

It's enough to make you blush

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An academic from the University of St Andrews is to delve into a series of embarrassing situations in an attempt to discover who makes us blush.

Dr Anja Eller from the School of Psychology has received funding from the Leverhulme Trust to examine the group dimensions of embarrassment, determining whether or not the company we're in makes us feel more flustered.

The three-year project aims to discover whether people experience their own and other people's embarrassment differently depending on whether they are members of their own group or another group. The team will also analyse whether fear of embarrassment may lead to people avoiding contact or intimacy with those from different groups and cultures.

Dr Anja Eller explained, "'Group' in this context can mean students of different universities, people of different nationalities, members of different sports teams, etc.

"The emotion of embarrassment is only felt in the presence of and because of an audience, even if that audience is imagined. However, the nature of the audience has been only scarcely investigated so far."

One part of the project will examine whether a series of faux pas such as muttering to oneself in an apparently empty room will elicit more embarrassment in a British person if they are surrounded by members of their own group (e.g. a British person surrounded by other British people) than if surrounded by members of a different group (e.g. a

British person surrounded by other nationalities).

The idea behind this mechanism is grounded in Social Identity Theory, which holds that when people act as group members, their worldview changes. They expect to share the same perspective and standards as fellow group members whose evaluations will be relevant to them. By contrast, there is no such common yardstick shared with those outwith their own group type ("outgroup members") and much less concern with their evaluation.

The St Andrews researchers will vary the nature and status of these "outgroups" in different studies in order to determine whether these processes can be generalised and to study other variables that might influence effects on embarrassment.

Another part of the project will examine whether people feel empathic embarrassment (i.e. feel embarrassed on behalf of another person who has made a faux pas) on behalf of members of the same group but not those outwith. When somebody has done something potentially embarrassing such as tripping or spilling a bag of groceries, people usually empathise with this person, try to make them feel better, and show social support.

Dr Eller explained, "We will investigate if the opposite process might be true when the embarrassed person is not a member of the group - particularly if they have a high-status. In this case, people might actually show joy at another's misfortune (schadenfreude) rather than empathy."

While there have been group-level analyses of empathy, anxiety, shame, guilt, and other moral, self-conscious emotions, there has been no such analysis of embarrassment.

Dr Eller continued, "Group memberships - for instance, nationality - are

crucial in social interaction. This project moves the literature forward by examining the effects of group belongingness and audience on embarrassment."

"In the realm of intergroup relations, it is arguable that fear of embarrassment may be particularly important in leading people to avoid contact and hence intimacy with those from different groups and cultures. The practical importance of embarrassment is evident when its presence or absence has important implications on intercultural contact and friendships and could determine people's behaviour in emergencies and health-related domains."

The Leverhulme Trust have offered a grant of £123,391 over three years for the project.

Provided by University of St Andrews

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