

*Human Communication*. A Publication of the Pacific and Asian Communication Association. Vol. 11, No.2, pp. 237 – 254.

**Embarrassment: The Communication of an Awkward Actor Anticipating a Negative Evaluation**

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**Abstract**

Embarrassment is often conceptualized as produced by either an awkward interaction or a negative social evaluation. The present study uses the Cupach and Metts (1994) and Sharkey and Stafford (1990) typologies to analyze these two influences. Respondents (n=327) describe embarrassing situations they experienced and explain why they were embarrassing. Chi-square results suggest a difference between awkward interaction and social evaluation as the primary influence on embarrassment in self-induced, actor-responsible situations and on other-induced, observer-responsible situations. Self-induced embarrassment predicaments are associated with a loss of personal script and an awkward interaction. Embarrassment caused by others shows a greater influence of perceived negative social evaluation. These results suggest that embarrassment is best conceptualized as a multidimensional phenomenon having multiple triggers and with multiple communication responses.

**Key Concepts:** Embarrassment, Face, Awkward Interaction, Negative Evaluation, Typologies

Embarrassment is a powerful and pervasive force in human interaction (Verbeke & Bagozzi, 2002). It has been linked by scholars to speechlessness (Berger, 2004), verbal repair strategies (Meyer & Rothenberg (2004), avoidance behaviors, and organizational employee responses to management sanctions (Kobayashi, Grasmick, & Friedrich (2001). The present study analyses the personal experience and communication of embarrassment and examines its triggers to better understand its onset, process, variety, and predictable outcomes.

### **Conceptualizing Embarrassment**

Embarrassment is said to occur when an expressive act threatens the assumptions of a participant's projected identity and discredits one's interactional face (Goffman, 1956, 1967). Embarrassment, therefore, is "located not in the individual but in the social system" (Goffman, 1967, p. 108). How embarrassment is triggered, however, is open to dispute. Three alternative perspectives suggest that embarrassment occurs due to: (a) a disruption in the social interaction (Gross & Stone, 1964; Weinberg, 1968), (b) a loss of situational self-esteem (Modigliani, 1971; Sattler, 1965), or (c) the perception of negative social evaluation (Buss 1980; Edelman 1981, 1990; Edelman & Neto, 1985; Edelman, et al., 1989). All three explanations draw on Goffman's conceptualization of interactional face, but each interprets the implications of face threats differently.

Gross and Stone (1964) and Weinberg (1968) describe embarrassment as a response to a disruption in the interpersonal-social interaction script. This disruption is precipitated by a threat to self-definition and face due to an error in personal judgment or behavior. Gross and Stone (1964) argue that embarrassment occurs when one of three essential aspects of face—identity, poise, or confidence—is disrupted by the social interaction. Weinberg (1968) suggests that these aspects have two dimensions. These dimensions identify the intended-unintended nature of one's act and the appropriateness-inappropriateness of one's behavior. Together these dimensions describe four basic types of embarrassing behavior, any one of which can disrupt the personal-social interaction script.

The situational self-esteem and negative social evaluation perspectives both argue that embarrassment results from an act or behavior that is observed and has the potential to be negatively evaluated by others. The situational self-esteem perspective suggests that this results from a temporary loss of self-esteem and that this loss leads one to judge oneself badly. The resulting private disapproval of a publicly observed act produces embarrassment (Modigliani, 1971). Sattler (1965) agrees, indicating that people are embarrassed when their competence for interacting with social grace, their propriety for maintaining appropriate dress and social relations, or their social conspicuousness produce undesired attention is publicly challenged (Sattler, 1965). This public challenge threatens one's self presentation and situational self esteem, creates private disapproval, and produces embarrassment. Alternately, the negative social evaluation perspective traces the source of embarrassment back to child-rearing practices and suggests that embarrassment provides a punishment for social mistakes (Edelman, 1981). Through its experience we learn self control, modesty, manners, and privacy. Hence, embarrassment represents a concern for what others think of us and threat of unwanted, negative social evaluation (Buss, 1980). We often blush when embarrassed, but children don't blush in their first few years of life suggesting that blushing is developed through socialization and, by implication; embarrassment is a socially based response (Buss 1980; Edelman 1981, 1990; Edelman & Neto, 1985; Edelman, et al., 1989). From either of these perspectives embarrassment is precipitated by the threat of negative social evaluation, rather than by the awkward disruption to a personal-social interaction script.

These two conceptualizations of embarrassment, as either a response to an awkward social interaction or a concern for negative social evaluation, provide the major influences on the development of models and typologies of embarrassment. The awkward interaction model incorporates elements of the situational self-esteem perspective of Gross and Stone (1964) and Weinberg (1968), and suggests

that embarrassment results from an anxious uncertainty and loss of direction in the social interaction. When a mishap disturbs the social interaction a person becomes flustered, loses his/her social script, is unsure of what to say or do next, is unable to gracefully continue his or her interactional performance, and becomes embarrassed. Hence, embarrassment based on awkward interaction is related to one's own social interaction skills, abilities, and competence. The social evaluation model, on the other hand, incorporates elements of Sattler's (1965) and Modigliani's (1971) situational self-esteem perspective, and Buss's (1980) socialization perspective. It is related to one's concern for what others think and generally considers embarrassment a response to the anticipation of unwanted negative social evaluation.

Miller (1995, p. 317) argues that these two models "make different predictions about the dispositional correlates of susceptibility to embarrassment." In support of the awkward interaction model Edelman and McCusker (1985) found that embarrassment is negatively related to the personality characteristics of extroversion and empathy, and to personal social skills and competence. Parrott, Sabini, and Silver (1988) and Parrott and Smith (1991) provided evidence connecting embarrassment to an individual's experience of anxious uncertainty and a loss of direction in the social interaction. Miller (1995) discovered that people with poor control over their self-presentation and who lack deftness in interaction are more susceptible to embarrassment. In support of the social evaluation model, Edelman (1987) linked embarrassment to public, but not private, self-consciousness. Miller (1995) demonstrated that unwanted negative evaluation can produce embarrassment independently of awkwardness, and Miller (1987, 1992, 1995, 1996) concluded that overall the evidence supports the social evaluation model. Sabini, Siepmann, Stein, and Meyerowitz (2000, p. 232), however, argue that "the Social Evaluation model captures some, but not all, triggers of embarrassment and that the Dramaturgic [awkward interaction] model captures different triggers."

The purpose of the present study is to analyze the triggers of embarrassment by examining people's reports of embarrassing situations through the lens of two embarrassment typologies, each of which represents a different perspective. The Sharkey and Stafford (1990) typology emphasizes the role of awkward interaction. The Cupach and Metts (1994) typology suggests that embarrassment arises primarily from a concern for negative evaluation, and a lack of control over one's self presentation.

### **Typologies of Embarrassment**

#### **The Sharkey and Stafford Typology**

Sharkey and Stafford (1990) based their typology on Sattler's (1965) 38 categories, but collapsed these categories to create a more manageable six-category typology consisting of privacy violations, lack of knowledge or skill, criticism, awkward acts, image appropriateness, and violations of environment. Privacy violations include exposure of the body, clothing, or an intimate act; the invasion of space or property; and the revealing of private or secret information. Lack of knowledge or skill includes forgetfulness, lack of skill that is role specific and that which is not associated with a particular role. Criticism includes criticism or rejection, praise or flattery, teasing, and being made the center of attention. Awkward acts are situationally improper acts; ungraceful, clumsy, or awkward acts; expressions of emotions, inappropriate or intimate talk; and verbal blunders. Appropriate image expresses a concern for one's body, clothing, or personal possessions. Embarrassment caused by one's environment involves external stimuli such as viewing an embarrassing movie or piece of art (Sharkey & Stafford, 1990).

#### **The Cupach and Metts Typology**

Metts and Cupach (1989) based their typology on Weinberg's (1968) intended-unintended and appropriate-inappropriate dimensions and the resulting four basic types of embarrassing situations: faux pas, accidents, mistakes, and duties. From these types Cupach and Metts (1990) developed a

typology identifying two basic embarrassment situations: the actor responsible and the observer responsible. Actor responsible situations become embarrassing when a person performs an act that is inappropriate to a level of competence congruent with social norms and expectations, inconsistent with role expectations, or out-of-sync with a social identity (Cupach & Metts, 1990). Observer responsible categories become embarrassing when one becomes the center of attention through recognition, praise, criticism, correction, or teasing; becomes unpoised by being tripped or bumped; is associated with someone who is acting inappropriately; or has personal information revealed publicly by someone else (Cupach & Metts, 1990).

Cupach and Metts (1994) proposed a typology with 12 categories of embarrassment divided into two types of predicaments: those that are self-induced or actor responsible and those that are created by others and observer responsible. Self-induced predicaments consist of accidents, mistakes, conspicuousness, inept performance, tactlessness, and deliberate rule violations. Predicaments created by others include awkward interactions, team embarrassment, individualization, caused to look unpoised, rudeness or abusiveness, falsely accused or implicated, privacy violation, and empathic embarrassment.

Although each typology includes aspects of both awkward interaction and social evaluation, each emphasizes these aspects differently. The Sharkey and Stafford (1990) typology, in general, emphasizes the role of awkward interaction. The Cupach and Metts (1994) typology suggests that, in general, embarrassment arises primarily from having poor control over one's self presentation, a concern for what others are thinking, and a concern for negative social evaluation. Together they provide an analysis tool for examining the comparative influence of awkward interaction and social evaluation on the creation of embarrassment predicaments.

The present study examines and compares the awkward interaction and social evaluation characteristics of embarrassment through the use of the Sharkey and Stafford (1990; Sharkey, 1992; Kim & Sharkey, 1995) and Cupach and Metts (Metts & Cupach, 1989; Cupach & Imahori, 1993; Cupach & Metts, 1990, 1992, 1994) typologies. This analysis uses both typologies to provide a more comprehensive examination of the triggers of embarrassment. The central research question is: What roles do awkward interaction and social evaluation play in the experience of embarrassment?

### **Method**

#### **Participants**

Responses to an embarrassment questionnaire were collected from two samples of participants. Participants in sample one were undergraduate students enrolled in the multiple sections of an introductory-level public speaking course at a northeastern university. Each class had an average of 19 students in attendance for a total sample of 207 participants.

In this first sample the number of embarrassing predicaments reported to be caused by others was relatively low. Therefore, a modified questionnaire was developed to collect additional predicaments from a second sample of participants. The participants in this second sample were asked to describe two embarrassing situations, one in which they had embarrassed themselves and another in which someone else had embarrassed them. Sample two participants were undergraduate students enrolled in the multiple introductory-level sections of a public speaking course taught at a second northeastern university. Each class in this sample had an average of 17 students in attendance for a total additional sample of 138 participants.

Of the 207 questionnaires distributed in sample one 10 incomplete questionnaires were returned. These questionnaires, which included no response to the embarrassment question, were discarded, leaving a sample size of 197. In sample two a total of 138 questionnaires were distributed. Discarding

the incomplete questionnaires left 130 useable questionnaires in sample two, for a combined total sample of 327 participants in the present study.

Of these 327 participants, 122 were female (37.3%), 204 were male (62.4%) and one person did not answer the question. Participant age ranged from 17 to 37 years. The majority of the respondents ( $n=306$ ) were between 18 and 22 years of age. Most participants were Caucasian ( $n=282$ ). Relatively few were Asian ( $n=16$ ), Native American ( $n=5$ ), African-American ( $n=4$ ), Hispanic ( $n=4$ ), or chose not to answer the race-ethnicity question ( $n=16$ ).

### **Questionnaire**

Following the work of Sharkey and Stafford (1990) the questionnaire consisted of two questions. First, participants were asked to write a detailed description of an embarrassing situation that they had experienced, and second to describe why they felt that situation was embarrassing. To avoid violating an assumption of independence of response and biasing the analysis, whenever more than one situation was reported in the first sample the response, following Sharkey and Stafford (1990), was considered uncodeable and discarded. To avoid violating the independence of response assumption in the second sample, the self-induced embarrassing situations were analyzed separately from the other-induced embarrassing situations. If a respondent gave multiple responses to either question in sample two, consistent with the procedure used in sample one, those responses were discarded. Consequently, we received one response from each of 197 respondents in the first sample and two responses from each of the 130 respondents in the second, producing a combined sample of 457 useable responses. Of these, 256 were identified as self-induced and 201 as other-induced embarrassment predicaments.

### **Procedure**

Both sample one and sample two embarrassment surveys were administered during class time. In accordance with institutional use of human subjects approval, oral and written instructions were given by the researcher and an informed consent form was distributed. After being introduced to the class, the researcher explained that she was conducting research on embarrassment and that she would distribute a questionnaire to each student. Participation was voluntary, and responses were anonymous. Participants were given 15 minutes to fill out the questionnaire and told that if they felt uncomfortable at any time while filling it out they could stop without fear of penalty. All students received the questionnaire and returned it, whether they had filled it out or not, by folding it in half and placing it in a large envelope. Once all questionnaires had been collected, the researcher thanked the students for their cooperation and gave a 20 minute instructional presentation on coping with public speaking embarrassment.

### **Data Treatment**

After the data were collected each questionnaire was numbered and prepared for coding. For each sample, two coders were trained by the researcher. Each coder received approximately 45 minutes of training specific to coding embarrassment predicaments in one of the two typologies. The researcher explained the typology in detail and provided examples. Following this explanation the coder engaged in some sample analyses which were then discussed. Next, the researcher and coder independently coded the first 10 questionnaires, compared their codings, and discussed differences until agreement was reached. Each coder then coded half of that sample's data using their assigned typology. When finished, each coder was retrained to code the same data in the other typology. The coders' categorizations provided the data used in all analyses.

The reason behind embarrassment can sometimes be difficult to identify. Directly asking the respondent why a situation is embarrassing provides a clearer articulation of that reason. As Berger (2004) argues for investigating speechlessness, self-report procedures are better suited for this task than relying on observations or coders' inferences. The why question used in the present questionnaire

facilitated the coding of responses. Intercoder reliability was checked on the entire set of coded data. Self-induced predicaments coded in the Sharkey and Stafford typology produced a kappa=.814 ( $p<.0001$ ,  $n=256$ ) and in the Cupach and Metts typology a kappa=.906 ( $p<.0001$ ,  $n=256$ ). Predicaments coded as created by others, in the Sharkey and Stafford typology produced a kappa=.796 ( $p<.0001$ ,  $n=201$ ) and in the Cupach and Metts typology a kappa=.872 ( $p<.0001$ ,  $n=201$ ). These kappas indicate reasonably good agreement among coders for both typologies.

**Results**

**Descriptive Analysis**

In the Cupach and Metts (1994) typology (Table 1), accidents ( $n=61$ ) is the most frequently reported type of self-induced embarrassment followed by conspicuousness ( $n=54$ ), mistakes ( $n=44$ ), tactlessness ( $n=42$ ), deliberate rule violations ( $n=17$ ), and inept performance ( $n=13$ ). Responses to the predicaments created by others are distributed across individualization ( $n=44$ ), caused to look unpoised ( $n=39$ ), privacy violations ( $n=29$ ), team embarrassment ( $n=23$ ), rudeness/abusiveness ( $n=22$ ), awkward interaction ( $n=15$ ), and empathic embarrassment ( $n=10$ ). No responses fall in the falsely accused or implicated category. In the Sharkey and Stafford (1990) typology (Table 2), awkward acts ( $n=152$ ) occur the most frequently, followed by privacy violations ( $n=98$ ), criticism ( $n=78$ ), lack of knowledge or skill ( $n=35$ ), and appropriate image ( $n=31$ ). Embarrassment caused by

**Table 1: Embarrassment Predicaments Coded in the Cupach and Metts (1994) Typology**

Categories	Sample One	Sample Two	Total	%
<b>Self Induced</b>				
Accidents	21	40	61	3%
Mistakes	22	22	44	0%
Conspicuousness	30	24	54	2%
Tactlessness	24	18	42	%
Inept Performance	8	5	13	%
Deliberate Rule Violation	12	5	17	%
Number of Self Induced Predicaments	117	114	231	1%
<b>Created by Others</b>				
Awkward Interaction	2	13	15	%
Team Embarrassment	5	18	23	%
Caused to Look Unpoised	29	10	39	%
Individualization	17	27	44	0%
Rudeness/Abusiveness	8	14	22	%
Falsely Accused/Implicated	0	0	0	%
Privacy Violation	4	25	29	%
Empathic Embarrassment	5	5	10	%

## 244 Embarrassment

Number of Predicaments Created by Others	80	146	<b>26</b>	0%
Uncodeable	10	34	4	0%
<b>Total Responses</b>	<b>197</b>	<b>260</b>	<b>57</b>	<b>01%</b>

\* Note: percentages do not add to 100% due to rounding error.

the environment is reported by only one person who unintentionally rented a pornographic movie for family viewing.

**Table 2: Embarrassment Predicaments Coded in the Sharkey and Stafford (1990) Typology**

Categories	Sample One		Sample Two		Combined Samples		Self and Other Induced Totals	
	Self Induced	Other Induced	Self Induced	Other Induced	Self Induced	Other Induced		
Privacy Violation	5	3	5	5	0	8	<b>98</b>	1%
Lack of Knowledge or Skill	6		4		0		<b>35</b>	%
Criticism	5	5		2	1	7	<b>78</b>	7%
Awkward Acts	5	2	3	2	18	4	<b>152</b>	3%
Appropriate Image					6	5	<b>31</b>	%
Environment							<b>1</b>	%
Uncodeable	5		5	8	0	2	<b>62</b>	4%
<b>Total</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>56</b>	<b>01</b>	<b>457</b>	<b>01%</b>

Note: percentages do not add to 100% due to rounding error.

Some embarrassing situations proved uncodable in each typology. Coders found 44 (10%) of the predicaments to be uncodeable in the Cupach and Metts typology. Some of these predicaments were considered by the coders to exhibit emotions other than embarrassment, such as shame, annoyance, or boredom, and were not coded in either typology. However, almost half (n=21) of these predicaments, uncodeable in the Cupach and Metts typology, were coded in the Sharkey and Stafford typology. On the other hand, of the 62 predicaments (14%) considered uncodeable in the Sharkey and Stafford typology, more than half (n=39) were coded in the Cupach and Metts typology.

### Comparisons

To analyze the triggers to embarrassment we compared the coding of the embarrassing situations in each of the typologies. Table 3 shows the comparisons of the predicaments coded in the Sharkey and Stafford (1990) typology compared to their coding in the Cupach and Metts (1994) typology. Although the Sharkey and Stafford typology does not divide embarrassing predicaments into self-induced and other-induced categories, making this distinction does not distort the typology's categories and allows for the present comparison of the two typologies. Table 3 shows that of the

predicaments coded in Cupach and Metts's self-induced categories (n=256) almost half are coded in Sharkey and Stafford's typology as awkward acts (n=118). Privacy violations (n=40), lack of knowledge or skill (n=30), criticism (n=21) and appropriate image (n=16) account for most of the rest. The predicaments coded in Cupach and Metts's typology as categories of embarrassment created by others (n=201) appear in Sharkey and Stafford's privacy violations (n=58), criticisms (n=57), awkward acts (n=34), appropriate image (n=15), and lack of knowledge or skill (n=5).

**Table 3: Embarrassment Predicaments Coded in Cupach and Metts (1994) by Sharkey and Stafford (1990) Typologies**

Categories	Sharkey and Stafford Typology							Total	
	Privacy Violation	Lack of Knowledge or Skill	Criticism	Awkward Acts	Appropriate Image	Environment	Uncodeable		
<b>Self-Induced</b>									
Accidents	3	0	3	54	0	0	1	<b>61</b>	
Mistakes	7	8	4	21	2	1	1	<b>44</b>	
Conspicuousness	20	2	4	18	7	0	3	<b>54</b>	
Inept Performance	1	19	5	7	3	0	7	<b>42</b>	
Tactlessness	5	1	0	7	0	0	0	<b>13</b>	
Deliberate Rule Violation	1	0	2	4	2	0	8	<b>17</b>	
Uncodeable	3	0	3	7	2	0	10	<b>25</b>	
<b>Self Totals</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>118</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>256</b>	
<b>Created by Others</b>									
Awkward Interaction	4	1	2	3	1	0	4	<b>15</b>	
Team Embarrassment	2	0	2	12	1	0	6	<b>23</b>	
Caused to Look Unpoised	11	2	10	8	4	0	4	<b>39</b>	
Individualization	7	1	24	4	5	0	3	<b>44</b>	
Rudeness / Abusiveness	4	1	13	0	3	0	1	<b>22</b>	
Falsely Accused	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	<b>0</b>	
Privacy Violation	25	0	3	0	1	0	0	<b>29</b>	
Empathic Embarrassment	5	0	0	4	0	0	1	<b>10</b>	
Uncodeable	0	0	3	3	0	0	13	<b>19</b>	
<b>Other Totals</b>	<b>58</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>57</b>	<b>34</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>201</b>	

**Chi-square Analysis**

To perform chi-square analyses we combined categories in each of the typologies. Following the procedures and conventions of Cupach and Metts (1992) we combined the self-induced categories of accidents, mistakes, and deliberate rule violation to produce an actor responsible category of idealized social self that comprises both comporment issues and rule violations. Inept performance and tactlessness combined to form accomplished role performer. Conspicuousness became idealized self-image. In the observer responsible categories of embarrassment created by others, we combined empathic, team, and privacy violations categories into an indirect involvement category. Individualization and rudeness/abusiveness formed a category of individualization identifying

predicaments that draw attention to a person through recognition, praise, criticism, correction, or teasing. Awkward interaction and caused to look unpoised create an unpoised category (Cupach & Metts, 1992). The falsely accused category received no responses and was dropped. In the Sharkey and Stafford typology the lack of knowledge or skill and the awkward acts categories were combined. Appropriate image and criticism were combined. The environment category was dropped due to a lack of responses, as it had been by Sharkey and Stafford (1990).

Table 4 shows the resulting categories and the distribution of responses within them. Of the 210 responses coded in the Cupach and Metts actor-responsible categories, the category of idealized social self (n=111) was the most frequent, followed by idealized self-image (n=51), and accomplished role performer (n=48). Of the 163 observer responsible predicaments individualization (n=62) was the most frequent, followed by indirect involvement (n=54) and unpoised (n=47). Of the 210 responses coded in the Cupach and Metts actor-responsible categories, more than half fell in the Sharkey and Stafford lack of knowledge/skill, awkward acts category (n=141), followed by privacy violations (n=37), and appropriate image and criticism (n=32). Of the 163 observer responsible predicaments image and criticism (n=69) was the most frequent, followed by privacy violations (n=58) and lack of knowledge or skill and awkward acts (n=36).

**Table 4: Embarrassment in Cupach and Metts (1992) by Sharkey and Stafford (1990) Typologies**

Categories		Sharkey and Stafford Typology				
Cupach and Metts Typology	Privacy Violations	Appropriate Image and Criticism	Lack of Knowledge/Skill, Awkward Acts	Total Frequency (%)	Row $\chi^2$ (df=2)	<i>p</i>
Actor Responsible						
<b>Idealized Social Self</b> Accidents, Mistakes, Rule Violations	11	13	87	<b>111</b> (53%)	101.42	< .005
<b>Accomplished Role Performer</b> Inept, Tactlessness	6	8	34	<b>48</b> (23%)	30.50	< .005
<b>Idealized Self Image</b> Conspicuousness	20	11	20	<b>51</b> (24%)	3.18	<i>ns</i>
<b>Self Totals</b>	<b>37</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>141</b>	<b>210</b>	108.20	< .005
<b>Column <math>\chi^2</math>, df=2</b>	8.19	.70	53.15	36.08		
<b><i>p</i></b>	<b>&lt;.025</b>	<i>ns</i>	<b>&lt;.005</b>	<b>&lt; .005</b>		
<b>Overall Actor <math>\chi^2 = 28.41</math>, <i>df</i> = 4, <i>p</i> &lt; .001</b>						
<b>Observer Responsible</b>						
<b>Indirect Involvement</b> Empathic, Team Embarrassment, Privacy Violations	32	7	15	<b>4</b> (34%)	18.11	< .005

<b>Individualization</b>						
Rudeness/Abusiveness	11	45	6	2 (39%)	43.72	< .005
<b>Unpoised</b>						
Caused to Look Unpoised, Awkward Interaction	15	17	15	7 (28%)	.16	<i>ns</i>
<b>Other Totals</b>	58	69	36	<b>63</b>	10.39	< .01
<b>Column <math>\chi^2</math>, <i>df</i>=2</b>	12.88	33.73	4.50	2.07		
<b><i>p</i></b>	< .005	< .005	<i>ns</i>	<i>ns</i>		

**Overall Observer  $\chi^2 = 18.47$ , *df* = 4, *p* < .001**

Percentages may not add to 100% due to rounding error.

This distribution of embarrassing predicaments across the Cupach and Metts and Sharkey and Stafford typologies produced significant chi-square results showing patterns in the coding of the predicaments across the actor responsible ( $\chi^2 = 28.41$ , *df* = 4, *p* < .001) and observer responsible ( $\chi^2 = 18.47$ , *df* = 4, *p* < .001) categories. These overall chi-square analyses were followed by column and row chi-square tests to show more specifically where the differences are in the table.

The results of the chi-square tests performed on the rows show that of the 111 predicaments coded in Cupach and Metts's idealized social self category, a significantly disproportionate number fall into Sharkey and Stafford's lack of knowledge or skill and awkward acts (*n*=87) category ( $\chi^2 = 101.42$ , *df* = 2, *p* < .005). The remaining idealized social self predicaments are evenly distributed between the Sharkey and Stafford categories of appropriate image and criticism (*n*=13) and privacy violations (*n*=11). Of the 48 predicaments coded in Cupach and Metts's accomplished role performer category a significantly disproportionate number are coded in Sharkey and Stafford's lack of knowledge/skill and awkward acts category (*n*=34), while the privacy violations (*n*=6), and image and criticism (*n*=8) categories each account for only a few ( $\chi^2 = 30.50$ , *df* = 2, *p* < .005). The predicaments coded in Cupach and Metts's idealized self image category (*n*=51) are more evenly distributed among Sharkey and Stafford's privacy violations (*n*=20), image and criticism (*n*=11), and lack of knowledge/skill and awkward acts (*n*=20) categories, producing a non-significant chi-square ( $\chi^2 = 3.18$ , *df* = 2, *p* = *ns*).

The observer responsible category of indirect involvement, shows a significantly disproportionate coding in privacy violations (*n*=32), followed by a lack of knowledge/skill and awkward acts (*n*=15), and image and criticism (*n*=7) ( $\chi^2 = 18.11$ , *df* = 2, *p* < .005). Individualization is disproportionately coded as image and criticism (*n*=45), followed by privacy violations (*n*=11), and lack of knowledge/skill and awkward acts (*n*=6) ( $\chi^2 = 43.72$ , *df* = 2, *p* < .005). The unpoised responses are relatively evenly distributed across Sharkey and Stafford's categories of appropriate image and criticism (*n*=17), privacy violations (*n*=15), and lack of knowledge/skill, awkward acts (*n*=15) producing a non-significant chi-square ( $\chi^2 = 0.16$ , *df* = 2, *p* = *ns*).

The chi-square column results show that Sharkey and Stafford's privacy violations are significantly disproportionate in their distribution across Cupach and Metts' actor responsible idealized self image (*n*=20) and idealized social self (*n*=11), and accomplished role performer (*n*=6) categories ( $\chi^2 = 8.19$ , *df* = 2, *p* < .025). Within the observer responsible categories, privacy violations fall in the indirect involvement (*n*=32), significantly more often than in the unpoised (*n*=15) or individualization (*n*=11) categories ( $\chi^2 = 12.88$ , *df* = 2, *p* < .005). Appropriate image and criticism appear non-significantly distributed across the actor-responsible categories of idealized social self (*n*=13), accomplished role performer (*n*=8), and idealized self image (*n*=11) ( $\chi^2 = 0.705$ , *df* = 2, *p* = *ns*); but

significantly disproportionate in distribution across the observer-responsible individualization (n=45), unpoised (n=17), and indirect involvement (n=7) categories ( $\chi^2 = 33.73$ ,  $df = 2$ ,  $p < .005$ ). Lack of knowledge/skill and awkward acts is significantly disproportionate in distribution among the actor-responsible categories of idealized social self (n=87), accomplished role performer (n=34), and idealized self image (n=20) categories ( $\chi^2 = 53.15$ ,  $df = 2$ ,  $p < .005$ ). However, lack of knowledge/skill and awkward acts is non-significantly distributed among the observer-responsible indirect involvement (n=15), individualization (n=6), and unpoised (n=15) categories ( $\chi^2 = 4.50$ ,  $df = 2$ ,  $p = ns$ ).

### Discussion

The results presented in Tables 1 and 2 suggest that both the social evaluation approach represented in the Cupach and Metts typology and the awkward interaction approach of the Sharkey and Stafford typology perform well in providing a basic set of descriptive categories of embarrassment, but that neither is comprehensive in describing all types of embarrassment. Some embarrassing situations prove uncodeable in each of the typologies that are codeable in the other, suggesting a limitation of each approach in its ability to categorize all types of embarrassment. This result supports and extends the finding of Braithwaite (1995) that the Cupach and Metts (1990) framework leaves some responses unaccounted for, and further suggests that neither the Cupach and Metts nor the Sharkey and Stafford typologies encompass all the possible experiences of embarrassment.

### Personal Expectation and Behavioral Discrepancy

However, within these typologies, the results reported in Tables 1, 2, and 3 show that in the Cupach and Metts typology accidents are the most frequently cited type of embarrassing predicament. In the Sharkey and Stafford typology awkward acts are the most frequently cited. The frequency of these categories suggests that a key element of embarrassment, as argued by Goffman (1956), is the recognition of a discrepancy between an expected presentation of self and one's actual displayed behavior. The awareness of this discrepancy between the expected and the actual behavior is a precursor to embarrassment. Using examples from the present data, predicaments coded as accidents such as slipping on ice, falling off a bar stool, farting in public, and forgetting to bring a towel to a public shower, and those coded as awkward acts such as vomiting in public, being caught breaking curfew, tripping in front of an attractive member of the opposite sex, and accidentally uttering an obscenity into a microphone at church, all involve a recognition of this discrepancy between an expected self-presentation and the actual behavior displayed.

The distribution of embarrassment predicaments in the present analysis suggests that this discrepancy between expected and actual behavior can produce both an awkward loss in the social script and an anticipated negative public evaluation. Again, using examples from the present data, Cupach and Metts's conspicuousness (finding a bad photograph of oneself published in the newspaper), mistakes (asking "who is buried in the Unknown Soldier's tomb?") and tactlessness (calling someone a "burnout" in front of one of her good friends) all suggest both an awkward interaction and an anticipated, or perceived, negative social evaluation. Sharkey and Stafford's privacy violations (being in public and finding one's zipper obviously unzipped), criticism (being ridiculed by a drunken friend at a party), and lack of knowledge (a golfer performing poorly in a championship tournament) suggest elements of both as well.

### Self-Induced Predicaments Precipitate Awkward Interaction

However, a difference appears in awkward interaction and social evaluation as the primary influence upon embarrassment when comparing self-induced actor-responsible situations and other-induced observer-responsible situations. Table 3 provides this comparison. The Sharkey and Stafford categories of awkward acts, privacy violations, and lack of skill or knowledge derive from Gross and Stone's (1964) interactional perspective that conceptualizes mishaps as disturbing one's self-definition,

identity, poise, and confidence, and leading to a flustered uncertainty and loss of a coherent interaction script. The self-induced embarrassment predicaments coded in the Sharkey and Stafford categories of awkward acts, privacy violations, and lack of knowledge or skill are closely associated with this loss of personal script and awkward interaction. The Sharkey and Stafford criticism and appropriate image categories are more closely related to Sattler's (1965) defined influences of situational self-esteem and impropriety, and to Buss's (1980) socialization perspective emphasizing a concern for negative social evaluation. Few of the Cupach and Metts self-induced embarrassment predicaments appear coded in the Sharkey and Stafford criticism and appropriate image categories ( $n=37$ ) compared to the number coded in the awkward loss of script categories ( $n=188$ ). This result suggests that for self-induced embarrassing predicaments an awkward disruption in the interactional social script appears to be the most salient influence triggering embarrassment.

The overall chi-square results of Table 4 show that in the actor-responsible categories a significantly disproportionate number of self-induced embarrassing situations are created through a perceived lack of knowledge/skill or awkward acts. On the other hand, in the observer-responsible categories of embarrassment caused by others, embarrassment is significantly more often associated with appropriate image and criticism and with privacy violations, and less often with a lack of knowledge/skill or awkward acts. Accidents, mistakes, and rule violations which threaten an actor's idealized social self are a disproportionately common type of embarrassment reported in the Cupach and Metts typology. This type of embarrassment is frequently attributed to an actor's lack of knowledge, lack of skill, and awkwardness. The significantly disproportionate pattern of responses suggests that the salient characteristic triggering embarrassment in these instances is the disruption to the personal-social interaction script and a consequent loss of situational self esteem, rather than a concern for the potential of negative social evaluation of others, as might be the case when embarrassment occurs in predicaments coded in appropriate image and criticism. The pattern of responses for the accomplished role performer's inept tactlessness shows this pattern of embarrassing predicaments that is triggered by an individual's perceived lack of knowledge/skill and awkward acts as well.

### **Negative Social Evaluation in Other-Induced Embarrassment**

Embarrassment caused by others, however, as shown in Tables 3 and 4, suggests a greater influence of perceived negative social evaluation. In the observer-responsible categories the awkward loss in personal script associated with a lack of knowledge/skill and awkward acts ( $n = 36$ ) occurred significantly less frequently than appropriate image and criticism ( $n = 69$ ). These results suggest that in the observer-responsible predicaments created by others, anticipation of a negative social evaluation becomes more salient as an important influence of embarrassment.

#### *Conceptualizing Embarrassment: The Awkward Individual and Negative Social Evaluation*

This pattern of results supports the accumulating evidence for the multidimensionality of embarrassment. Withers and Vernon (2006) found different embarrassment triggers associated with the dramaturgic and the social evaluation models of embarrassment suggesting that each model captures a distinct dimension of embarrassment. The present results support this idea of multiple dimensions of embarrassment and suggest that these dimensions are characterized, at least in part, by the actor- and observer-responsible triggers to embarrassment. Of the 210 actor-responsible embarrassment predicaments shown in Table Four, 141 are attributed to a lack of knowledge/skill and awkward acts. Only 32 fall into the image and criticism category associated with social evaluation. On the other hand, of the 163 observer-responsible predicaments only 36 are associated with awkward interaction and 69 are linked to social evaluation, suggesting more influence of awkward acts on actor-responsible embarrassment and of social evaluation on other-induced embarrassment.

These results suggest that embarrassment is best conceptualized as a multidimensional communicative process that begins with the implicit personal expectation of a consistent presentation of self, followed by an awareness of a discrepancy between the expected and perceived presentation of self which can trigger, and become apparent through, the experience of being flustered, at a loss for words, and either uncertain about how to proceed with the social script or a perception of the potential for negative social evaluation. The present data suggest that self-induced embarrassment is more often triggered by and associated with the flustered social script and awkward interaction scenario, while other-induced embarrassment is more frequently triggered by the anticipation of negative social evaluation.

This conclusion represents a slight variation from that of Sabini Garvey and Hall (2001). Sabini et al. conclude that "a person will not become embarrassed in some incident if he or she has a coherent line to play out, even if there has been a trigger. . . . Embarrassment always involves a dramaturgic failing, an inability to continue to present oneself to an audience as the person one has been taken to be" (p. 113). The present results suggest that this is true for actor-responsible predicaments, but that for observer-responsible embarrassment predicaments the expectation of negative social evaluation may become the major influence in curtailing one's ability "to present oneself to an audience as the person one has been taken to be." The sense of a dramaturgic failing may still be present, but the expectation of negative social evaluation should not be ignored or overlooked as a major disruption in this presentation of self. As Sharkey, Park, and Kim (2004) and Cupach and Metts (1990) argue, people often feel embarrassed because their behavior is not in accord with values, attitudes, and conduct they would like others to believe are characteristic of them.

This multidimensional conception of embarrassment helps explain Berger's (2004) findings that embarrassment is associated with voluntary speechlessness when a participant feels verbally incompetent and unable to find the appropriate words to express an intention in a problematic social situation but that embarrassment is not associated with involuntary speechlessness due to violated expectations, extreme emotions, intense behavior of the other, or verbal exhaustion. The actor-responsible nature of voluntary speechlessness precipitates embarrassment. Involuntary speechlessness, however, does not stimulate that same trigger. Braithwaite's (1995) study of women embarrassing men in the context of baby showers suggests that the embarrassing predicaments observed in that context are triggered by negative social evaluation and are relatively short-lived. Braithwaite reports that the men appear embarrassed, but not embarrassed enough to engage in pro-active face-saving strategies. She argues that considering embarrassment within the context in which it occurs shows that all embarrassment is not the same and not equally intense. The impetus for the embarrassment makes a difference. Embarrassment induced by perceived negative social evaluation may dissipate differently over time, taking on a different experience as it does. Embarrassment triggered by an awkward social interaction due to a lapse for which one perceives oneself responsible may take on a different importance, may be more difficult to get over, and may be responded to differently by the individual. For example, Verbeke and Bagozzi's (2002) study conceptualizes embarrassment as a self-conscious emotion occurring among salespeople within the context of the sales encounter. The participating salespeople describe it as an internal sense of feeling stupid, blushing, and falling silent. With this type of embarrassment a salesperson engages in protective and avoidant behaviors that negatively impact sales performance, reducing both the sales volume and the quality of the sales interaction. In contrast, Meyer and Rothenberg (2004) found that embarrassment perceived by their respondents as self-generated, actor-responsible in nature, stimulated participants to engage in pro-active relational repair strategies, including apologies and excuses, in response to the embarrassment of having sent a regretted message.

Each of these studies suggests different communication responses to embarrassment that can be interpreted and explained within the framework of conceptualizing embarrassment as different when it is self generated than when it is other induced. The experience of embarrassment triggered by a disruption in the social interaction due to a loss in the personal-social script for which the actor feels responsible appears to be a different experience, and to precipitate a different set of responses, than embarrassment for which others are perceived to be responsible and which is triggered by a concern for being negatively evaluated by others. Embarrassment associated with actor-responsible predicaments is created by a personal expectation and a perceived discrepancy in behavior from that expectation, followed by an awkward interaction and a feeling of being verbally incompetent, and results in a flustered loss of personal-social interaction script that is associated with the communication face-saving strategies of apologies and excuses. Other-responsible embarrassment predicaments are associated with a sense of feeling stupid, socially inadequate, uncertain, and anxious; are susceptible to the negative social evaluation of others; and predict the use of protective and avoidant communication face-saving strategies.

### **Conclusions**

Embarrassment is a dynamic personal-social communication experience involving triggers, internal processes, and communication face-saving strategies. The present results suggest that the experience of embarrassment is differently influenced according to whether the predicament is perceived as self-induced by one's own inabilities and inarticulate scripts or other-induced and associated with the potential for negative social evaluation. Awkward interaction is the most frequent activator of embarrassment in predicaments for which the actor is perceived to be responsible. Anticipated negative social evaluation appears influential in producing embarrassment in other-induced, observer-responsible predicaments. Both actor-responsible and observer-responsible predicaments are called embarrassment, but the experience associated with each appears to be somewhat different. One experience is an actor's personal sense of a lack of knowledge, skill, and awkwardness; the other shows a concern for the other, for one's public image, and for potential social criticism. These two influences likely interact, affect each other, and combine to create an ongoing and escalating experience of embarrassment but, depending upon the primary influence, the consequent communication response differs from a pro-active communication response to a socially avoidant one. Embarrassment, as conceptualized here, is a multi-dimensional communication experience with multiple triggers and multiple communication responses associated with those triggers. The present results suggest that there are at least two dimensions characterizing different experiences: the one perceived as self induced, the other perceived as created by others. Both are called embarrassment.

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