

The Unwanted Exposure of the Self: A Phenomenological Study of Embarrassment

Brent Dean Robbins
*Psychology Department
Daemen College*

Holly Parlavecchio
*Department of Psychology
Allegheny College*

The self-conscious emotion of embarrassment has been the focus of much attention by phenomenological and cognitive researchers in psychology. However, although a variety of theoretical models of embarrassment have been proposed, there has been little consensus in the literature. Through a synthesis of prior theory and empirical research, these authors propose a model of embarrassment in which embarrassment is understood to signify the core, essential theme of a self that has been exposed to unwanted attention. Through an empirical, phenomenological method of analysis of data from 6 undergraduate college students, the authors identify 8 themes of embarrassment and relate them through a structural description of the phenomenon. The findings support the unwanted exposure model of embarrassment.

Embarrassment is usually categorized as a “self-conscious” emotion (Fischer & Tangney, 1995). Other self-conscious emotions include guilt, shame, pride and hubris (Tracy & Robins, 2003). They are called “self-conscious” emotions because self-focused attention appears to be a necessary condition for the experience.

Phenomenological philosophers and psychologists pioneered research into the dynamics of self-conscious experience as an essential component of emotions such as guilt, shame, and embarrassment (Fuchs, 2003). Self-consciousness in this

tradition has been explored through descriptions of embodiment. Phenomenologists usually distinguish between the *lived body* and the *corporeal body* (e.g., Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1962). The *lived body* designates the body from which we live in relation to important projects that matter to us (Leder, 1990). The surface body that contains our sensory organs self-effaces so that it can put up before itself the sensory world of our lived experience of others and things. However, in moments of disruption, such as in illness, clumsiness, or exposure to the judgments of other people, the lived body becomes an object of our attention. In these moments, the body appears as the *corporeal body* (Fuchs, 2003). The corporeal body can therefore be conceptualized as the body-subject turned toward itself as a body-object. Embarrassment and the “self-conscious” emotions seem to always occur within dynamics in which the lived body is momentarily reduced to the corporeal body.

Jean-Paul Sartre (1943/1956) vividly described the dynamics of a shameful self. When the self is exposed to other people and becomes an object subject to their gaze, the body appears at that moment as a “body-for-others.” This state of self-consciousness gives rise to a shift in temporal awareness. Although experienced time is usually lived forward toward the projection of future possibilities, the “body-for-others” seems to reduce our temporal flow to a truncated present. In this state of mind, the self-conscious person appears to him- or herself through the gaze of the other as an object to be witnessed and evaluated.

These classic phenomenological descriptions of self-consciousness and emotion long anticipated more recent cognitive theories of the self-conscious emotions. Surprisingly, however, the literature suggests there has been little effort to integrate recent empirical research and theory with the long tradition of phenomenological research on emotions. In this study, we will outline some of the models of embarrassment and relevant empirical studies. Then, through the empirical, phenomenological analysis of first-person descriptions, we hope to stimulate further discussion that might help to integrate phenomenological conceptions of self-conscious emotions with more recent theoretical and empirical research on these states of mind.

WHAT IS AN EMOTION?

Any empirical study of embarrassment requires some explicit or implicit pre-understanding of the meaning of terms such as “emotion” and “mood.” A full explication of our assumptions about affect is beyond the scope of this article. Nevertheless, it is imperative that we momentarily consider some of the basic presuppositions about emotion that guide and constrain our investigation.

Elster (1999) identified seven central characteristics of episodic emotion: Qualitative feel, cognitive antecedents, an intentional object, physiological arousal,

physiological expressions, valence on the pleasure–pain dimension, and characteristic action tendencies. Experiences of emotion are first and foremost experiences or perceptual acts (Barrett, 2005). Moreover, as phenomenological philosophy has consistently emphasized (Fish, 2005), any given experience is intentional in nature; in other words, experience is always about something. Emotion is no different in this regard, but neither the experiential nor the intentional qualities of emotion are distinguishing characteristics of emotion. As appraisal theorists have elaborated (e.g., Lazarus, 1991), emotions often seem to be accompanied by implicit or explicit cognitive interpretations of events. However, any perceptual activity admits to some form of cognitive processing of sensory information. Physiological arousal and expressions both seem to accompany some emotions but not others. Emotions do however appear to have qualities that are pleasant or unpleasant, but so do sensations. And, finally, tendencies toward action seem to always be a characteristic of concrete human behavior. In short, as intuitively appealing as Elster’s description of emotion may seem, the characteristics of emotion he identifies do not seem to meaningfully discriminate emotions from other types of experience.

How then can emotion be demarcated from other, nonemotional perceptual acts? From a phenomenological perspective, it is possible to understand emotion and mood in terms of a rough translation of the German term, *Befindlichkeit*, as it was used by the philosopher Martin Heidegger (1927/1962). The term implies that mood or emotion is a certain way of finding oneself (*Sich befinden*; Gendlin, 1978–1979). This kind of “self-finding” would be the genuine response to the question, “How are you?” To answer the question, one must assess three aspects of one’s world. First, mood or emotion requires a reflexive act—a referencing in some way to a “self.” However, the self with a mood or emotion is not an isolated, atomized self, but a self in relation to a situation. The second aspect of mood or emotion is therefore “being situated.” Finally, any given emotion or mood is also characterized by a feeling, in which the “feeling” stands for one’s evaluation of how the self stands in relationship to its situational context. In other words, to be in a mood or an emotional state is to find oneself in a situation and to evaluate how one is fairing in that situation. It is to implicitly or explicitly grasp the meaning of the situation for one’s important projects. All three aspects of mood or emotion converge in a general sense of how one is doing, the “how-you-are-ness” of one’s being-in-the-world. This is why Sartre (1939/2001) described emotion as a “specific manner of apprehending the world” (p. 57).

Sartre (1939/2001) also characterized emotion as “a transformation of the world” (p. 63). Emotions seem to happen when the world is perceived to be altered or transfigured in one way or another, for the better or worse. Considering that mood and emotion are in many respects ways we find ourselves in the world, emotions and moods seem to be the finding of one’s self within a situation that is in the process of being reconstructed in some way. The world as a whole and/or its con-

tents appears to shift from one meaning to another, and to that extent the world calls for interpretation.

Although both moods and emotions are kinds of “self-finding,” they can be meaningfully differentiated. Moods have often been characterized as affects that are intentionally directed at the world as a whole rather than a particular content of the world (Crane, 1998; Smith, 1986; Solomon, 1976). In contrast, emotion is a type of affect that is intentionally directed at particular things in the world. However, as Fish (2005) argues, this distinction between emotion and mood does not hold up to close scrutiny, because emotions also give rise to global affectivity. Instead, emotion can be understood as an intentional state of mind that lends itself to the provision of a reason for that state of mind. To be in an emotional state of “self-finding,” therefore, is to understand one’s emotional state to be directed at a particular target, which serves as the “reason” for one’s state of mind. That reason provides the basis for ongoing activity in relation to that target. In contrast, moods share all of the qualities of emotion, but lack beliefs about the cause, or reason, for that state of mind.

This distinction between mood and emotion is important, because it provides a justification for the argument that human beings are always in some kind of mood. However, a mood transforms into an emotion only to the extent that the person or agent develops a reason to understand his or her mood in relation to a specific target that calls for future action to address a concern. It is important to note, however, that these “reasons” are usually implicit and need not be explicit or verbal (Nussbaum, 2001).

The question “How are you doing?” calls for a reply that designates one’s mood or emotion at the time. One replies with an answer that communicates one’s “how-you-are-ness.” If one answers the question in a general way, without giving reasons for that state of mind, one expresses a mood. However, if one gives reasons by identifying the intentional target of one’s state of mind, one expresses an emotion. Embarrassment, therefore, appears to fit the criteria of an emotion. Someone asks, “How are you doing?” Someone replies, “I feel embarrassed.” This answer invites the additional question, “What are you embarrassed about?” And generally the interlocutor is able to provide a readily available answer. She answers, “I am embarrassed because I slipped and fell in front of a crowd of people.” When the interlocutor provides an answer to the question, she puts forth a narrative that describes or explains the transformation of a world. A description of the event constitutes an authentic, phenomenological account of the emotion, whereas an explanation suggests a more detached, intellectualized grasp of the situation, which may be a sign of self-deception (Churchill, 2000).

Because we have identified the “self” as a key constituent of emotional experience, it is tempting to draw the conclusion that all emotions are “self-conscious” emotions. In that case, embarrassment, shame, and guilt could not be meaningfully categorized as a distinct set of experiences from other emotions, such as fear, an-

ger, and joy. However, the term “self-consciousness,” as it is used to designate experiences of embarrassment and shame, actually describes a peculiar relationship of the self to itself. As noted earlier, the experiences of shame and embarrassment seem to have as an essential characteristic the reduction of the lived body to a corporeal body. To be ashamed, for example, is to have one’s existence reduced to the object of another person’s evaluative gaze. Beyond that, the experience of shame requires the shamed person to have the capacity to project him- or herself into the position of the observing other. To the extent that one is capable of putting oneself into the perspective of the other, one is therefore capable of also having a reflexive relationship toward one’s own self as an object subject to evaluation. This capacity to experience one’s self as an object appears to be a developmental achievement.

DEVELOPMENT OF EMBARRASSMENT AND THE SELF-CONSCIOUS EMOTIONS

Phenomenological research has understood self-consciousness as a quality of experience that gradually emerges developmentally during early childhood (Merleau-Ponty, 1951/1964; Robbins & Goicoechea, 2005). Embarrassment, shame, and guilt are therefore presumed to appear on the scene with the genesis of self-consciousness. Developmental research supports the thesis that embarrassment is a self-conscious emotion that emerges with the ontogenesis of the self (Lewis & Brooks-Gunn, 1979; Lewis, Sullivan, Stranger, & Weiss, 1989).

According to Lewis’s (1992) developmental model of the self-conscious emotions, the basic emotions appear within the first 6–8 months of life, whereas embarrassment does not emerge until the child’s second year, which is about the same time the child develops self-consciousness. However, more complex self-conscious emotions, such as guilt and shame, do not develop until 1½ to 2 years after the emergence of embarrassment. According to this model, primary emotions such as joy, fear, anger, sadness, disgust, and surprise are universal and biologically based emotions that are fairly stereotypical and do not require much cognitive capacity. Embarrassment and similar emotions such as envy, however, require that the child have a basic self-awareness. Pride, shame, and guilt do not appear for another 2 years, Lewis suggests, because they require that the child is able to evaluate his or her own behavior (or more specifically, his or her “self”) in light of certain standards, rules, and goals.

To interpret Lewis’s research from a phenomenological perspective, there is a certain class of “basic” emotions that may not have the same experiential structure as the “self-conscious” emotions. In early development, and in certain emotional experiences of adults, the lived body effaces itself during emotional experiences, and therefore does not appear as a thematic object of reflection. For example, the experience of joy in adults has been described as a loss of self-consciousness

marked by a sense of fusion with others and things in the world (Robbins, 2006). In these cases, such as in joy, the emotion can still be conceptualized as the felt sense of one's situated "self" in the world. However, the "self" in this case is the activity of an agent or subject, and therefore does not appear explicitly as an object or target of the emotion. In the example of joy, the self finds itself before something to be celebrated. In contrast, the "self-conscious" emotions involve a structure in which the self stands before itself as if the self were an exterior event, object, or person. When a person takes joy in him- or herself, joy is transformed into the "self-conscious" emotion of pride, in which the self celebrates itself.

As noted earlier, developmental research on embarrassment, based largely on observation of behavioral expressions (e.g., blushing), has suggested that embarrassment appears on the scene earlier in childhood than shame and guilt. If this research is correct, then the "self" in embarrassment may have a different experiential quality than the reflexive self of shame and guilt. The self-reflexivity of embarrassment may involve a kind of proto-self that understands itself through an empathic, imaginative projection of one's self through the other. However, in contrast to shame and guilt, embarrassment may not claim this evaluation of the self as its *own* evaluation. Thus, where "basic" emotions do not require a capacity for empathy, embarrassment does, because without the capacity for empathy, the self could not imagine itself through the gaze of the other. However, in contrast to shame and guilt, the evaluation of the self through the gaze of the other is not yet an evaluation that one is ready to take up as *one's own* evaluation of one's self. In early childhood, the child who has not yet developed a sense of his or her own identity cannot yet take on that evaluation as his or her own. In adulthood, embarrassment may characterize those experiences by which one perceives one's self evaluated by others, but one does not identify or claim those evaluations *of oneself for oneself*.

Having made some suggestions about the nature of the "self" in the self-conscious emotions, we have yet neglected that other dimension of emotion identified as "being situated."

EMBARRASSING SITUATIONS

As Miller (2001) has suggested, an evolutionary perspective might conclude that embarrassment serves an important social function that, in turn, would have furthered the survival of the species. The expression of embarrassment, under the right circumstances, can serve as a signal to others that one's inappropriate behavior was not intentional. However, research suggests that people do sometimes embarrass themselves and/or others intentionally to achieve certain social outcomes (Sharkey, Park, & Kim, 2004). Intentional embarrassment can be used for a variety of reasons, including face-management of self or others, attention, self-satisfaction, testing situations or others, solidarity, or compliance.

Miller (2001) has defined embarrassment as “the acute state of flustered, awkward, abashed chagrin that follows events that increase the threat of unwanted evaluations [negative or positive] from real or imagined audiences” (p. 129). However, it is not clear how this definition, nor most of the evidence presented, distinguishes embarrassment from shame or guilt.

Miller (1996) has developed a taxonomy for embarrassing situations. One category of triggers for embarrassment includes individual behaviors: Physical pratfalls/inept performances, cognitive errors, loss of control over one’s self (body, emotions, possessions), failures of privacy regulation, and abashed harmdoing. The other category involves interactive behavior: awkward interactions and partner sensitivity. As Sabini, Garvey, and Hall (2001) note, these antecedents of embarrassment are somewhat different from the common antecedents for shame, which include poor performance, hurting others emotionally, failing to meet others’ expectations, disappointment in oneself, and role-inappropriate behavior. The differences in the antecedents of shame and embarrassment, as well as the evidence that embarrassment precedes shame developmentally, suggest that these emotions can and should be meaningfully distinguished. However, attempts to distinguish these emotions have resulted in mixed and perhaps even contradictory conclusions in the literature.

MODELS OF EMBARRASSMENT

The fact that researchers have had difficulty distinguishing the self-conscious emotions is due in part to confusion about the nature of embarrassment in general. There are various models of embarrassment. These include the loss of self-esteem model (Modigliani, 1971), the social evaluation model (Manstead & Semin, 1981), the personal standards model (Babcock, 1988), the dramaturgic model (Silver, Sabini, & Parrott, 1987), the transgression of others’ expectations model (Sugawara, 1992), and the center of attention model (Sabini, Siepmann, Stein, & Meyerowitz, 2000).

The *loss of self-esteem model* holds that embarrassment results from a loss of self-respect or dignity as a result of the negative evaluations of others (Modigliani, 1971). However, people can sometimes be embarrassed when positively evaluated by others. Therefore, the *social evaluation model* argues that any undesired evaluation, whether positive or negative, will result in embarrassment (e.g., Manstead & Semin, 1981). The *personal standards model*, on the other hand, emphasizes the role of the embarrassed person. This model suggests that embarrassment results from a discrepancy between one’s behavior and one’s self-imposed ideals. In this model, the evaluations of others matter less than a person’s own self-evaluations.

The *dramaturgic model* of embarrassment takes a different approach than the aforementioned models. Rather than emphasizing the role of evaluations from self

or others, this model holds that embarrassment results primarily from a disruption of social interaction due to a person's inability to act his or her given social role. In other words, the person for whatever reason fails to follow a social script (Sabini et al., 2000).

The *transgression of others' expectations model* shares the *social evaluation model's* emphasis on the evaluations of others. However, in contrast to the social evaluation model, the person is threatened with the possibility of acting in a way that is contrary to the expectations of the other people who are present to witness the behavior (e.g., Sugawara, 1992). For example, a person who is praised by others may not simply be embarrassed by the positive evaluation; rather, he or she may be embarrassed because he or she is not sure how people expect him or her to act in response to the praise.

Finally, the *center of attention model* was developed by Sabini and colleagues (2000) to account for experiences that are addressed by neither the *social evaluation model* nor the *dramaturgic model*. They suggest that merely being the center of attention can be embarrassing, even when there is neither a loss of esteem nor dramaturgic failure. This model, however, is one of the weaker accounts, because it does not explain why some people enjoy being the center of attention whereas others are embarrassed. (For more information about these models, see Higuchi & Fukada, 2002; Miller, 1996; and Sabini et al., 2000.)

Higuchi (2000, 2001) has noted that these models are interdependent rather than distinct accounts of embarrassment. The various models fit certain situations better than others. Higuchi and Fukada (2002) concluded that the factors of disruption of social interaction and apprehension of social evaluation were most characteristic of embarrassing public situations, whereas the loss of self-esteem and inconsistency with self-image were most characteristic of embarrassing private situations. They concluded that public situations of embarrassment were best explained by the disruption of social interaction and apprehension of social evaluation models whereas private situations were best explained by the loss of self-esteem model and personal standards model. It should be noted, however, that, although these findings may hold true for Japanese participants, these results may not generalize to other cultures, including the United States and Europe. This is particularly the case because Japanese people are generally more prone to embarrassment than people from other cultures (Benedict, 1946).

Although Higuchi and colleagues have used a factor analytic approach to identifying subtypes of embarrassment, past research has mostly taken an analytic induction approach. Among these, Miller's taxonomy (1992, 1996) is the most widely recognized. It identifies three situational triggers of embarrassment: failings (faux pas), being the center of attention, and sticky situations.

By comparing subtypes of embarrassing situations with various personality variables, Sabini and colleagues (2000) were able to establish discriminant validity among the subtypes. Findings suggest that embarrassment in sticky situations is

more concerned with how one appears to others specifically for the purpose of avoiding conflict. On the other hand, embarrassment in faux pas situations appears to be geared more closely to avoiding rejection and fearing a loss of self-esteem. Furthermore, embarrassability in situations of being the center of attention seems to represent a general fear of social situations (social phobia or social anxiety) rather than a concern with loss of esteem or conflict avoidance.

In conclusion, no single model of embarrassment appears to provide an explanation broad enough to include all three situational subtypes. Whereas the loss of self-esteem model and the personal standards model best explain embarrassment in faux pas situations, sticky situations appear to be better explained by the social evaluation model and/or the transgression of other's expectations model. Embarrassment in the context of being the center of attention, moreover, seems best explained by the center of attention model or the dramaturgic model. Although these distinctions are important for identifying subtypes of embarrassment, they nevertheless raise questions about how to develop a model of embarrassment that adequately accounts for each subtype.

THE UNWANTED EXPOSURE MODEL OF EMBARRASSMENT

We suggest that an alternative model of embarrassment is the unwanted exposure model. Blushing is a distinct behavioral expression of embarrassment (Lewis, 1995). Further, Crozier (2001) has argued that blushing is a physiological response to unwanted exposure. "Unwanted exposure" in this context refers to an event that reveals something a person prefers or wishes to keep hidden or concealed. If indeed blushing is a behavioral expression of embarrassment, we can reasonably conclude that embarrassment is the feeling that accompanies the perception of an unwanted exposure or revelation. The revelation could include a wide variety of hidden topics, including a topic that a person feels should not be discussed or the revelation of a person's motives for his or her actions (Crozier, 2001).

We believe the unwanted exposure model best explains each situational subtype of embarrassment. Clearly, when a given person becomes the center of attention, this does not necessarily imply that he or she will be embarrassed. However, a person may become embarrassed when he or she receives public exposure that he or she prefers not to receive. Also, in cases of a faux pas, the public failing tends to reveal a flaw in the person that he or she prefers to keep hidden. The failing may or may not cause the person to lose some self-respect, and it may or may not lead to negative or even positive social evaluations, but the embarrassment in these cases does seem to imply, necessarily, that the person would otherwise have preferred that the revealed aspect of him- or herself had remain concealed. Finally, in the case of sticky situations, the person is typically forced to confront another person

about an uncomfortable event, such as returning a loan. The unwanted exposure model suggests that the embarrassment of the sticky situation is less centrally a matter of avoiding conflict than it is a concern with revealing one's true motives to the other person. For example, confronting another person about an outstanding loan reveals to the other person a variety of things that one may prefer to keep hidden, including the fact that one may need the money and perhaps also that one is annoyed with him or her for failing to return the loan on time.

One problem with the unwanted exposure model is that it does not seem to address incidents of intentional embarrassment (Sharkey et al., 2004; discussed earlier). However, efforts to intentionally "embarrass" one's self does not imply that one actually experiences the emotion of embarrassment. It is possible, and in fact quite likely, that a person could fake the experience of embarrassment solely for the sake of influencing the behavior of others. It is certainly possible to feign embarrassment without actually experiencing the emotion and still get the desired effect from one's audience.

In conclusion, we suggest that the unwanted exposure model is a better model of embarrassment because it is able to address each situational subtype of embarrassment, and it is able to do so in cases where other models of embarrassment cannot. In this sense, the unwanted exposure model seems to distill embarrassment to its most essential, core meaning as an emotional experience: the revelation of something hidden that one prefers to remain hidden. The model can provide a hermeneutic forestructure through which to conduct an empirical-phenomenological method of investigation, which is specifically designed to distill core, essential meanings of phenomena.

EMBARRASSMENT AND SHAME: WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE?

Initially, it may appear that the unwanted exposure model of embarrassment is not sufficient enough to distinguish embarrassment from shame. However, empirical research appears to support the conclusion that the theme of unwanted exposure is essential for embarrassment but not sufficient for shame.

A number of researchers have suggested that there is essentially no difference between shame and embarrassment (Izard, 1977; Kaufman, 1989; Lewis, 1971). However, the growing consensus among researchers is that embarrassment can be meaningfully distinguished from shame and other self-conscious emotions. The problem is that empirical research aimed at distinguishing these emotions has tended to yield inconsistent results. These differences are probably best explained as methodological artifacts.

A very common assumption in the literature is that embarrassment and shame can be distinguished mainly along the dimension of intensity (Borg, Staufenbiel,

& Scherer, 1988; Buss, 1980; Lewis, 1992; Ortony, Clore, & Collins, 1988). The problem with this distinction is that it is primarily a quantitative distinction such that shame is thought to be more powerful than embarrassment; but more powerful or intense in what sense? The difference in perceived intensity could be an indication of a qualitative difference, such as the gravity of the failure or transgression (Ortony et al., 1988). As Buss (1980) notes, embarrassment may be more characterized by feelings of silliness and humor rather than deep feelings of remorse. On the other hand, the perceived intensity could be a reflection of shame's focus on a failing of one's core self as opposed to simply one's presented self, as may be the case in embarrassment (Klass, 1990; Modigliani, 1968; Tracy & Robins, 2004).

Miller and Tangney (1994) found a variety of characteristics that demarcated shame from embarrassment. In comparison to embarrassment, shame was reported to be more intense, enduring, and about a more serious transgression. It was also experienced to be a response to an act that felt more immoral and lead to feelings such as disgust and anger toward the self. In contrast, embarrassing episodes were felt to be more surprising, were about relatively more trivial events, and were more related to humorous feelings.

Tangney, Miller, Flicker, and Barlow (1996) found differences between shame and embarrassment on a variety of dimensions. In contrast to shame and guilt, embarrassment tended to occur before bigger audiences who were more likely to be acquaintances and strangers if not peers or equals. In contrast, guilt and shame were more commonly associated with loved ones. Embarrassment was also unique in that it was less negative, more fleeting, and more likely to involve physiological reactions such as blushing. It also had fewer moral implications. Lacking moral gravity, embarrassment was less likely to give rise to reactions such as attempts to make reparations, taking responsibility for the event, concern with other's negative evaluations, or attempts to hide. Instead, embarrassment was in response to events that were experienced as surprising, accidental, and even amusing. Significantly, and consistent with the unwanted exposure model of embarrassment, the feeling was much more closely aligned with a sense that one had been exposed both to the attention and judgments of others.

Sabini and Silver (1998) offer an alternative description of shame and embarrassment. They assume that these self-conscious emotions essentially share the same physiological response of shame-humiliation. The difference, they argue, is a matter of the person's interpretation after the fact. If the person feels they have exposed a genuine flaw in themselves, he or she is likely to feel shame, but if the flaw is not felt to be representative of one's true self, the resulting emotion would be embarrassment. Drawing on the dramaturgic model of embarrassment, Sabini et al. (2001) elaborate on this theory by identifying embarrassment as always a matter of a disruption in a social script that results in a feeling of being flustered and inhibited. However, embarrassment only evolves into shame if the person believes the cause of the disruption can be attributed to a real flaw in him- or herself.

The conclusions of Sabini and colleagues (1998, 2001) are problematic for a variety of reasons. Most important, the clear distinction between shame and embarrassment assumes that these emotions are mutually exclusive. Either a person perceives he or she has revealed an actual flaw or he or she does not. There is no middle ground. Yet, research demonstrates that feelings of guilt–shame are highly correlated with embarrassment–exposure (Harris, 2003). For this reason alone, the unwanted exposure model of embarrassment seems to better account for the differences between shame and embarrassment.

Shame and embarrassment may tend to co-occur because shame often involves the unwanted exposure of the self to others. However, unwanted exposure to others may not be an essential aspect of shame. Based on the unwanted exposure model of embarrassment, it is reasonable to conclude that, to the extent that shame involves an unwanted revelation, the experience already implies the copresence of a feeling of embarrassment. However, the presence of embarrassment does not imply a feeling of shame. An unwanted exposure would not produce shame if the exposure were the result of an accident for which a person did not feel responsible nor if the revelation was the flaw or failure of another person. Also, it seems unlikely that a person would feel shame if the unwanted disclosure did not put him or her at risk of negative evaluation, such as in the case of unwanted praise.

The phenomenological investigation of embarrassment promises to clarify the meaning of embarrassment, which in turn should assist in the project of conceptually sharpening the distinction between embarrassment and shame.

METHOD

Participants

Three male and three female undergraduate students from a small, Western Pennsylvania college volunteered to participate in our study. Participants were recruited from an undergraduate psychology course. Participants were between the ages of 18 and 21.

Data Collection

Each participant was asked to write a brief narrative in reply to the question,

Please describe as concretely as possible, a situation in which you experienced embarrassment. Include as much detail as you can, including what led up to the situation, how the experience showed itself, and any resolutions that may have occurred.

Each participant was left alone in a room to work on his or her narrative. Subsequently, participants gave an interview to provide further information. One of the

researchers explained to the participants that they would read their own narrative and that, whenever they heard a pause, they were to elaborate on what was being said in as much detail as they could provide. The narrative and interview were then transcribed for analysis.

Data Analysis

The transcriptions were analyzed with the empirical, phenomenological method (Churchill, 2006; Giorgi, 1985; Robbins, 2006). The analysis was performed separately by each of the researchers, and the results were shared with a class on qualitative research. Students from the course provided feedback on the analysis, and any discrepancies between the analyses of the various researchers were worked out through an ongoing dialogue.

The data analysis consisted of seven steps: (a) reading the descriptions, (b) delineating meaning units, (c) organizing the meaning units, (d) seeing the meaning units psychologically, (e) situated structural descriptions, (f) identification of general themes, and (g) construction of a general situated structure.

Reading the descriptions. The transcriptions were read with the aim of becoming empathically connected with each participant's description (Wertz, 1985). The researchers used their empathic imagination to put themselves, as much as possible, in the place of the participants. Phenomenological research requires that the researcher make sense of first-person descriptions of experience, and the best way to comprehend first-person descriptions is to immerse oneself in the first-person perspective of the participants. Doing so, the researcher creates the possibility for a rich, experiential grasp of the unfolding worlds of the participants.

Delineating the meaning units. In the second step of the analysis, we identified "meaning units" in the data of each participant. The process of identifying meaning units serves the function of making more manageable the following steps of the analysis, which will require interpretations that stay as close to the phenomenon as possible. Wertz (1985) defines a meaning unit "as a part of the description whose phrases require each other to stand as a distinguishable moment" (p. 165). Meaning units can vary quite widely in length. In our case, we used a word processing program, and cut and pasted each meaning unit of each transcription into separate documents.

Organizing the meaning units. In the next step of the analysis, we organized the meaning units of each transcription according to "existential" categories. These existentials included themes of time, space, body, others, things, and language. Each of these categories can be considered givens or essential constituents of human being-in-the-world (Robbins, 1998, 2006). As givens of existence, they remain invariant even as their content changes with the dynamic un-

folding of an emotional episode. By tracking the changes in these existential categories, we were better able to identify the transformation of each participant's world. Once the meaning units were organized into existential categories, we then eliminated meaning units that were redundant, keeping only those meaning units that maintained the most clear and vivid articulation of the unit's significance.

Seeing the meaning units psychologically. The fourth stage of analysis, "seeing psychologically," is a peculiarly phenomenological approach to experiential data. In most natural scientific investigations of phenomenon, the emphasis is placed on the identification of explanations for the phenomenon, whether these explanations consist of behavioral antecedents or physiochemical processes in the nervous system. In contrast, seeing psychologically from a phenomenological perspective is a matter of identifying how each participant's transcription is disclosive of a world (Robbins, 2006). "World" in this sense is to be understood as a relational concept, by virtue of which a self or agent is intentionally related to a network of relationships to others and things that matter to him or her. By "seeing psychologically," we read beyond a literal interpretation of the participants' descriptions to explicate what their statements imply about how those relationships mattered and were at stake during the emotional episode. Like the initial stage of reading the descriptions, this stage does not yet entail a verbal or written interpretation of the protocols. Rather, it is a shift in attitude on the part of the researcher: a shift from an empathic attunement to a reflexive perspective that sees through a given participant's description toward its implicit structural features.

Situated structural descriptions. The phenomenological attitude, or "seeing psychologically," was preparatory for the next stage of the analysis, which involves the construction of situated structural descriptions for each participant's transcription (Giorgi, 1985). Each situated structural description was developed from a translation of the meaning units, and their existential categories, into a narrative that evoked the world of the participant.

General themes. We identified general themes among the transcriptions by identifying themes shared by all of the situated structural descriptions. We began with themes that were very obvious and used those initial discoveries to identify less obvious and implicit thematic regularities in the data. By identifying general themes, we aimed to discover those relationships and structures that we believed could not be suppressed or changed without the phenomenon ceasing to be itself (Merleau-Ponty, 1964/1968, p. 111). To assist us in this process, we each used a process called "imaginative variation," which Wertz (1985) describes as a matter of "asking all constituents, distinctions, phrases, and themes if they could be dif-

ferent or even absent without altering the individual's psychological reality" (p. 176). Each researcher separately identified general themes, and then later compared these general themes. Those themes that were common among the researchers were retained, whereas the remaining themes became subject for discussion and further articulation. In that process, some themes were discarded and others were retained.

General situated structure. Finally, we used the general themes to develop a general situated structure. The general situated structure is a synthesis of the general themes into a single, unified Gestalt or whole. The process of writing the general situated structure was a matter of tracking how the general themes, as constituents of the phenomenon as a whole, sought a "balanced fulfillment, in accordance with [their] intrinsic structural demand" (Fuller, 1990, p. 114). We continued to construct and revise the general situated structural description until we had achieved a description that we felt was adequately balanced and coherent.

In the results that follow, we include examples and conclusions of several steps of the analysis, including one example of a transcription, the general themes, and the general situated structure.

RESULTS

Narratives and Interviews

The following is one written narrative, which serves as a typical example of the data we used to perform our analysis. The written narrative is typed in regular font. The responses from the interview are typed in italics.

Example of Protocol

When I was a freshman here, 3 years ago, I experienced one of my most embarrassing moments in [the dining hall]. It was a Sunday afternoon and my friends and I were going down to brunch. I was still wearing my pajama bottoms and threw on a pair of flip-flops for my trip downstairs. After standing in line and getting brunch on my tray, I made my way to the drink area. I must not have noticed the wet floor beneath the beverage dispenser because I suddenly found myself sliding across the floor and onto my butt. Apparently, my flip flops did not have traction on the bottom of them and there was no hope for me on the wet linoleum floor. As I was falling everything felt like it was moving in slow motion, but it came so quick and unexpected. *It's hard to explain, it was one of those moments—you could feel yourself physically falling but you couldn't do anything else to stop it and you knew you were gonna end up on the*

ground, but it came so quick, it was before you realized what had happened. So, it was like an instant, but dragged out. It totally caught me by surprise but I knew it was happening when it had started. I was taken by surprise when I found myself on the ground. My tray of food came crashing to the ground along with me and I was mortified. I think I realized what had happened. It's almost like I could see myself falling to the ground. I could see myself the way other people could see me and oh my God I can't believe that just happened. There was a sense of being looked at and all the attention was on me and pretty much made me want to disappear. The fact that I fell on my butt, and normally people don't fall on the ground. It is not perceived as an acceptable social custom to fall on your butt. It wasn't graceful and it wasn't planned. [Participant blushes.] I wanted to crawl inside myself to avoid the stares of the crowded dining hall onlookers. I immediately felt that warm rush of blood to my face and knew that I was turning red, an experience I was very familiar with. *Yeah that's cause I get embarrassed a lot. It's hard to describe. You're warm and your heart starts beating fast and your fight and flight kicks in and you just want to run away and hard. There's just that warm sensation where your face is burning. Adrenaline kicks in.*

Before I made anymore of a fool of myself in front of all those people, I stood up and walked straight to the back of the dining hall, sat with my friends and acted as if nothing happened. I did not even want to think about what had just happened let alone talk about it. *After something really embarrassing happens you don't want to relive it, you don't want to tell people about what just happened because it just happened. You just want to forget because it just happened in five minutes. Talking about it would just bring up the memory and I didn't want to think about it because I had these bad feelings and I was embarrassed.* I kept running the situation over and over again in my head, not being able to believe what had just happened. Could that have been real? Could I actually have fallen down on the ground in front of an entire dining hall full of chattering students? *It ruined my day. I get embarrassed easily. By the next day I was over it. I was so shocked that it kept repeating itself. I couldn't believe that it happened. I didn't want to share with other people so I just had to share with myself multiple times.* The experience seemed too surreal but the reality set in when I felt the ache of my body from the fall. Now when I see others in a similar situation, I experience my feelings of embarrassment for them all over again. Even if I am watching a movie in which something embarrassing is happening to the main character I have to hide my eyes because of the empathy I feel for them. *I don't know, I mean, it's like I don't know. It's really hard to describe but when you see someone in a situation when you've been there before you feel so bad for them, just totally by accident and you can't do anything about it. I think that you want to be viewed in a positive light by other people and acts that would make you seem clumsy or unattractive you don't want to show off. Some people don't care about that because they don't care what other people think about them, some like the attention. I care how people see me and on the ground isn't a positive light. You want to make a positive impression. You don't want to seem like a dumbass. It's like Meet the Parents ... he's trying to get Robert DeNiro to like him and he messed everything up. If you fall down in front of people, it's embarrassing. It's a place you're not supposed to be."*

General Themes

1. Each of the situations of embarrassment occurred within the context of an interpersonal situation (i.e., a dining hall full of students, a classroom with a teacher and other students).

2. The participants were surprised to find themselves engaged in an unintended behavior, or set of behaviors, that was aberrant or out of the ordinary. For example, when one participant fell in front of a crowd of onlookers, she understood her falling as an aberration from the expectation that she would otherwise walk gracefully through the dining hall. Other examples included falling asleep in class, using an unintended double entendre with sexual connotations when speaking publicly, tripping when playing baseball and running the bases, being exposed as a gossip, and performing a clumsy cartwheel.

3. Embarrassment emerged following a point of “realization”—an evaluative moment of insight—through which his or her behavior was exposed as departure from his or her expected comportment. For example, one participant wrote that the embarrassing situation occurred “so quick, it was before you realized what had happened.”

4. The self-focused evaluation of the behavior as an aberration was given as if through the eyes of witnesses. Rather than a first-person disclosure of the self to itself (i.e., a “me” to an “I”), the self was experienced instead as exposed to a third-person other (i.e., a “me” in relation to a “he,” “she,” or “it”). As one participant noted, “I could see myself the way other people could see me and oh my God I can’t believe that just happened.”

5. In each case, the witnesses of the aberrant behavior were constituted by the participants as others who would, justly or unjustly, negatively evaluate him or her based on the behavior. “I remember thinking that they probably thought I was such an idiot ...,” wrote one participant.

6. Each of the participants found themselves before a situation that repelled their attention from the present moment toward a future free of exposure to the other. While the effort to free the self from exposure differed from person to person (e.g., escape–avoidance, humorous reappraisal, derealization, dissociation, problem-focused coping), each plan of action was oriented toward freeing the exposed self from the evaluative gaze of witnesses. As one participant remarked, “I wanted to crawl inside myself to avoid the stares ...,” a kind of escape–avoidance strategy. At the height of this ordeal, the participant slipped into a state of derealization, describing the situation as “too surreal.” However, several of the participants described the event as “funny” or “humorous,” which can be interpreted as a kind of cognitive flight from the situation’s potential for seriousness.

7. The exposed self emerged thematically to the participants as an alienated, corporeal body, including an explicit awareness of outward expressions of blushing as well as interoceptive sensations of a racing heart. “I immediately felt that

warm rush of blood to my face and knew that I was turning red," described one participant.

8. Participants also implied that the gravity or seriousness of the situation was relatively mild—therefore, the aversive feeling was relatively fleeting and isolated to the particular incident that gave rise to the feeling. Participants wrote, for example, "It happened very quickly and it didn't bother me for that long," or "at this point the situation was humorous and it wasn't embarrassing at all."

General Situated Structure

Embarrassment was experienced by these participants within the context of an interpersonal situation. As an interpersonally situated phenomenon, embarrassment was disclosed through the participants' relations with others. Within this social context, the participants found themselves engaged in a behavior that was experienced as an aberration or anomaly that differed from their intended plans as well as from what they believed were normative social expectations. The deviation from normative social expectations became embarrassing, however, only to the extent that the participants found themselves exposed to important others who were constituted as evaluating the self. That is, the unintended or unplanned behavior became embarrassing through the participants' imaginative constitution of his or her behavior through the eyes of important witnesses.

Through the imagined other, the participants fashioned a third-person perspective on the self. Through this decentered perspective of the self from an alien vantage point, the lived body, or "me" of the participants, was reduced to a corporeal body, a thing or "it" exposed to the judgments of the other. This corporeal body showed itself through a thematic awareness of the surface and interior body. Blushing was a common behavioral expression of the participants' embarrassment. Nevertheless, the relative seriousness of the embarrassment-eliciting situation was relatively mild and thus the feelings were short-lived and isolated to the situation. The aberration in self-presentation was not an exposure of a shameful aspect of one's core self, but rather a trivial incident without consequence to the participant's identity. The embarrassment dissipated to the extent that participants were able to restore a nonthreatening relationship with others through a humorous reappraisal of the situation. Through humor, participants became once again situated within the first-person perspective of the lived body, and were able to restore affiliation to others through a common humorous perspective on his or her prior embarrassed self.

DISCUSSION

The results of our analysis support prior theory that identifies embarrassment as a self-conscious emotion. In the experience of embarrassment, the participants came

to an aversive self-conscious awareness through the imaginative projection of the evaluations of others. The phenomenon of embarrassment, therefore, demonstrates how human self-consciousness is a developmental achievement that follows from the individual's projection of intentional consciousness to other minds—and, in particular, minds that are capable of judging one's self, for good or ill. In contrast to the more developmentally advanced affects of guilt and shame, the individual seems not to judge him- or herself directly but initially judges him- or herself through the imagined evaluations of important others. To experience shame, the participants may have needed to take at least two additional steps: (a) perceive the anomaly as a consequence of a core defect in the self and (b) accept the negative evaluation as his or her own interpretation of the anomaly, rather than only a real or potential judgment of other people. Future phenomenological research on shame may help address this question.

As with Miller's (1996) taxonomy of embarrassing situations, our participants described a variety of situations that led to the feeling of embarrassment. In our sample, these situations included physical pratfalls—inept performances, loss of control over the body, and failures of privacy regulation.

No particular model of embarrassment seems to have been upheld by our study. Rather, each model seems to highlight a different aspect of the whole structural tapestry of embarrassment. The models of embarrassment, therefore, may be appropriately conceptualized not so much as competing models as various hermeneutic approaches, each appropriate in their own way and which illuminate different profiles of the phenomenon of embarrassment. Nevertheless, some of these hermeneutic frameworks are more or less illuminating than others.

The *loss of self-esteem model* identifies that aspect of embarrassment in which the person, via the imagined evaluations of others, appraises the self as inferior to others (Modigliani, 1971). Self-esteem, in this context, would be defined as the evaluation of one's worth in relation to others. Future research might explore the relationship between a proneness to embarrassment and contingencies of self-worth (Crocker & Wolfe, 2001). Embarrassment may be a cost of failing to live up to certain investments in social esteem. At the same time, the aversive experience of embarrassment may serve as a deterrent to pursuing certain activities that may put a person at greater risk of making an error that would cause him or her to feel inferior to others.

However, although our data did not reveal any narratives about embarrassment resulting from positive evaluations from others, other researchers have suggested such narratives are occasionally reported. Subsequent research might explore narratives that specifically focus on embarrassment that results from positive evaluations. These experiences may share essential features with our phenomenology of embarrassment, but they may also include key differences. One difference might be a relative lack of negative evaluations by others, which consequently would challenge the self-esteem model.

The *social evaluation model* is a more comprehensive conceptualization of embarrassment (e.g., Manstead & Semin, 1981). In this model, embarrassment results less from the valence of the evaluation as much as from the participant. If the evaluations from others are undesired, whether positive or negative, embarrassment is likely. Our analysis is consistent with this model. Clearly, the evaluations from others—even if imaginatively constituted by the participant—were unwanted evaluations that typically initiated escape–avoidance coping mechanisms. These observations are also consistent with the model of embarrassment that emphasizes embarrassment as a transgression of others' expectations.

Nevertheless, the analysis makes clear that the participants were never entirely sure how others were evaluating them. The participant's evaluations were always interpretations of him- or herself by him- or herself, but through the imagined projections of others. It is perhaps, therefore, more accurate to say that, consistent with the *personal standard model*, the participants were concerned about a discrepancy between his or her self-presentation in a social context and his or her own ideal social self. Yet, rather than attributing these evaluations to him- or herself, the participant attributed these evaluations to others. The attribution to others may reflect the essentially social nature of these self-evaluations: that is, they indicate that the person's self-concerns are concerns about how he or she appears publicly to others.

The *dramaturgic model* predicts that participants felt embarrassed to the extent that the episode caused a disruption in normal social interaction. Clearly, the episodes described some events that caused disruptions in social interaction—but only in some cases. We are led to believe, based on our results, that the disruption in social interaction is not a necessary condition nor an essential theme of embarrassment, but a common consequence of embarrassment. The participants described coping responses that sometimes included escape–avoidance and derealization, which tended more often than not to distract the person from the ongoing social events. However, in cases where the participants were able to successfully use humorous reappraisals of the event (e.g., when they were able to laugh with others at their faux pas), the embarrassment was less likely to cause an obvious disruption in the social interaction.

Finally, the *center of attention model* predicts a theme found in some of our narratives, in which participants described the aversive feeling of being at the focus of public attention. However, it is clear from the narratives that being the center of attention was only embarrassing to the extent that the participant experienced this attention as essentially evaluative in nature—and particularly so when the participant felt that these evaluations touched on aspects of his or her self that were invested in contingencies of self-worth.

The data also seem to fit our *unwanted exposure model of embarrassment*. Indeed, we believe the hermeneutic framework of the unwanted exposure model is better able than others models to describe the phenomenon of embarrassment as

a whole. The model can incorporate all of the themes identified in other models but in such a way that they make sense as a whole, coherent description of the phenomenon.

As the general situated structure described, embarrassment was a phenomenon that involved the self's revelation of his or her own social self-worth as it was revealed through the imagined, projected eyes of the other. In other words, the participants found themselves exposed to the other's evaluative gaze and this evaluative gaze was an unwanted gaze. We can imagine other occasions, such as the case of the exhibitionist, when a person might desire the evaluative gaze of others. In none of the cases we observed did we find a case in which the participant desired the evaluations of others. It seems to us, therefore, that the unwanted exposure model captures the most important profiles of embarrassment described by others models, but incorporates them into a simple, more parsimonious and yet also holistic description: the self's unwanted exposure to the other.

Given the unwanted nature of the exposure, the consequent emotion of embarrassment led most of the participants to initiate escape and avoidance tactics designed specifically to remove the self from exposure. Again, this theme supports our model. Escape does not remove the self from the evaluations of others, but it does remove the self from the immediate exposure of the self to others. Also, the coping mechanism of humorous appraisal was another, perhaps more effective technique for changing the situation from an undesired exposure to a desirable one—an exposure that became constituted as a source of social bonding through shared laughter, which effectively eliminated the embarrassment.

Future research should use similar empirical–phenomenological methodology to identify the phenomenological structure of other self-conscious emotions, such as guilt and shame. Such work might assist with the process of distinguishing these emotions from one another.

Our study supports the observations of prior researchers that embarrassment, in contrast to shame, seems to occur in response to failings or transgressions that are relatively mild (Buss, 1980; Miller & Tangney, 1994; Modigliani, 1968). The fleeting nature of embarrassment, and the relatively trivial nature of the embarrassing episodes, permitted at least some of the participants to find humor in the events. These themes suggest that embarrassment may relate more to failings of the presented self rather than the core self. Also, the participants described their surprise at their own unintended behavior—and this element of surprise may be relatively lacking in episodes of shame. Future research might clarify whether these themes differ in cases of shame.

Consistent with past research by Miller (1995), embarrassment seems to share with shyness a concern with the evaluation of the self. Likewise, the episodes of embarrassment revolved around episodes of social evaluation, whereas past research has suggested shyness is more closely linked to deficits in self-esteem that are linked to social skill deficits.

Our study has its limitations. Our narratives were restricted to those of college students, and young adults are likely to experience more self-conscious emotions than others. Future research might focus on how older adults experience embarrassment and whether or not different themes emerge in participants who are more mature. Again, we think it is important for future work to focus on a wider range of embarrassing episodes, particularly ones that include the various types of triggers identified in prior literature.

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AUTHOR NOTES

Brent Dean Robbins has a doctorate in clinical psychology from Duquesne University. He is Assistant Professor of Psychology at Daemen College in Amherst, New York, where he teaches a wide variety of courses, including research methods, social psychology, theories of personality, existential/phenomenological psychology, positive psychology, film and psychology, and the psychology of emotion. He is Editor-in-Chief of *Janus Head: Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature, Continental Philosophy, Phenomenological Psychology, and the Arts* (www.janushead.org). He is a board member of the Institute for Cultural Therapeutics, as well as the International Network on Personal Meaning, and he is Membership Chair of Division 32 of the American Psychological Association.

Holly Parlavecchio has a B.A. from Allegheny College, where she double majored in neuroscience and psychology. She completed a research internship with Brent Dean Robbins when he was a visiting professor at Allegheny College from 2002 to 2004. She is a member of Psi Chi and graduated with honors. Her senior thesis was titled, "Size Ratios in Ruptured Versus Unruptured Intracranial Aneurysms," and the study identified a model for predicting the correct classification of aneurysms in 71% of cases. She is currently working as a lab assistant at the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center.

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