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Naked in Front of a Crowd:
How College Students Use Relational Strategies to Deal with Embarrassment

The feeling of embarrassment is a pervasive element in many people's everyday lives. Experiencing embarrassment can influence how an individual perceives themselves and their own self-worth and can dictate how an individual is understood and perceived by others. This study explores the question how college students understand their own feelings of embarrassment given different witnesses, and how they deal with and overcome such situations. This research uncovered that college students dealt with embarrassment using what I call "relational strategies." Relational strategies function to help an individual regulate their own emotions and understandings of embarrassment, but also aid the individual in amending and avoiding situations in which they may feel embarrassed. Participants engaged in three relational strategies: "avoidance strategies," "coping strategies," and "reconciliation strategies." These strategies were engaged in by all participants in a variety of situations regardless of the power dynamic between the individual and the witnesses. I suggest that these relational strategies are present in most cases of embarrassment because of the embedded nature of socialized self-regulation in the United States, and because self-regulation is not necessarily heavily influenced by power disparities. Relational strategies can heavily influence one's experience and understandings of embarrassment.

The first of these relational strategies is avoidance strategies. Avoidance strategies are preventative, external strategies in which an individual engages in certain behaviors to avoid "being seen" and experiencing embarrassing situations. The second relational strategy I call coping strategies. Coping strategies are internalized processes utilized by the individual to

overcome their feelings of embarrassment and is the most similar strategy to “emotional management.” Reconciliation strategies, the third and final relational strategy, is an external procedure through which an individual attempts to rectify the embarrassing situation through atonement and reputation management.

Reconciliation strategies are the most greatly influenced by asymmetrical power dynamics, with individuals redeeming the situation through tailored behaviors. These relational strategies differ from other sociological practices because of their intersection with emotional management and reputation management theories. Emotional management is generally defined as the ability to recognize, accept and control one’s own emotions and feelings (“Emotional Management”). Reputation management is considered to be the ability to influence or manage how an individual is perceived by others and the positive, negative, or neutral connotations attached to them (“Reputation management”). Relational strategies are not specifically reputation management strategies or emotional management strategies, but instead are a combination of the two. Through relational strategies, one partakes in various rituals to both present themselves in a desired role and engage in self-policing behaviors in order to justify and reconcile their own identities and perceptions of self. Research into relational strategies and how individuals work through embarrassment may uncover how embarrassment is socialized and what patterns of social behavior have been developed to navigate embarrassment.

UNDERSTANDING EMBARRASSMENT

The study of emotion really began with the understanding that humans aren’t driven purely by rational or economic motives, but that their personal emotional attachments to others, their desires, attitudes, values, and their beliefs also influenced individuals’ behavior (Thoits

1989:317). Embarrassment has primarily been studied in the fields of cognitive sociology, cognitive psychology, and the sociological study of emotion. Studies from these fields focusing on the role and importance of emotions found that “emotions serve a variety of functions in daily life, calling our attention to important events and motivating and directing subsequent behavior” (Tangney and Miller 1996:1256). The importance of emotions in directing subsequent behavior becomes particularly relevant in the exploration of the role and purpose of embarrassment and shame. Modigliani (1971) defined embarrassment as “a special, short-lived, but often acute, loss of self-esteem. More specifically... embarrassment reflects a loss of situational self-esteem” (pg. 16). Goffman (1956) elaborates on this definition of embarrassment explaining that in the case of the U.S. culture, feeling embarrassment or appearing embarrassed is “evidence of weakness, inferiority, low status, moral guilt, and defeat” (pg. 266). Scholars agree that embarrassment is a negative emotion, leaving the individual feeling small and insecure (Taylor 1988; Tangney and Fischer 1995).

Where embarrassment stems from is by far a more complicated debate. On one hand, there is evidence that embarrassment is to some extent biological. Turner and Stets (2006) explain that while culture may influence how an emotion is expressed, the capacity for emotions cannot be the product of emotional culture and socialization alone. Emotions appear across all human cultures, proving that there is a biological basis for the experience of emotions (pg. 46). Biology also plays a crucial role in how emotions are expressed through body language. For example, avoiding eye contact, having a heightened heart rate, playing with the hands, and sweating all physically indicate that an individual is experiencing a heightened emotion (Modigliani 1971; Goffman 1956). That being said, the cultural and social significance of the presentation of and reason for embarrassment cannot be overlooked. Scholars Ketler, Dacher and

Haidt (2010) explain that “embarrassment serves as an appeasement function, reconciling social relations following transgressions of social norms” (pg. 514). Adding to the argument that embarrassment is learned through socialization is scholars Keltner, Dacher and Buswell (1997) who argue that embarrassment serves socialized rather than biological goals. They argue that because embarrassment requires individuals to see themselves from the perspective of others, it requires a more advanced level of cognitive development, and thus emerges later in an individual’s development. This seems to suggest that embarrassment serves to reinforce socialized behaviors and is not a strictly biological behavior.

Similarly, social interactionist theory maintains that the feeling of embarrassment is most often (though not always, see Modigliani 1971) tied to a social interaction. In particular, embarrassment is most often studied and recognized as having stemmed from an unsuccessful social interaction. Gross and Stone (1964) found that “embarrassment frequently occurred in situations requiring continuous and coordinated role performance- speeches, ceremonies, processions, or working concerts” (pg. 2). They suggest that ultimately an individual must present their best self and when others do not accept that self or there is a violation of that self, embarrassment ensues. These authors go on to outline the importance of witnesses, as they write:

Embarrassment exaggerates the dimensions of social transactions, bringing them to the eye of the observer in an almost naked state. Embarrassment occurs whenever some central assumption in a transaction has been unexpectedly and unqualifiedly discredited for at least one participant...embarrassment is infectious. It may spread out, incapacitating others not previously incapacitated. (Gross and Stone 1964:2)

Thus, the feeling of embarrassment is personal, but it has the capacity to infiltrate a community of people who initially serve as witnesses to the event. It is in part because of embarrassment can be infectious that witnesses of the embarrassing moment become central to how the embarrassed individual experiences their own embarrassment.

Two types of witnesses have been deeply researched in regards to embarrassment: strangers and associates. Giordano (2003) argues that embarrassment is heightened when an individual is witnessed by strangers; “social others”— those who are not an individual’s close friends—prove to be a “tougher” audience and frequently weigh in on an individual’s “apparent social worth/identity and engender feelings of awkwardness and insecurity” (Giordano, 2003:275). Giordano (2003) goes on to explain that “social others” weigh in through direct and non-direct communication, for example approval, gossip, teasing, and ridicule (pg. 276). Bandura (1991) on the other hand, argues for the importance of relationship proximity stating, “that individual’s personal standards are shaped based on how those close to them react to their behavior, and that over time, an individual begins to judge behaviors based on the social sanctions others place on certain behaviors (pg. 253). The literature surrounding the impact of relational proximity on the experience embarrassment is divided, while some scholars believe strangers magnify embarrassment, others state that because individuals are more invested in the relationships they have with acquaintances the embarrassment is “worse” in front of them. The socialization of an individual through the reactions of their peers has been studied at length by sociologists and social psychologists.

Precisely because of the importance of peers and social interaction to the experience of embarrassment, much research has implied that the feeling of embarrassment functions as a form of self-regulation. Emler (1990) argues that reputation is a collective social phenomenon, and actors are both constantly tracking others reputations as well as attempting to uphold their own (pg. 171). In order to protect and control one’s reputation they must self-police. Hoffman (2012) defines self-regulation as revolving around three main components “(a) standards of thought, feeling, or behavior that people endorse, mentally represent, and monitor, (b) sufficient

motivation to invest effort into reducing discrepancies between actual states and standards, and (c) sufficient capacity to get there (reduce the discrepancy) in the light of obstacles and temptations along the way” (pg. 3). Hofmann (2012) goes on to explain that crucial to self-regulation is refraining from bad habits and bad impulses, and failing to abstain implies that the individual is either not motivated or incapable of meeting societies standards (pg. 8). Gecas (1989) makes a similar argument, but highlights that self-evaluation is a direct reflection of how well an individual is able to control or manipulate the larger social environment, and failing to manipulate the environment correctly signifies issues of personal control and competence (pg. 309-10). Ultimately, the individual must present the right image to the environment and protect their reputation, but the proper presentation of self is dictated by the social environment an individual finds themselves in.

Macrosocial literature emphasizes this connection between the self and the social environment. Specifically, how “self-structures and internalized meanings organize social life, and how we import cultural meanings and shape them within the context of situated interaction (Owens, Robinson, Smith-Lovin, 2010:495). Bandura (1991) expresses the importance of self-regulation on the development of the self, stating, “people can gain understanding of how their thinking affects their emotional states, level of motivation, and performance. Self-knowledge provides direction for self-regulatory control” (pg. 251). Gordon (1976) adds to Bandura’s argument, emphasizing that social roles are basic to the structures of both society and the self, and it is through the performance of these roles that people become connected to their culture and others (pg. 405). Through a presentation of self an individual is proving that they have mastered their social role. For example, a medical student must learn to behave like a doctor, otherwise failing to produce the proper impression is understood as a personal fault (Fine

1989:249). The self acting upon itself has attracted the attention of a great deal of sociologists and social interactionists. Foucault wrote about the relationship of the self to itself as a form of power and social control. In this thought process, the self is always being acted upon by the individual, a constant project, projecting the “correct” image (Lawler 2008; Anthony et. al. 2017). Fine (1989) echoes this in his own work, arguing that people must be processed into their social role in order to adopt it. Individuals are socialized to meet certain standards and failing to do so can result in negative emotions and status (pg. 249).

In short, the role and importance of embarrassment to the presentation of the self has attracted the curiosity of many scholars. Much of the literature around embarrassment does well to explain the importance of socialization, environment, and social role. What is lacking from the literature is distinctions and implications of power, and how individuals experience embarrassment differently depending on their social position in the situation, and the relational proximity they have to the witnesses. My research contributes the concept of relational strategies. Relational strategies outline the methods through which and individual regulates their own internal emotional processes and help the individual relate to the external world as they avoid and rectify situations of embarrassment.

METHODS

This study was conducted using semi-structured interviews with the participation of six Goucher College students. The participant pool was pulled from the freshman, sophomore, and senior classes with the interviewees ranging in age from 18-22. The participants were evenly divided with three male- and three female-identifying participants. These interviewees were pulled from a convenience sample. A convenience sample was the most logical choice because

embarrassment is a negative emotion and having established rapport with my participants aided the fluidity of the interview and contributed to the overall comfort and openness of the participants.

The interview questioned individuals' experiences of feeling embarrassed. Questions asked the individuals to compare and quantify their experiences of embarrassment in front of strangers vs. peers and friends vs. authority figures. Participants were asked how they coped or reconciled their feelings of embarrassment given different audiences, and if and how they went about avoiding embarrassment.

Each individual interview was held in a private and quiet place of the interviewee's choosing and was audio-recorded. The average length of the interviews was 47 minutes. Following the interview process, each audio recording was transcribed then deleted. All participants were given pseudonyms during transcription. The transcriptions were then coded for larger themes. Coping strategies were labelled "C. Strat," avoidance strategies labelled "A. Strat," and reconciliation strategies labelled "R. Strat." Following the coding process, relevant information was divided into themes and discussed in the findings section.

FINDINGS: REATIONAL STRATEGIES FOR REGULATION

AVOIDANCE STRATEGIES

Avoidance Strategies are present in an individual's day-to-day behaviors, and despite being embedded in the regulation of the self and clandestine in nature, the participants in this study were aware that they were engaging in them and understood why. Nearly all participants commented on using various strategies to not attract attention. Avoidance strategies are ways of regulating how an individual is perceived and prevent the individual from attracting the attention

of others at all. There are two primary categories of avoidance strategies: assimilation and preparedness. The fear of being seen is what many participants attributed as the reason for engaging in avoidance strategies.

Many of the participants ascribed being seen to being judged and thought about later. By commenting on being seen, both Beka and Peter are citing that they stand out: assimilation strategies aide participants in blending in and avoiding attention, while preparedness strategies ensure they don't receive negative attention. Beka, a freshman expressed that attracting the attention of others made her embarrassed.

when I'm participating [in class], I'm afraid people are looking at me and look at me. They're like, 'what a bum' ... I'm embarrassed about everything, everything... I'm, I'm afraid they're gonna think about me. Oh my God. That's my worst fear. One of my worst fears is that they're going to not to be so self-centered and that they're going to, it's going to be later on- they're going to be studying- and be like 'I remember that bitch from my class.' It's so terrible. It's bad. It's bad. Cause I'm thinking like I don't want anybody thinking about me really in terms of like, 'she really screwed the pooch'.

In this scenario Beka is explaining that she equates being seen with being judged, and worse, reflected on later. In Beka's recounting, she is emphasizing that the attention of her peers is negative, despite saying that she herself tries to ignore others' embarrassment to let them off the hook so to speak, but she doesn't believe others afford her the same benefit. Peter also reflects on wanting to avoid the attention of others, though he recognizes that people are rarely paying attention. Peter when describing a hypothetical situation in which he tripped on the street said "but nine times out of ten, especially in a city, people do not care. Like .you're trying to get home" Despite recognizing that people aren't paying attention to him, a point Beka makes as well by referring to her classmates as "not being so self-centered and remembering..." Peter expressed that "it's easy to get hit with that spotlight effect where you slip up and you think everyone is watching." While Peter does not emphasize or recount any fear of what others think

about him or damage to his reputation, he instead accounts that for him, feeling embarrassed makes him feel as if people are watching, regardless of the fact that he knows they aren't.

In order to avoid the attention of their peers, participants engaged in either preparedness or assimilation avoidance strategies. By engaging in avoidance strategies, participants were influencing how they related to the outside world and social interactions, making avoidance strategies the only premeditated form of relational strategies.

Preparedness

Preparedness strategies were the most common form of strategy when discussing avoiding embarrassment. Stafford for example expressed that he felt less embarrassment when giving a classroom presentation, because he had had more time to prepare and had prepared gathering background knowledge and research, he believed he had more authority and confidence. Peter expressed similar situations and preparation techniques to Stafford emphasizing, knowing what needs to get done and how to do it correctly. Beka and Patience prepared very differently than Stafford and Peter but had similar routines to each other when it came to avoiding embarrassment. Both Patience and Beka expressed being anxious and that being prepared allowed them to minimize their feelings of embarrassment. Beka outlined that in order to prepare for an event, she prefers to be notified 2- 4 weeks in advance, and if she is has to engage in a dialogue, she'd prefer time to draft her statement. Also, in terms of event preparation both Patience and Beka emphasized the importance of having an escape plan, both often planned to be picked up from an event at a specific time, and used homework as an excuse to minimize the length of events. Before heading to the mall or a restaurant, both individuals explained that they check their bank accounts online, often pulled out cash, and in many cases calculated the tip and tax of their purchases before buying them. Patience and Beka expressed wanting to avoid the

embarrassment of being unable to pay. Being unable to pay is would reflect poorly on them, they would appear unprepared, of low financial means, or as trying to manipulate or take advantage of the business. Besides prepping for the logistics of events, Patience and Beka both explained that they always carry certain items with them,, a “survival kit,” as Patience described it. Their “survival kits” ensured that Patience and Beka would not be caught without having an item they needed, thus they could avoid having to ask someone for something or have to alter the plan to accommodate an unforeseen situation. Their survival kits included items such as fully charged cell phones, headphones, lotion, Chapstick, and water. These items, as well as having set boundaries and expectations allowed for Patience and Beka to feel prepared for any situation, and to a certain extent provided them a sense of control. Based on my research, avoidance strategies were a common method through with individuals were able to allot themselves some power over how and if others saw them.

Assimilation

Assimilation strategies, the second kind of avoidance strategy, attempts to prevent the individual from being noticed. The two main ways individuals engaged in assimilation was through their dress and through their speech. Beth was very straightforward about dressing a certain way in order to avoid attention, stating that one of her avoidance techniques was her “big clothes ‘cause I feel like my body sometimes it's like laughable matter...so, I always try to cover up ... so nobody will notice me. I could just blend in. That's what I do. I'm under the radar.” By dressing in oversized clothes, Beth is not drawing attention to herself, and feels that she becomes less noticeable. Patience also expressed her dress was another avoidance technique. Patience said, “being somewhat out of uniform” had often made her embarrassed “I don’t look the norm or like having a uniform that’s not the correct uniform... like, oh my gosh, I’m going to get

called out.” Making sure that they were dressed appropriately limited the amount of attention they were going to receive, and in turn limited the likelihood of feeling embarrassed.

Interestingly enough, being worried about how they were dressed was more prominent in the responses of my female participants than in the male’s responses. Beka, explained that how she was dressed gave her confidence to “leave her lane” knowing that she was making a good impression and minimizing her embarrassment after the fact knowing that “at least I was dressed, I was lookin’ good.” Only one of my male participants commented on how he was dressed, but in John’s case he was embarrassed that he had spilled on himself and that it looked like a bodily incident more so than the actual clothes he was wearing.

A similar but more common assimilation avoidance strategy was controlling if and how much the individual spoke. Beka is required to participate in her classes but has created a two-strike rule for herself. On Beka’s two strike rule, “It’s like a strike, two strikes and I’m not going to participate for the rest of the class”. Beka regulates the amount of attention she receives by interjecting only the bare minimum. By controlling her participation, she feels she is able to avoid the attention of her peers, attention that she believes would be negative. John also avoids speaking in order to control the attention he receives. Instead of having a two-strike rule like Beka, John instead expressed that in various audiences he refuses to talk all together. When asked how he avoids embarrassment John said “I don’t speak because I have not, um... I sometimes try to think... maybe I shouldn’t say anything because it’s not going to lead to anything good.” John believes that his verbal contribution is not worth the potential risk of embarrassment, so in certain situations he will not participate. While Beka and John discuss not talking as an avoidance strategy, they both discuss it in terms of avoiding attention, and thus blending into the background. By controlling their contributions, they successfully influence how

they will be perceived by others and limit their likelihood of becoming embarrassed. This being said, it would be nearly impossible to always avoid embarrassment, and for that reason all of my participants had developed internal coping strategies.

COPING STRATEGIES

Coping strategies are the most internalized management strategy, and they aid individuals as they overcome and process feelings of embarrassment. Unlike the other strategies outlined in this paper, coping strategies are strictly for the benefit of the embarrassed individual and do not influence the social interaction. However, coping strategies are still grounded in relational strategies because they influence how an individual relates to their own embarrassment and situates it within the larger scheme of things. A variety of coping strategies were outlined by my participants including participating in self-care, owning it, deflecting, distracting themselves and others, talking it out, physically leaving the space, and using and internalizing a variety of mantras. However, by far the most popular form of coping was contextualizing the situation within a larger context. Contextualization highlights the importance of one's behavior in relation to others, making it a crucial element of relational strategies.

Contextualization as a strategy revolved around contextualizing one's own situation in order to minimize one's own embarrassment. There were two main ways to contextualize one's experience: by comparing one's embarrassment in relation to other's embarrassment, and by situating one's own embarrassment in the "bigger picture" of life.

Beka most clearly summarized the first strategy of contextualization (comparing her own embarrassment to others) with two separate statements. While describing a class she is in where she often does not feel embarrassed, she said "you can't afford to be a smart ass in language class and almost everybody [is] fucking up in here like nobody, there's nobody on a high horse in

there”. Because Beka feels equal to her peers- they are all struggling- she experiences embarrassment less often, they’re all on an equal playing field and they’re all feeling embarrassed. Contextualizing her mistake in terms of her peers’ mistakes again, Beka discussed how she may mess up in class, but then someone else in the class would “fuck all the way up,” and she’d think- “that poor person, I don’t know where you got that from,” but she’d know she had no longer made the worst mistake and the attention would no longer be on her. For Beka, having not done the worst in the class or being in a situation where everyone is experiencing the same or more exposure to embarrassment than she is allows her to cut herself a break, feel less embarrassed and feel reassured that the attention isn’t on her. Contextualizing one’s behavior in terms of others was also very common. Patience and John both cited mantras that reinforced this, John said “[embarrassment] it happens to everyone,” while Patience used sayings like “everyone gets embarrassed, it happens” and “they don’t know the answers either” to contextualize her feelings.

While contextualizing your behaviors based on others was common, Stafford and others also contextualized their embarrassment in the “bigger picture” of life. Stafford explained it like this;

“[I], sort of look at the bigger picture, I guess... you get bogged down in the details, you can't really see where you're going. But if you take a step back and you look at the overall trajectory, then you can understand what that specific part has in the grand scheme of things... I had the underlying realization of that and whatever these people think of me, it's not the law. It's not set in stone.”

In Stafford’s case, he isn’t contextualizing his behavior in other people’s mistakes, but instead the greater scheme of things. He believes that because it is just a small blip in the overall picture, he doesn’t need to invest too much energy in it, and because his self-image is less impacted by the opinions of others, he is okay with them judging him perhaps harshly. He contextualizes both other’s opinions of him and the embarrassing moment into a larger fabric, and by doing so

minimizes the impact of the people and the event on himself. While Stafford went into the most depth, Beka and Patience also used this strategy in their mantras. Patience said “it [embarrassment] doesn’t really mean anything, I’m here and like I’m good,” “I really don’t care,” and “what happened happened” to situate her feelings of embarrassment and reassure herself that it wasn’t the end of the world, and that there was nothing to be done. This mentality that “what happened happened” was also present in Beka’s interview where she reported that one of her personal mantras for letting go of embarrassment was “there’s literally nothing you can do to change it.” By looking outward participants were able to minimize and let go their feelings of embarrassment, which is the ultimate goal of coping strategies.

Coping strategies took on a variety of forms in the interviews, but they appeared pervasive and deeply embedded in personal understanding of what embarrassment is and how an individual could handle it. While there were a multitude of coping strategies discussed, from deflection, to ownership, to laughing it off, to taking time for self-care, one of the most prominent and interesting forms of coping was contextualizing. Contextualization happened two primary ways, comparing their behavior and experience of embarrassment to others, and to looking at the greater scheme of things. While coping strategies benefit the individual and contextualize their own embarrassment, they do not address how others view the individual’s embarrassment. In order for others to rectify a social situation with witnesses, they had to engage in reconciliation strategies.

RECONCILIATION STRATEGIES

Reconciliation strategies are external strategies that don’t attempt to resolve any emotional distress, but instead are procedures through which an individual may attempt to amend a social situation that has been impacted by embarrassment. Reconciliation strategies are the most

dependent strategy on the witnesses of the embarrassment and their relationship to the individual, thus reconciliation strategies are the final form of relational strategies. In trying to bond a social relationship individuals must engage in an action or verbal dialogue with those they offended. Unlike coping strategies, none of my participants discussed reconciliation strategies as ways they made themselves feel better, they were discussed more in terms of a process through which an individual atoned and repaired their reputation or in Goffman's (1956) terms "saved face." Not all embarrassing social interactions required an individual to rectify it, in discussions both of strangers and with friends, participants either didn't use or used more casual reconciliation strategies. With authority figures or people the participant held in high esteem, individuals were clearer about how they went about repairing the situation and often used more formal reconciliation strategies (like apologizing).

Overall, most of my participants expressed that they did not do anything about rectifying a social blunder in front of strangers. Beth was asked about how she conceptualized feeling embarrassed in front of different audiences. She reported that she cared the least amount about strangers; in her words "let's say I trip in front of like random strangers. I don't care 'cause like I'm not going to see you again." Because Beth does not have to face the strangers who watched her trip, she doesn't feel embarrassed in front of them. The strangers are not reoccurring characters in her life, and she feels that the reputation they assign to her will not have any lasting impact on the rest of her life. Stafford had a similar response to Beth but conceptualized it further; instead of just discussing how he felt about strangers, he hypothesized about what strangers felt about him: "there's no give with a stranger, so their opinion is harsher, but they know less about you so it's less personal, and I care less." Stafford contextualizes and compares the way strangers relate to him to how other audiences who are more familiar with him relate. He

argues that the more experiences an individual has with him, the less judgmental they will be because they have more evidence on which to judge or vouch for his reputation. Because strangers lack the same exposure to who he is, he believes they will be more critical, but going back to the same point Beth made, strangers are not an important audience in his life, he isn't trying to impress or maintain them, and if they judge him harshly he can brush it off and move on. Though strangers are considered too fringe for many of my participants to feel the need to mitigate strangers' opinions, most participants did comment on the importance of reconciliation strategies with their friends or an authority figure.

Friends were the middle ground between strangers and authority figures. While all my participants claimed to have felt embarrassed in front of their friends, they all discussed that they knew their friends were still there for them and that it was less of a disruption to the social order. The most popular strategies for dealing with feelings of embarrassment in front of their friends were rather *laissez faire*, revolving primarily around laughing it off, or talking it out. While laughing it off is also a common coping strategy, in friend situations, the group process of acknowledging it and making it comedic desensitized the embarrassing situation. The group was able to acknowledge it, destigmatize it and take ownership for it. In situations with his friends Peter preferred to laugh about it than to talk about it, "[with] both of my friends, we usually don't talk about it 99.9% of the time... [we're] just laughing it off and moving on." In Peter's experience, having a sense of humor about it meant his friends and him could easily joke about the situation and move on with little to no lasting impact to his reputation.

While laughing it off was the most effective method for Peter, Stafford instead discussed the importance of talking it out, finding comfort in having his friends' opinions and then moving forward as a unit. Stafford said, "talking it over with the people that you think you were

embarrassed in front of; they might say, “oh, that was nothing, we all do that” and that might help you... and then you’re sort of like, oh, okay, nothing's wrong.” For Stafford having a conversation about his embarrassment allowed him to repent for his mistake and receive from others present forgiveness and acceptance which allowed him to move forward in his interactions with them. By his friends giving him verbal conformation that he was okay, he knew his reputation was still intact. While these strategies were by far the most common, there was one case in which a participant enacted revenge in order to regain her reputation. After being left behind at a park by her friends, Beth pretended to forgive her friends and went on with her day-to-day; however, when it was her friend’s birthday party, Beth refused to go and claimed it was because she had been left at the park weeks before. While she did eventually feel guilty for having upset her friend and acting maliciously, she admitted that at first she felt more confident, having righted the wrongs against her and having “punished” her friend for embarrassing her, and leveling the social field. Beth was the only participant to reflect on a reconciliation strategy that was this negative, though it is an interesting example of how reconciliation strategies do not have to revolve around appeasing the other parties, but may instead attempt to knock others down and re-establish the social hierarchy. In situations where participants felt embarrassed in front of an authority figure, the social playing field was already asymmetric. In these cases participants used the most concise and traditional strategies.

There were two main reconciliation strategies utilized by participants in which an authority figure was present for the embarrassment. These strategies were: an immediate apology and doing better next time. Immediate apologies were something the majority of individual’s discussed as an option, though few reported having actually apologized to anyone. Peter was the only participant to talk about apologizing as an important step stating, “you can always

apologize. I think apologizing is the first step, but actions speak louder than words.” Peter emphasized an apology, calling it the first step but even he alluded to the same theme the majority of the interviewees did: doing better next time. By emphasizing that “actions speak louder than words,” he is making the point that others made, to avoid embarrassment and regain one’s reputation one needs to stop making the same mistakes. John very briefly stated that when asked how he reconciles embarrassment in front of a professor: “I’ll try to improve, I’ll try to improve.” Similarly, Peter also stated, “I just like finding a way to correct my mistakes and improve,” and “I want to do, I want to improve, I want to do better from where I currently am.” In these cases, as well as with Stafford and Beth, an action-oriented strategy was the most popular choice. It allowed participants to regain their social standing and prove themselves, but did not require the participant to fully acknowledge and take responsibility for their actions. It also was the best strategy for avoiding similar situations in the future; if participants changed their behavior they would not be in this situation again.

Ultimately the goal of reconciliation strategies is reputation and social interaction management. These strategies allow individuals to regain their social footing and rectify an otherwise unsuccessful social interaction. Reconciliation strategies do depend largely on who was there to witness the incident. The majority of participants reported not engaging in reconciliation strategies with strangers, because they were not important opinions. With friends participants used casual reconciliation strategies like talking it out or laughing about it. Authority figures were the most concrete examples of reconciliations with individuals apologizing and or changing their behavior immediately.

CONCLUSION

This paper has shown that when dealing with embarrassment, college students engage in a number of relational strategies to avoid, cope, and reconcile embarrassment internally and in the larger social world. Avoidance strategies, the most popular being categorized into either preparedness or assimilation strategies, were a common premeditated form of relational strategy. Participants attempted to be as prepared as possible or to attract as little attention as possible in order to avoid feeling embarrassment. Because avoidance strategies cannot always work, when participants did become embarrassed they engaged in coping strategies to soothe their internal feelings of disruption, and used reconciliation strategies to amend their relationships and reputation with others. Coping strategies took on a variety of forms though the most foundational was contextualization. The coping strategy of contextualization is a crucial element of relational strategies not only because they aid the individual in their own relationship with their feelings, but contextualize their situation in a larger scheme of relationships and experiences allowing the individual to minimize their own impact or embarrassment. Reconciliation strategies were the final form of relational strategies and largely depended on who witnessed the situation. With strangers, participants had little to no desire to rectify the situation, but with their friends, individuals used casual coping strategies such as laughing it off or talking about it. In front of authority figures however, participants used formal reconciliation strategies relying largely on apologizing and changing their behavior.

The concept of relational strategies may shape and inform our understandings of how individuals interpret their feelings of embarrassment and image of self. Based on how and when individuals utilize relational strategies, we may further answer the question of how embarrassment is impacted based on the relational proximity, and further explore this divide in the literature about witnesses' influence over embarrassment. Relational strategies may also be

key in further understanding how embarrassment is socialized and whether or not embarrassment functions as a self-regulatory and self-policing strategy. Further study into relational strategies may want to focus on the impacts of age, gender, and race on the use and adaptation of relational strategies. Through further explorations into this area of study, patterns of societal influence and cultural emphasis may emerge. These emerging patterns may explore whether embarrassment is gendered or racially framed. It may also speak to how social positioning and power dynamics impact an individual's experiences of embarrassment – what makes varying individuals embarrassed and how they were taught to overcome it. The concept of relational strategies offers a new lens through which to explore the socialization and relational elements of embarrassment.

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