

Situations that
causes
embarrassment, guilt
and shame



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Typical situations that involve having Self Conscious Emotion- Embarrassment, Guilt and Shame

Abstract

The purpose of this research was to identify and differentiate the situations where participants found embarrassment, guilt and shame and to investigate the self-conscious emotions by evaluating unstructured questionnaire responses. A group of psychology undergraduates from University of Warwick participated in this study. It was carried out by giving them semi-structured questionnaires to fill in. In the questionnaires, there were three sections which were “ embarrassment”, “ shame” and “ guilt”. They were asked to fill in events that they felt or would feel these emotions and were given twenty minutes to complete the task in silent. By analysing the responses given, it was shown that participants often felt embarrassment in certain conditions like something happening in the public, accident or something they did not have control over. It often occurred in a less personal occasion. Whereas shame was associated with being got caught most likely when cheating and guilt was often related with personal affairs.

Introduction

This study aims to demonstrate the common situations where people feel the three emotions - embarrassment; guilt and shame. Here are the some definitions of the emotions: “ *Guilt is an emotion that occurs when a person believes that they have violated a moral standard that they themselves*

believe in.” (Wikipedia) “ Embarrassment is an emotional state of intense discomfort with oneself, experienced upon having a socially unacceptable act or condition witnessed by or revealed to others. ... It is similar to shame , except that shame may be experienced for an act known only to oneself. Also, embarrassment usually carries the connotation of being caused by an act that is merely socially unacceptable, rather than morally wrong.”

(Wikipedia) Past research indicated that the three emotions embarrassment, shame and guilt figure prominently in human affairs. They are associated with social and moral transgressions involve self-awareness, and motivate reparations for transgressions. (Keltner, & Buswell, 1996) (Ausubel, 1955; Goffman, 1956; Harre , 1990; Taylor, 1985; Wicker, Payne, & Morgan, 1983) Emotion is a subjective , conscious experience characterized primarily by psychophysiological expressions , biological reactions , and mental states . (Wikipedia) Results of past research are fairly distinct, for the common reasons for being embarrassed were: (1) Physical pratfalls;(2) Cognitive shortcomings;(3) Loss of control over the body; (4) Shortcoming in physical appearance; (5) Failure at privacy regulation. For shame, they were: (1) Poor performance; (2) Hurting others emotional; (3) Failing to meet other’s expectation; (4) Disappointing in oneself; (5) Role-inappropriate behaviour. As for guilt, they were (1) failures at duties; (2) Lying; (3) Neglect of another; (4) Breaking a diet or exercise regime; (5) Cheating. They were the typical reasons for experiencing those self- conscious emotions (Keltner, Buswell, 1996).

Everyone has different emotions, they are often influenced by your mood, personality, daily arousal and the circumstances we are facing. They might

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also be influenced by internal bodily responses such as hormones and neurotransmitter. In this research, we are interested in finding out what leads to having the self-conscious emotions (Embarrass, guilt and shame). As each individual are so unique, we are intrigued to find out why the situations have caused them to have experienced the same emotion. In the following research, we are going to identify situations that caused people to have such emotions which is letting us to get a better view towards self-consciousness and how these increased understanding of how they feature in self-presentation in social interaction.

Method

Participants. A group of 6 psychology undergraduates (5 females, 1 male) aged 18-19 in University of Warwick participated in the study for the preparation of doing a practical report. They were not volunteers or getting paid.

Procedure. In the study, participants were received informed consent at the beginning and were given a short semi-structured questionnaires which stated: " Please give three examples, writing two or three lines on each, if possible of occasions when you have felt or would feel embarrassment, shame and guilt." Participants were asked to describe the situations where they have felt or would feel the three emotions in two to three lines giving three examples each. They were given twenty minutes to finish the whole task and were asked to do it in silent. It was an independent group design. Responses gained from each participants were then analysed by the most frequently used vocabularies and the typical situations that were written

down by the participants. After the task is completed, all participants were then debriefed at the end.

Result

In this research, participants gave potential responses for the emotions were always around certain topics. In the “ Embarrassment” section, participants often describe the emotion of being embarrass as in (1) something which happens unexpectedly in the public, (2) accident or something they do not have control over. (E. g. being late.) One example states: “ I walked into a lecture late, entering from the bottom of the room (Physics Lecture Theatre) and there wasn’t many seats left. I could feel myself heating up & I felt very embarrassed. “ In the “ Shame” section, participants often felt shame in the following situation: (1) getting caught for something you have done unwillingly, (2) cheating or being cheated on. (E. g. exams, relationship) One example reads: “ I felt shame when I cheated on an exam and got caught.” In the last section, where participants described their guilty situation, they were often personal experiences, some frequently the aftermath of things that they have done wrong. “ One Easter, my aunty bought us 3 Easter eggs, one per me, my brother and sister. I ate two of them whilst my brother and sister was at school and when asked me if I ate it, I denied it and blamed it on my gran.” They were less stereotypical comparing to the situations in “ embarrassment” and “ shame”. Length of the responses given by participants are ranged, some of the responses were longer, more specific and using first person pronouns ‘ I’ and giving autobiographic-like information of a particular occasion where they have felt that specific

emotion while a few of the participants were just listing out stereotypical examples of situations where the three emotions would be experienced.

Participants are often alone when experiencing embarrassment situation, the incidents that leads to embarrassment were often happening in front of a large group of people that they did not know or in front of the person/people that meant something to the participants. Words that were often used to describe the embarrass situation were “ in front of everyone”; “ being late”; “ schools”; “ teachers “; “ strangers”; “ family members”; “ being laughed at”; “ alone”; “ awkward” and “ silence”. A large proportion of situations described by participants that caused them to feel embarrass were often humorous and comic-like. When experiencing a shameful or guilty situation, phrases that were used to describe the events relatively familiar such as “ got caught”; “ they found out”; “ being cheated on”; “ damaged”; “ accusing”. Among the phrases that were used, “ lied” and “ lying” were most frequently written down by participants in both sections. Occasions that were being described are often personal experiences. (E. g eating behaviour) They were more serious cases, more hassle and less stereotypical unlike the events given by the participants in the embarrassment section.

Discussion

Results obtained from this study were similar to the outcomes of past research which meant the research had been replicated. However, the procedure of the research needs to be criticised. Although participants were requested to complete the questionnaire in silence, participants were still chatting and discussing their experiences together, when some of the

participants could not think of any events, they tried to seek help from other participants.

To improve the study, researchers should ensure participants to complete the questionnaire in an individual session to avoid getting others responses as their own. Some participants were saying that they were confused about the feelings of guilt and shame, it created problems when the responses were being analysed as participants might have mixed the emotions up and put the responses the other way round. As a result, the vocabularies used to describe guilty and shameful situations are fairly familiar. Researchers might need to put definitions of each emotion at the top of the questionnaire to make it clear to every participant to avoid this from happening again.

However, as this is a qualitative study, there was not much information gained as each incident described by the participants were only written in two to three lines. Length of the responses are ranged, some are longer than the other; some are just one-sentence responses. There was not enough detail to fully understand what self-conscious emotions.

The fact that only one male participant was used was also a limitation as there are always gender differences so it might not be possible to generate findings to the male population. However, there is a meta-analysis *demonstrating that blanket stereotypes about women's greater emotionality are inaccurate. Emotionality of females and male shown gender similarities.* (Else-Quest NM , Higgins, Allison, & Morton, 2012)

References

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