to experience embarrassment, and individual differences in embarrassability seem to be more closely tied to ordinary variability in personality than to atypical physiology or unique personal experience.

By comparison, the sources of SAD seem to be more idiosyncratic, being present in some people and not at all in others. This may be true even of social anxiety, which, being milder than SAD, is considerably more widespread. Although most people occasionally experience at least some social anxiety, predispositions to be especially socially anxious appear to be inherited (Stein, Chapter 13, this volume). There appear to be organismic differences involving noradrenergic, serotonergic, and dopaminergic neurotransmissions between those who are prone to social anxiety and those who are not (Phan, Chapter 12, this volume), and inhibited temperaments that distinguish such children are present from birth (Kagan, Chapter 14, this volume).

However, theorists generally agree that biological predispositions like these interact with the family and social experiences people encounter to produce and shape SAD (e.g., Beidel & Turner, 2007). The parenting children receive can be influential (Rapee, 1997), and specific traumatic social experiences may be formative, as well. About half of those with SAD can recall a particular adverse event that coincided with the onset of their disorder (Stemberger, Turner, Beidel, & Calhoun, 1995), and, even when no single catastrophe is at

fault, a variety of smaller setbacks can conceivably have cumulative deleterious effects (Mineka & Zinbarg, 1996). The role of such experiences may be one reason specific SADs usually take longer to develop than embarrassment does; whereas 11-year-olds are fully susceptible to embarrassment, half of those who develop specific social fears do so after the age of 13 (Stein, Walker, & Forde, 1996).

Fuller discussion of these possibilities is beyond the scope of this chapter. Here, it is sufficient to reiterate that the factors that contribute to SAD seem to be more variable and less pervasive than are the influences that produce embarrassment. Individual differences in social anxiety and SAD seem to result from relatively idiosyncratic developmental processes involving types of genetic endowments, neurobiology, parenting, and traumas that—fortunately—do not affect everyone.

Thus, embarrassment appears to be a natural, ordinary product of human development, but SAD is rarer and arguably results from influences that are not ordinary at all. It should be no surprise, then, that one of these states is normal and the other is not.

Normality and Abnormality

People with SAD differ from the rest of us in several respects. They perceive social situations in pejorative, self-defeating ways that make those situations seem more risky and less rewarding than they really are (Miller, 2009). They are at increased risk for a variety of damaging comorbid disorders, and the more generalized their SAD, the worse their related pathologies tend to be (Wenzel, Chapter 9, this volume). Finally, there is SAD itself: sufferers cannot perform without impairment or extreme distress public actions the rest of us find unremarkable. Clearly, by any standard, SAD is an unwelcome, undesirable, abnormal condition.

Embarrassment is none of those things. Embarrassment is unpleasant, but it seems to fulfill useful interactive functions, and we would likely be worse off without it.

Of course, these assertions are overly simplistic. Comparing embarrassment directly to SAD is a bit like comparing a cool summer breeze to a tropical storm; to say the one is more desirable than the other is to belabor the obvious. A more sophisticated analysis must acknowledge that social anxiety has its benefits and embarrassment some potential drawbacks.

Collectively, people exhibit concerns over social evaluation that range from nearly nonexistent to the paralyzing incapacitation of SAD. Low, manageable levels of social anxiety are, of course, customary and commonplace in many situations; after all, anxiety is a normal response to intimidating challenges, and it (like embarrassment) probably evolved because it motivated beneficial behavior. Early humans who were roused by the prospect of negative evaluation from their fellows were probably more able to head off disapproval that could

be dangerous (Leary, Chapter 20, this volume). However, social anxiety is adaptive only within a delimited range and, outside those levels, abnormality results.

This volume focuses on the irrational, excessive, debilitating levels of social anxiety that we label as SAD, but we should not forget that *too little* social anxiety is dysfunctional, too. People without social anxiety—who are either always certain that they are being judged in a desired fashion or who care not at all what others think—have a disability that is relatively unlikely to come to the notice of clinicians, but they are handicapped, nonetheless. They lack a feedback mechanism that would help them avoid social disapproval (Leary, Chapter 20, this volume), and they may seem narcissistic, ruthless, or arrogant to others (Hofmann, Korte, & Suvak, 2009). Their relationships are likely less fulfilling than they otherwise could be.

In short, there is probably a curvilinear, inverted *U* relation between social anxiety and personal adjustment. Low-to-moderate social anxiety is presumably both normal and adaptive, but as one's worries about others' judgments either become excessive or vanish completely, difficulty follows.

In my view, embarrassment is similar to social anxiety in this regard, but it is adaptive over a wider range of intensity. Even high embarrassability that increases one's reactions to existing predicaments does not inhibit or impair normal behavior to the extent high social anxiety in advance of any evaluation does. There are limits even to embarrassment's usefulness, however, and outside the broad normal range it is disadvantageous to be either too little or too highly susceptible to embarrassment (Miller, 2007). At the low end, people who cannot be embarrassed may seem to lack a conscience (Dijk et al., 2009). At the high end, people overreact to trivial events, becoming discombobulated by situations that would not faze the rest of us. This is problematic because—whereas appropriate, measured embarrassment in response to a predicament makes good impressions on observers—excessive fluster and agitation make bad impressions (Miller, 2013). By remaining unperturbed by compelling predicaments, people risk seeming crass and unfeeling, but by responding with exaggerated embarrassment, they risk appearing inept.

Excessive embarrassability is also associated with *chronic blushing* that occurs in public settings in the absence of any overt predicament (Leary & Meadows, 1991). Chronic blushers frequently find themselves blushing in ordinary situations that involve innocent contact with others, and they may come to dread their blushing episodes so much, and avoid interaction with others so thoroughly, that they meet the diagnostic criteria for SAD (Edelmann, 1990). Clearly, normal mechanisms associated with embarrassment can go awry.

Still, chronic blushing is not really an example of embarrassment run amok. Sufferers are typically socially anxious but are not embarrassed until their blushing starts, and only after their public loss of control makes them feel conspicuous do they ordinarily begin to feel abashed (Edelmann, 1990). Nevertheless, the fact that a miscalibrated signal of embarrassment can contribute to SAD is

telling. Embarrassment and SAD are notably different but, at bottom, they serve the same master.

Similarities of the States

Underlying all the particular facts and specifics of SAD and embarrassment, a single foundation exists: If people were genuinely heedless of the judgments of others, they would experience neither state. Both kinds of affect presumably evolved because of their interpersonal functions: It was adaptive for people to be concerned about acceptance and approval from others, and useful to have alarm mechanisms that motivated both preventive and remedial behavior (Leary, Chapter 20, this volume). Hence, respectively, social anxiety and embarrassment are states that are experienced by all the peoples of the world (Horwath & Weissman, 1997).

Perhaps as a result of these shared evolutionary roots, social anxiety and embarrassment spring from the same dispositional source: The hallmark of both is fear of negative evaluation (Miller, 2009). From that core constituent, embarrassment is shaped more by sensitivity to social norms, whereas social anxiety is more highly correlated with poor social skill, low self-esteem, and neuroticism (Miller, 2009). Still, the most important active ingredient is identical in the two states.

The situations that elicit the two states are similar to some extent, as well. Many circumstances that cause social anxiety are not embarrassing at all, but all events that cause embarrassment will also arouse social anxiety if they can be foreseen. Indeed, a defining characteristic of SAD is exaggerated fear of embarrassment (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Almost everybody avoids embarrassment when they can, but some people go to extraordinary lengths to steer clear of situations that hold any potential for embarrassment (Miller, 2007). If they are able to do this without undue inconvenience, their extreme fear may go mostly unnoticed by others; however, if their avoidant behavior interferes with too many ordinary activities, their fear is judged to be SAD (Bögels, Chapter 1, this volume). Thus, social anxiety and SAD have a longer reach than embarrassment does, but embarrassing situations can also be anxiety-arousing, and the dread of such situations is one of the characteristics that makes SAD so dreadful.

CONCLUSIONS

Our species is clearly equipped with psychological mechanisms that prepare us to monitor and react to social evaluation. Sensitivity to such stimuli, like other human characteristics, is probably normally distributed throughout the population, and embarrassability and social anxiousness may vary considerably from person to person (Miller, 2009). Susceptibilities to both states are completely normal in moderation. However, in some unfortunate people, presumably

through the interactive influences of biological (e.g., neurotransmitter), psychological (e.g., perceptual), and social (e.g., family) factors, irrational fears of ordinary situations develop and interfere with social life (Beidel & Turner, 2007). These are undesirable mutations of normal processes, so they differ from embarrassment, which is typically a profitable, adaptive reaction to the inevitable predicaments of social life.

However, even when it is moderate, social anxiety differs from embarrassment. Social anxiety is an anticipatory mood state, whereas embarrassment is an emotion elicited by events that have already occurred. The two states feel different and engender different types of behavior: Social anxiety is characterized by inhibition and avoidance whereas embarrassment is typified by conciliation and remediation.

Nevertheless, they are recognizably kin to one another, born of the same fundamental human motivation to be accepted by others. One is benevolent and often light-hearted, the other less so, but they belong to the same extended family. Consider them cousins at work in the same family business.

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