

# **On the Nature of Embarrassability: Shyness, Social Evaluation, and Social Skill**

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**ABSTRACT** In this study, the correlates of embarrassability, or chronic susceptibility to embarrassment, were examined. Competing theoretical models suggest either that embarrassed people should be especially concerned about others' evaluations of them or that they should lack social skills. Further, shyness and embarrassment are typically considered to be closely related states. To test these propositions, 310 participants provided extensive self-reports of social skill, fear of negative evaluation, self-esteem, self-consciousness, and negative affectivity. Regression and factor analyses indicated that, compared to those of low embarrassability, highly embarrassed people are particularly concerned with the normative appropriateness of behavior and are more motivated to avoid rejection from others. In contrast, shyness was best predicted by low social self-confidence and low social skill. The data best support a social-evaluation model of embarrassment and argue that embarrassability is linked to the appropriateness of social behavior, and shyness to its effectiveness.

Almost everyone is susceptible to embarrassment, the aversive state of abashment and chagrin that is associated with unwanted social pre-

I am indebted and grateful to Nancy Kerschenbaum, whose tireless assistance made this project possible. This study was supported by Sam Houston State University Faculty Research funds and was prepared for publication while the author was on a developmental leave from Sam Houston, enjoying the kind hospitality of Texas A&M University. Portions of these data were presented at the meeting of the American Psychological Association in San Francisco, August 1991. Correspondence concerning this manuscript should be addressed to Rowland Miller, Division of Psychology and Philosophy, Sam Houston State University, Huntsville, TX 77341-2447. Electronic mail: psy\_rsm@shsu.edu.

*Journal of Personality* 63:2, June 1995. Copyright © 1995 by Duke University Press.  
CCC 0022-3506/95/\$1.50

dicaments. Embarrassment is readily recognizable, both through characteristic nonverbal behavior (Asendorpf, 1990; Edelmann, 1990) and by physiological changes (Drummond, 1989; Leary, Rejeski, Britt, & Smith, 1994), and can routinely be observed in children 5 years of age (Buss, Iscoe, & Buss, 1979). It occurs around the world, in both Western and Eastern cultures (Edelmann, 1990). Indeed, experience with embarrassment is so customary that "we might think that a person who is never embarrassed . . . is lacking some important human quality, is insensitive, thoughtless, or uncaring" (Crozier, 1990, p. 7).

### Competing Theories

Despite its ubiquity, however, the key causes of embarrassment are uncertain. Some theorists suggest that it results when public events cause individuals to regret the impressions they are currently making before an audience (Edelmann, 1987; Miller, 1992; Schlenker, 1980). This *social-evaluation* perspective holds that one's apprehension of unwanted judgments from others causes the physical and psychological arousal that is recognized as embarrassment. Typically, embarrassment follows acute failures of self-presentation that cause an actor to believe that others are gaining undesired impressions of him or her.

This point of view easily explains why embarrassment is a uniquely social emotion that depends on the presence of real or imagined others (Edelmann, 1994). Further, because most people ordinarily wish to make favorable impressions on others, the social-evaluative perspective also fits the sociological premise that embarrassment is inculcated in young people as an agent of social control (Buss, 1980; Kemper, 1990; Shott, 1979); as Gibbons (1990) notes, "[F]ear of embarrassment helps bring behavior in line with certain accepted social rules. . . . [W]ithout its impact, there would be social anarchy" (p. 138). As a signal of the threat of social rejection, social-evaluative embarrassment presumably plays a key role in socialization and self-regulation (Miller & Leary, 1992).

In contrast, other theorists argue that maladroit interaction, and not a concern over social evaluation, is the only necessary antecedent of embarrassment (Parrott, Sabini, & Silver, 1988; Parrott & Smith, 1991; Silver, Sabini, & Parrott, 1987). This *dramaturgic* model holds that embarrassment occurs when events disrupt the script of an encounter, leaving participants without a coherent role. The resulting uncertainty and indecisiveness about how to proceed is thought to cause the un-

comfortable arousal of embarrassment, no matter what others are presumed to be thinking. This model readily explains why embarrassments seem so awkward (Parrott & Smith, 1991), and fits the wide variety of circumstances known to cause embarrassment about as well as the social-evaluation perspective (Miller, 1992).

Differentiating between these two perspectives is no easy task, in part because awkward uncertainty and concerns over social evaluation are both characteristic of prototypical embarrassment (Parrott & Smith, 1991). However, the two models appear to make different predictions about the dispositional correlates of susceptibility to embarrassment. If the dramaturgic perspective is correct, one's social skill should be substantially related to one's embarrassability; not only should skillful people artfully foresee and avoid impending predicaments, their adroit adeptness should enable them to minimize and more easily overcome any difficulties that do occur. People with low social skills should more often blunder into embarrassing circumstances. As Buss (1980) surmised:

[P]eople who are socially clumsy tend to blurt out statements that should not be said, to call people by wrong names, to lack poise and polish in their interactions with others. Lacking social skills, they repeatedly make the small mistakes that cause them to feel foolish, silly, uncomfortable—in a word, embarrassed. (p. 141)

On the other hand, if a social-evaluation model is correct, embarrassability should be more highly related to one's concern about what others are thinking. Unexpected, uncontrollable happenstance may often thrust people into embarrassing circumstances, no matter how skilled they are; on such occasions, people's chronic concerns about others' judgments of them may have the predominant impact on resultant embarrassment. In particular, the social-evaluation perspective would predict that people with a high fear of negative social evaluation are especially embarrassable regardless of their social skill.

Existing data bearing on these two possibilities are rather sparse. Although Modigliani created a useful Embarrassability Scale in 1968, only a handful of studies have examined individual differences in susceptibility to embarrassment. Edelman (1985) found that embarrassability was related to public, but not to private, self-consciousness; people who were typically conscious of others' reactions to them suffered stronger embarrassments, a finding consistent with the social-evaluation model. However, Edelman and McCusker (1986) later found that embarrass-

ability was moderately negatively related to both extraversion and empathy; because gregarious sociability and empathic sensitivity are both related to social skill, these patterns seem consistent with a dramaturgic approach. More recently, Leary and Meadows (1991) showed that both embarrassability and a propensity for blushing are closely related to chronic fear of negative social evaluation. People who typically dread disapproval from others tend to react more strongly to social predicaments when they occur, just as the social-evaluation model predicts. The existing evidence thus fits a social-evaluation perspective, but provides some support for the dramaturgic approach as well. This study therefore sought to arrange a clearer test of whether social skill or social evaluation is the better predictor of embarrassability.

### Other Social Anxieties

Both factors may be involved. Susceptibility to embarrassment is also highly related to general social anxiety, or unease at the prospect of evaluations from others (Leary, 1991), and socially anxious people often exhibit both behavioral and cognitive deficiencies (Cheek & Melchior, 1990). For instance, people who are shy, who are both anxious and inhibited in interactions with others, typically exhibit low social skill; they say less, look less, sit further away, and seem less relaxed and friendly in interactions than those who are not anxious (Cheek & Buss, 1981; Leary, 1983c; Pilkonis, 1977). However, they also exhibit less adaptive cognitions, using more negative self-statements and worrying about disapproval from others (Halford & Foddy, 1982; Leary, Kowalski, & Campbell, 1988). To the extent that embarrassability substantially overlaps a general tendency to become anxious in social situations, it may typically be the result of either low social skill or high fear of negative evaluation, or both.

Indeed, a valuable self-presentational model of social anxiety specifically suggests that either low skill or dysfunctional cognitions can cause problems in relationships. Schlenker and Leary (1982) organized a diverse literature by arguing that social anxiety occurs when people are motivated to make a particular impression on others but doubt their ability to do so. Unrealistically high motivation to impress others can result from a variety of irrational beliefs, and doubts about one's ability can stem either from actual skill deficits or from perceived skill deficits that are the product of faulty self-evaluation (Leary, 1983c). The Schlenker and Leary model thus implicates both skills and cognitions

as potential sources of social concerns, providing another indication that embarrassability may have multiple sources.

### Embarrassability and Shyness

Schlenker and Leary (1982), however, also speculated that embarrassment could be differentiated from other social anxieties (such as shyness) by the sufferers' *certainty* that they would be unable to manage a desired impression. Because embarrassment typically follows a known public predicament in which impression management has already failed (see Miller, 1992), it differs from shyness, in which people anticipate and fear failures that have not yet occurred. This is a plausible assertion, but with few exceptions (e.g., Harris, 1990; Leary et al., 1994), the distinction has gone unnoticed. Most observers assume there are substantial similarities between shyness and embarrassability.

The states themselves do seem comparable. Because they are both rooted in public self-consciousness, Buss (1986) described embarrassment as "the extreme endpoint of shyness" (p. 41). Noting our lack of knowledge about embarrassability, Crozier (1990) suggested that "shyness may *be* embarrassability" (p. 3). Adopting a social-evaluative approach, Asendorpf (1990) noted that "people who are sensitive to the opinions of others should be prone both to state shyness and to embarrassment; thus one would expect that dispositional shyness and embarrassment would coincide" (p. 112). Asendorpf did not find any differences in the blushing or embarrassed behavior of shy and non-shy people, however, concluding that there was not yet any behavioral evidence that shy people are also especially embarrassing.

In fact, the widespread assumption that trait shyness and embarrassability are nearly synonymous may not recognize subtle but important differences between the two traits. Let us return to Schlenker and Leary's (1982) suggestion that embarrassment follows real predicaments, whereas shyness results from anticipated plights. Surveys of embarrassing predicaments (Cupach & Metts, 1990; Miller, 1992) reveal that people often become embarrassed when they, personally, have done nothing wrong. For instance, in "team" embarrassments, others in one's group misbehave, making one look bad by association even though one's own behavior is flawless. Further, people often become embarrassed when others tease and ridicule them in the absence of any transgressions. In such cases, undesired images are thrust upon the hapless actors—despite their appropriate behavior—by adverse events.

They may now fear social rejection and be unsure of how to proceed, but no lack of social skill is involved in creating their embarrassment.

Somewhat different situations exacerbate shyness. Novel, unscripted interactions with attractive, prestigious others are especially likely to increase the inhibited and avoidant behavior of shy people (Leary, 1983c; Trower, 1986). The mere prospect of such interactions increases shyness *before* the participants actually create undesired images (Leary, Kowalski, & Campbell, 1988). From a dramaturgic perspective, this should be expected; lacking an established script should leave shy people uncertain and ill at ease. (Indeed, providing shy people with structured scripts to follow significantly reduces their anxiety [Leary, Kowalski, & Bergen, 1988].) One's level of social skill thus seems a plausible influence on one's chronic level of shyness.

In comparison, a social-evaluation model has more difficulty accounting for anticipatory shyness that precedes the onset of some actual predicament. The model would have to presume that, because no real events have raised the specter of unwanted impressions (as in embarrassment), shy people dread the threat of unwanted evaluations because of a history of real or imagined adverse outcomes in similar situations. That analysis, though, still begs the question of why shy people have had disappointing prior experiences; some additional factor, such as a history of poor social skills or unduly idealistic standards for social interaction, is needed to give them a plausible reason to dread interactions in which nothing has yet gone wrong. The social-evaluation perspective thus appears to be a less complete explanation for shyness than for embarrassment, and would argue that the two states are not wholly synonymous.

The theoretical debate over the origins of embarrassment is thus relevant to the arguable similarity of embarrassability to shyness. To the extent that dispositional susceptibility to embarrassment is associated with poor social skill, as a dramaturgic model should predict, shyness and embarrassability may be quite similar, indeed. However, if embarrassability is more closely related to social-evaluative concerns, it may be clearly discriminable from shyness, which may be based, in part, on deficiencies in skill (Buss, 1986). This investigation addressed these issues.

## METHOD

### Participants

Two hundred female and 110 male undergraduate students at a public southwestern university participated, either in partial fulfillment of social psychology course requirements or for extra credit in an introductory psychology course. Their average age was 21.0 years, with a median of 20.0 years; the youngest respondent was 17, and the oldest 56.

### Procedure

In large group sessions, participants provided their informed consent and then completed a questionnaire packet containing:

1. Modigliani's (1968) Embarrassability Scale, a measure of chronic susceptibility to embarrassment. The scale contains 26 items, each describing a social predicament (e.g., "Suppose you walked into a bathroom at someone else's house and discovered it was occupied by a member of the opposite sex"), and respondents were asked to report how embarrassed they would be in each case. The sum of their responses provided their embarrassment score.

2. Cheek and Buss's (1981) Shyness Scale, the "measure of choice" (Leary, 1991, p. 184) of both anxiety and inhibition in social encounters (e.g., "I feel tense when I'm with people I don't know well").

The self-report measure of social skill was:

3. Riggio's (1986) Social Skill Inventory, which assesses six individual components of social skill and provides a total score indicative of overall social competence or social intelligence. Riggio (1986) validated the inventory both with standardized performance measures of specific skills and with studies of actual interactions among strangers. Thus, although it is a self-report measure, the inventory does predict respondents' real social behavior. Its subscales address respondents' ability to send, receive, and regulate both verbal (or "social") and nonverbal (or "emotional") communications; the resulting individual components are as follows:

*Social Expressivity*, skill in social discourse and verbal expression, reflecting the ability to initiate and guide conversations (e.g., "When in discussions, I find myself doing a large share of the talking");

*Social Sensitivity*, skill in interpreting others' remarks. The subscale also assesses one's attentiveness to the normative appropriateness of behavior (e.g., "There are certain situations in which I find myself worrying about whether I am doing or saying the right things");

*Social Control*, skill in self-presentation. High scorers are generally adept and socially dexterous (e.g., "I can easily adjust to being in just about any social situation");

*Emotional Expressivity*, skill in nonverbal transmission of emotional states

and attitudes (e.g., "It is difficult for others to know when I am sad or depressed" [reverse scored]);

*Emotional Sensitivity*, skill in decoding others' nonverbal communications, especially the cues to their emotions (e.g., "I always seem to know what peoples' true feelings are no matter how hard they try to conceal them"); and

*Emotional Control*, skill at regulating one's nonverbal displays. High scorers can convey a given emotion at will (e.g., "People can always tell when I am embarrassed by the expression on my face" [reverse scored]).

Sensitivity to social evaluation was surveyed with three measures:

4. Leary's (1983a) Brief Fear of Negative Evaluation Scale, a measure of one's chronic dread of disregard from others (e.g., "I am afraid that others will not approve of me").

5. A new Motive to Avoid Exclusion Scale (Leary & Meadows, 1991) that assesses one's drive to avert social rejection. High scorers report especial interest in social approval and approbation (e.g., "I want other people to accept me").

6. The Martin-Larsen Approval Motivation Scale (Martin, 1984), which gauges one's desire both to receive positive evaluations and to avoid disapproval and punishment (e.g., "I find it difficult to talk about my ideas if they are contrary to group opinion").

Several additional scales were included to provide further construct and discriminant validity for the Shyness and Embarrassability scales:

7. The Texas Social Behavior Inventory (Helmreich & Stapp, 1974), a measure of self-esteem in social situations (e.g., "I would describe myself as self-confident").

8. Fenigstein, Scheier, and Buss's (1975) Self-Consciousness Scale, which assesses both public and private self-consciousness.

9. Leary's (1983b) Interaction Anxiousness Scale, a measure of social anxiety in conversational settings unconfounded by behavioral responses (e.g., "Parties often make me feel anxious and uncomfortable").

10. The Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS) (Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988), which taps general tendencies to experience positive and negative affect.

Two different versions of the questionnaire packet were prepared, partially counterbalancing the order in which participants encountered the scales. (The order of the scales had no effect on the results obtained.) A response range of 1-5 was used for all scales, and each participant's responses were anonymous. Once the scales were completed, the respondents were debriefed and thanked.

## RESULTS

Each of the scales exhibited internal reliability of .70 or above and was judged to be acceptable for research purposes. Four key instruments,



**Table 1**  
Scale Means and Standard Deviations

Scale	Men		Women		<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>		
Embarrassability	63.5	14.3	71.8	13.9	24.6	.001
Shyness	23.1	6.8	24.0	7.1	1.2	<i>ns</i>
Social Skill	289.7	33.7	291.6	33.3	0.2	<i>ns</i>
Emotional Expressivity	46.5	7.2	49.2	8.7	7.3	.01
Emotional Sensitivity	48.3	8.9	52.3	8.7	14.3	.001
Emotional Control	49.7	9.6	44.4	9.3	21.9	.001
Social Expressivity	46.2	11.1	45.1	12.3	0.6	<i>ns</i>
Social Sensitivity	47.8	9.7	50.7	9.8	6.3	.02
Social Control	51.1	9.4	49.9	10.4	1.1	<i>ns</i>
Fear of Negative Evaluation	36.1	9.9	38.6	10.3	4.1	.05
Motive to Avoid Exclusion	32.7	4.7	34.3	5.5	5.2	.03
Approval Motivation	27.3	5.8	27.0	6.7	0.1	<i>ns</i>
Social Behavior Inventory	56.7	9.6	54.0	10.1	5.2	.03
Self-Consciousness (Public)	26.2	5.5	26.8	5.2	0.9	<i>ns</i>
Self-Consciousness (Private)	33.4	6.0	33.5	5.7	0.1	<i>ns</i>
Interaction Anxiousness	38.3	10.8	42.2	11.8	8.3	.01
PANAS: Positive Affectivity	37.1	5.6	35.7	6.0	3.7	.06
PANAS: Negative Affectivity	22.9	6.8	23.7	7.0	1.1	<i>ns</i>

Note. PANAS = Positive and Negative Affect Schedule.

the Embarrassability and Shyness scales, the full Social Skills Inventory (SSI), and the Brief Fear of Negative Evaluation (FNE) scale all had alpha levels of .82 or higher.

### Sex Differences

Men and women had significantly different mean scores on several of the scales (see Table 1). Their responses to the SSI reflected the established superiority of women to men in nonverbal communication (Hall, 1984), with women reporting both more emotional expressivity and sensitivity than men. Women also reported more social sensitivity, but men, in keeping with their stereotypical nonemotional instrumentality, reported more stoic emotional control than women. Each of these differences was also obtained by Riggio (1986) when he established norms for the SSI.

Women also seemed more affected by social evaluation than men. They reported higher fear of negative evaluation and a stronger motive to avoid exclusion, and described themselves as having higher chronic interaction anxiousness, despite their generally better nonverbal talents. They also reported more embarrassability than men, a gender difference which reliably occurs in a variety of contexts. Women recall more intense embarrassments than men do (Miller, 1992) and report more abashment when randomly assigned to embarrassing laboratory conditions (Miller, 1987). They also behave somewhat differently, working harder to redress embarrassing predicaments once they have occurred (Gonzales, Pederson, Manning, & Wetter, 1990). The greater embarrassability of women appears to be more than a difference in self-report and merits further discussion. In contrast, men and women did not differ in shyness.

### Correlational Analyses

Correlations among the scales did not differ by sex and are shown in Table 2. Both embarrassability and shyness were meaningfully, positively related to fear of negative evaluation, motive to avoid exclusion, and approval motivation. In general, the greater one's concern about disapproval and rejection from others and the greater one's desire to be liked and accepted by others, the greater one's susceptibility to embarrassment and shyness. Tests of the correlations showed that both embarrassability,  $t(310) = 2.11$ ,  $p < .05$ , and shyness,  $t(310) = 1.81$ ,  $p < .05$  (one-tailed), were also more closely related to public than to private self-consciousness.<sup>1</sup> Each was also negatively related to social self-esteem, but shyness ( $r = -.77$ ) was clearly more highly associated with self-esteem than embarrassability,  $r = -.32$ ,  $t(310) = 7.47$ ,  $p < .01$ ; whereas self-esteem accounted for 10% of the variability in embarrassability, it overlapped nearly 60% of the variability in shyness.

Generalized concerns for social evaluation were obviously related to embarrassability. In contrast, the global measure of social competence (the total score from the SSI) was not correlated with embarrassability ( $r = .07$ ); knowledge of a person's global social skill apparently provided no useful information about his or her susceptibility to embarrassment. Interestingly, this was not true of shyness or interaction

1. These and subsequent pairs of nonindependent correlations were compared with a test formulated by Williams (1959) that is advocated by Steiger (1980).

anxiousness. Unlike embarrassability, both shyness and interaction anxiousness were substantially related not only to global social skill but to each of its six components assessed by the SSI. Embarrassability was significantly related to three individual skills: It correlated positively with social sensitivity and negatively to both emotional and social control.

Finally, both shyness and embarrassability were moderately related to chronic dispositions to experience both positive and negative mood, although shy people ( $r = -.43$ ) apparently experience fewer uplifting and joyful positive emotions,  $t(310) = 4.22, p < .01$ , than those who are merely embarrassable ( $r = -.19$ ). In particular, embarrassability seems to be discriminable from a general tendency to experience bad moods; it was significantly ( $r = .29$ ), but not especially highly, correlated with negative affectivity.

### Regression Analyses

The correlates of embarrassability were further explored with a stepwise multiple regression in which global social skill, the social evaluation variables, and self-esteem, self-consciousness, positive and negative affectivity, and gender were used as predictor variables. As Table 3 indicates, social competence did not predict embarrassability. Instead, fear of negative evaluation was the best predictor, accounting for better than 20% of the variance in susceptibility to embarrassment. Respondent gender, motive to avoid exclusion, and low social self-esteem were also significant predictors,  $F(4, 306) = 29.24, p < .001$ . With these variables in the equation, self-consciousness and negative affectivity were not significantly related to embarrassability. Openness to embarrassment evidently depends less on self-awareness as a social object (and a general tendency to experience negative emotions) than on a particular kind of social dread of negative evaluation or rejection from others.

However, particular components of social skill did uniquely predict embarrassability. When Riggio's (1986) six individual skills were used instead of the full SSI score in a second regression analysis, social sensitivity replaced fear of negative evaluation as the best predictor of embarrassability (Table 4). Being female, having low social control, and having a high motive to avoid exclusion were also linked to higher potential for embarrassment,  $F(4, 306) = 33.54, p < .001$ . With social control in the equation, social self-esteem, which was highly related to social control ( $r = .79$ ), dropped out.

**Table 2**  
Correlations among the Scales

	Embarrass- ability <sup>1</sup>	Shy- ness	Soc- Skill	Emot- Exp	Emot- Sen	Emot- Con	Soc- Exp	Soc- Sen	Soc- Con	FNE	SEsteem	PriSC	PubSC	Int- Anx	Pos- Aif
Shyness <sup>2</sup>	.37	<b>.85</b>													
Global Social Skill (SocSkill) <sup>3</sup>	-.07	-.60	<b>.82</b>												
Emotional Expressivity (EmotExp)	-.05	-.41	.63	<b>.70</b>											
Emotional Sensitivity (EmotSen)	.08	-.31	.72	.34	<b>.78</b>										
Emotional Control (EmotCon)	-.24	-.23	.32	-.23	.10	<b>.80</b>									
Social Expressivity (SocExp)	-.13	-.65	.89	.62	.51	.15	<b>.89</b>								
Social Sensitivity (SocSen)	.51	.39	.12	-.01	.23	-.29	-.03	<b>.82</b>							
Social Control (SocCon)	-.37	-.75	.70	.46	.31	.31	.69	-.44	<b>.85</b>						
Fear of Negative Evaluation (FNE) <sup>4</sup>	.47	.47	-.02	-.11	.08	-.23	-.13	.79	-.43	<b>.91</b>					

Motive to Avoid Exclusion (ExMotive) <sup>5</sup>	.45	.20	.21	.11	.25	-.21	.11	.67	-.21	.62	.71						
Approval Motivation (AppMot) <sup>6</sup>	.34	.49	-.20	-.22	-.16	-.16	-.24	.59	-.48	.65	.46	.78					
Social Behavior Inventory (SEsteem) <sup>7</sup>	-.32	-.77	.67	.44	.40	.25	.69	-.34	.79	-.44	-.13	-.51	.86				
Private Self-Consciousness (PrISC) <sup>8</sup>	.23	.16	.28	.09	.40	.00	.13	.37	-.03	.36	.27	.09	.03	.70			
Public Self-Consciousness (PubSC) <sup>8</sup>	.34	.26	.17	.01	.21	-.12	.04	.63	-.17	.66	.52	.34	-.10	.48	.80		
Interaction Anxiety (IntAnx) <sup>9</sup>	.48	.83	-.56	-.42	-.24	-.24	-.65	.51	-.79	.55	.29	.51	-.75	.08	.28	.90	
Positive Affectivity (PosAff) <sup>10</sup>	-.19	-.43	.48	.22	.39	.20	.44	-.16	.49	-.20	-.01	-.28	.59	.09	.03	-.41	.85
Negative Affectivity <sup>10</sup>	.29	.38	-.10	.02	.01	-.24	-.13	.43	-.40	.41	.25	.29	-.37	.24	.22	.43	-.25

Note. Critical values:  $r = .14, p < .01$ ;  $r = .20, p < .001$ . Superscript numbers refer to the scale descriptions in the Method section. Values on the diagonal represent Cronbach's alpha for each scale. Alpha for the Negative Affectivity Scale of the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule was .86. Alpha for the Embarrassability Scale was .89.

**Table 3**  
**Stepwise Multiple Regression of Social Competence, Sex, and Other Social Constructs on Embarrassability**

Predictor	$R^2$	$\Delta R^2$	Beta	$F$	$p$
Fear of negative evaluation	.22	.22	.47	69.32	.001
Sex	.27	.05	.22	16.52	.001
Motive to avoid exclusion	.30	.03	.24	12.05	.001
Self-esteem	.32	.02	-.17	7.88	.005

Note. The tabled  $F$  ratios test the significance of the change in  $R^2$  contributed by each predictor variable.

At first glance, this appears to be notable support for a skill-based dramaturgic model of embarrassment. However, close inspection of Table 2 reveals that social sensitivity substantially overlapped both fear of negative evaluation ( $r = .79$ ) and motive to avoid exclusion ( $r = .67$ ), and appears to be a component of social competence that is clearly related to social evaluation. The second, more fine-grained regression analysis suggests that highly embarrassed people are especially aware of the normative appropriateness of behavior (i.e., are "socially sensitive") and are highly motivated to avoid rejection and disapproval from others. These findings support a social-evaluation model of embarrassment by suggesting that concern over the disapproval that can follow violations of normative standards underlies embarrassedness.

On the other hand, proficiency at adept interaction (i.e., "social control") is linked to embarrassedness as well. The more deft one is, the less one's susceptibility to embarrassment. This result clearly supports a dramaturgical model.

Shyness was linked to a somewhat different mix of predictors. As Table 5 shows, a stepwise regression using the individual skill components revealed that by far the best predictor of dispositional shyness was low social self-esteem. People who reported low confidence in their social worth were also likely to be shy. Thereafter, low social control, high private self-consciousness, low social expressivity, and high public self-consciousness each accounted for significant increments in prediction,  $F(5, 305) = 97.46$ ,  $p < .001$ . Attentiveness to normative behavior (i.e., social sensitivity) did not predict shyness, but both the ability to be flexible with communicative behavior (social control) and talent at small talk and conversation (social expressivity) did. Further, both private and public self-consciousness independently predicted shy-

**Table 4**  
**Stepwise Multiple Regression of Social Skill Components, Sex,**  
**and Other Social Constructs on Embarrassability**

Predictor	$R^2$	$\Delta R^2$	Beta	$F$	$p$
Social sensitivity	.26	.26	.51	88.81	.001
Sex	.30	.04	.21	14.73	.001
Social control	.33	.03	-.18	9.34	.002
Motive to avoid exclusion	.35	.02	.21	9.03	.003

**Table 5**  
**Stepwise Multiple Regression of Social Skill Components, Sex,**  
**and Other Social Constructs on Shyness**

Predictor	$R^2$	$\Delta R^2$	Beta	$F$	$p$
Self-esteem	.58	.58	-.77	357.29	.001
Social control	.64	.06	-.39	41.26	.001
Private self-consciousness	.67	.03	.16	18.81	.001
Social expressivity	.69	.02	-.20	14.25	.001
Public self-consciousness	.70	.01	.12	8.59	.001

ness, reflecting a global tendency toward anxious self-preoccupation in shy people (Melchior & Cheek, 1990).

Finally, because shyness and embarrassability were moderately correlated ( $r = .37$ ), the analyses described in Tables 4 and 5 were repeated after accounting for each trait's overlap with the other. In one analysis, shyness was entered before any other predictors into an equation predicting embarrassability, and in the other analysis, embarrassability was entered into a shyness equation before other variables. The results displayed in Tables 4 and 5 did not change substantially in either case; the significant predictors of each trait, and their orders of entry, were unchanged.<sup>2</sup>

### Factor Analysis

The dimensions underlying this collection of scales (excluding the PANAS, which seemed tangential to this analysis [Watson & Clark,

2. In addition, inspection of the residuals from all the regression analyses showed that various assumptions of linearity, normality, and heteroscedasticity were met.

**Table 6**  
Rotated Factor Loadings

Scale	Factor		
	1	2	3
	Social self-confidence	Social evaluation	Asocial
Shyness	-.92	.23	.02
Social Control	.88	-.30	.10
Self-Esteem	.81	-.40	.11
Social Expressivity	.80	.01	-.04
Interaction Anxiety	-.70	.60	-.05
Emotional Sensitivity	.68	.13	.14
Fear of Negative Evaluation	-.15	.86	-.10
Social Sensitivity	-.16	.85	-.36
Exclusion Avoidance	-.10	.82	-.48
Approval Motivation	-.36	.69	-.24
Public Self-Consciousness	.21	.66	.29
Embarrassability	-.18	.51	.18
Private Self-Consciousness	.12	.04	.84
Emotional Control	.38	-.22	.79
Emotional Expressivity	.18	.07	-.70

1992]) were further explored with a principal components analysis. Inspection of eigenvalues and a scree plot suggested that three factors be retained, and because an oblique rotation revealed only small correlations among the factors, a varimax rotation was ultimately employed. The factors together accounted for 72.1% of the variance in the scales, with eigenvalues of 6.37, 2.47, and 1.98, respectively. As Table 6 shows, the first factor was a social self-confidence factor defined by low shyness and high social self-esteem, and high social control and expressivity. It accounted for 42.5% of the variance in subjects' responses. The second factor (16.5% of the variance) was a social evaluation factor, with high loadings from fear of negative evaluation, social sensitivity, and motive to avoid exclusion. Unlike shyness, embarrassability loaded on this factor. The last, asocial factor (13.2% of the variance) was defined by high private self-consciousness and emotional self-control, and the absence of nonverbal expressivity.

This analysis thus lent additional weight to a distinction between behavioral adeptness and sensitivity to social evaluation as influences on



interactive behavior. Although they are both components of Riggio's (1986) and others' conception of global social competence, they are discriminable and may be related to rather different social concerns. For example, in their review of interpersonal competence research, Spitzberg and Cupach (1989) cite "effectiveness," or control, and "appropriateness," or adherence to norms and expectations, as two interrelated but discrete fundamental features of competent behavior. Here, the social self-confidence factor, with its high loadings from social control and expressivity, fits an effectiveness dimension, whereas the social-evaluation factor, characterized by social sensitivity and fear of negative evaluation, corresponds to appropriateness. With this approach shyness is more highly related to "effectiveness," whereas embarrassability is more highly related to "appropriateness."

## DISCUSSION

As social dispositions that are rooted in the development of, and attention to, one's social self, shyness and embarrassability share several broad similarities. Both depend upon awareness of and concern for others' evaluations of oneself. Moreover, both nicely fit a self-presentational model of social anxiety (Schlenker & Leary, 1982). However, the present data argue that there are also important dissimilarities between these two traits that may reflect the operation of different enduring causes.

### The Nature of Shyness

Shyness, in particular, seems complex. The adult trait of shyness appears to encompass both "fearful" shyness, which develops early in infancy and involves inhibition around strangers, and "self-conscious" or "social-evaluative" shyness, which develops later (with embarrassability) as a social self is formed (Asendorpf, 1989; Buss, 1986). In this study, shyness correlated fairly highly with both fear of negative evaluation ( $r = .47$ ) and approval motivation ( $r = .49$ ), so that it does seem to entail concerns about social evaluation. However, shyness was even more highly related to global social competence and self-confidence. Social skill and self-esteem were the best predictors of shyness; people who held low opinions of their social worth, and who, in particular, reported low proficiency at conversation and flexible self-presentation, were especially likely to be shy. Moreover, the regression analyses

showed that the social evaluation variables included here could not add any useful information about participants' shyness once the skill variables, public and private self-consciousness, and social self-esteem had been accounted for. Although shyness is undeniably linked to social-evaluative concerns (see Asendorpf, 1987), it is also—perhaps more closely—tied to poor *self*-evaluation and specific deficiencies in self-presentational skill.

### The Nature of Embarrassability

The variables for shyness also predict embarrassability, but to a lesser degree. As a dramaturgic model would predict, people who report poor control over their self-presentational behavior and who lack deftness in interaction are more embarrassable than those with better social control. Such people presumably blunder into both more frequent and more trying interactive predicaments, and are then less able to extricate themselves with grace and dexterity than are those with better social skill; as a result, they are more likely to experience the aversive uncertainty and awkwardness of embarrassment and are thus more embarrassable. This is a plausible result, after all, and demonstrates the utility of a dramaturgic approach to embarrassment. Nevertheless, deficiencies in self-confidence and social control apparently play a much smaller role in embarrassability than they do in shyness.

By far the better predictors of embarrassability were social-evaluation variables such as social sensitivity and fear of negative evaluation. Regardless of their interactive skill, people who report high sensitivity to social norms and high attention to the appropriateness of their behavior are especially embarrassable. In addition, tendencies to dread social exclusion and to fear that others are judging them negatively are usually coupled with their excessive awareness of propriety and correctness. Such people presumably perceive portent and momentousness in small transgressions that others shrug off, and experience more intensely the aversive arousal that follows the threat of negative social evaluation; as a result, just as the social-evaluation model would predict, they are more embarrassable.

Altogether, then, the data suggest that shyness and embarrassability result from multiple influences that are reasonably similar. Both behavioral and cognitive proclivities and self- and social evaluation are involved in these traits. Still, the prototypical mix of these causes appears to differ between the two traits. The present results imply that

people are shy primarily because they doubt their social worth, and for good reason: They hold low opinions of their ability to make small talk or to adroitly manage their self-presentations. They believe they lack certain vital components of social skill, and are consequently inhibited in interaction. Concern about negative social evaluation appears to be secondary to, and a likely result of, the self-perceived skill deficits that underlie their shyness.

People are embarrassable for different reasons. Skill deficits play a less important role; people often find themselves in embarrassing circumstances through no fault of their own. Indeed, Miller (1992) found that over a third of people's embarrassments did not involve personal transgressions or misbehavior, but resulted instead from the actions of others or untoward fate. When adversity strikes, a person's poise and grace in handling difficult circumstances can influence how embarrassed he or she becomes. The more influential variables, however, are the individual's apprehension about and expectations regarding the judgments of others. People who dread public rule violations and expect the worst when they occur may become embarrassed in ordinary situations in which unremarkable behavior is required. Social evaluation thus appears to play a larger part in embarrassment than behavioral adeptness does and explains a greater portion of the variance in embarrassability.

In short, then, real or perceived behavioral/skill deficits are major influences on shyness, whereas embarrassability seems to stem more from the cognitive appraisal of others' evaluations. Moreover, the social-evaluation model that asserts the primacy of such judgments appears to tell us more about the trait of embarrassability than a dramaturgic "awkward interaction" model does. Both embarrassability and shyness are linked to components of global social competence, but they load most highly on different dimensions; on the most fundamental level, embarrassability is tied to appropriateness, shyness to effectiveness.

We should pause at this point to acknowledge that these findings are based solely on self-report. It would certainly be valuable to replicate them with behavioral measures of social skills, and to validate them with manipulations of state shyness and embarrassment in the lab. Nevertheless, these data are tentatively useful, for both their theoretical and practical implications.

Shyness and embarrassability differ in ways that Schlenker and Leary (1982) did not expect, but their self-presentational model of social anxiety still explains both traits nicely. They assert that social qualms occur when people want to manage a particular impression but doubt

that they can. In this study, shyness and embarrassability were apparently influenced by both motivation and doubt. Both traits showed substantial correlations with motive measures (shyness,  $r = .49$  with approval motivation; embarrassability,  $r = .45$  with motive to avoid exclusion), and each was predicted by low perceived social control, or chronic doubt about one's self-presentational ability. The greater one's desire to gain acceptance or avoid rejection, and the lower one's self-presentational efficacy, the greater one's susceptibility to both embarrassability and shyness. However, embarrassability and shyness do differ, and the Schlenker and Leary framework can also highlight those differences. Although both motivation and doubt are involved in these traits, the present data suggest that embarrassability is determined more by the former, and shyness more by the latter.

Embarrassability is especially exacerbated by a person's desire to achieve a normative, appropriate impression, coupled with high motivation to avoid social disapproval. Misgivings about one's ability to create such impressions are obviously influential, but embarrassability is better predicted by Schlenker and Leary's (1982) motive component. In contrast, shyness is more affected by chronic skepticism about one's social talents.

### Implications for Treatment

This analysis suggests that treatments for excessive embarrassability and shyness will usually be most successful if they have different goals. For instance, shyness is amenable to a variety of treatments (e.g., van der Molen, 1990), and straightforward cognitive restructuring that reduces the negative self-preoccupation of shy people is often quite helpful (e.g., Glass & Shea, 1986). However, the importance of low social self-confidence in the reports of shyness in this study argues that even more sufferers will be helped by cognitive-behavioral approaches that treat both real and perceived social-skill deficits; indeed, interventions that teach both social monitoring and communication skills to shy people are widely effective (Alden & Cappe, 1986; Glass & Shea, 1986; Hartman & Cleland, 1990). Embarrassability, on the other hand, is more likely to be ameliorated by cognitive interventions that address excessive fear of negative evaluation (Klass, 1990). Behavioral skill programs may be of some use, but as Goldfried (1979) argued, "training in realistic thinking" is probably more efficacious "in instances in which the anxiety is mediated by concerns regarding the evaluations of others" (p. 147).

Of course, no one treatment will be maximally effective for all clients because both embarrassment and shyness are based on problems with both social motivation and doubt; eclectic strategies that are tailored to an individual's concerns are always desirable (Leary, 1987). Nevertheless, emphasizing social evaluation in embarrassment and social skill in shyness may have therapeutic payoffs.

### Sex Differences

The sex difference in embarrassment obtained here appears to be a reliable finding that is based on more than differential self-report (see Gonzales et al., 1990). The correlates of embarrassment did not differ across the sexes, however, so the sex difference appears to be one of mere intensity. Why should women be more embarrassed, but no more shy, than men? One possibility is that the emotional responses of women are more influenced by external, situational, and perhaps interpersonal, cues than those of men (Pennebaker & Roberts, 1992). Because embarrassment typically results from salient and sometimes dramatic external events, women may have stronger reactions than men even though their physiological cues (which are more influential in men's experiences of emotion) are similar to those of men. From this perspective, men and women would not differ in shyness because the social circumstances that create shyness are more mundane; as Pennebaker and Roberts note, the emotions of men and women tend to be similar when people are not distracted by compelling external cues.

There are several other possibilities, however. Because women are more adept at nonverbal communication (Hall, 1984; Riggio, 1986), they may be more perceptive and thereby react more to social disapproval. Given similar predicaments, women may be more embarrassed than men because they are more astutely aware of just how bad things really are. However, audiences are often very supportive and kind to embarrassed actors (Cupach & Metts, 1990), and women report more embarrassment even when their audiences remain hidden behind one-way mirrors (Miller, 1987).

Instead, the greater embarrassment of women may be related to influences of social roles. Girls are usually rewarded for their affectivity whereas boys are not, so that as adults women's emotions are often more robust than those of men (Fujita, Diener, & Sandvik, 1991). Further, women may have more reason to fear negative evaluation from others. To the extent that they hold lower social power than men,

women may typically be more dependent on others for desired outcomes. As a result, social disapproval and exclusion may be more costly for women, entailing material, as well as social, losses. More wary concern over the acceptability of their behavior would presumably be manifested in stronger reactions to social transgressions and, hence, higher embarrassability. In any case, the true cause of the sex difference in embarrassability remains uncertain, and further inquiry is needed.

Finally, the pattern of sex differences in fear of negative evaluation, motive to avoid exclusion, social sensitivity, and embarrassability—but not in social control, social expressivity, and shyness—lends further conceptual support to the conclusion that embarrassability is more a product of social evaluation than of awkward dramaturgy. Men and women don't differ in self-presentational skill, but they do differ in their dread of social disapproval and embarrassability. Indeed, throughout the analyses reported here, social evaluation variables were better predictors of chronic susceptibility to embarrassment than the variables associated with a dramaturgic perspective. Although awkwardness is prototypical of embarrassment (Parrott & Smith, 1991) and low social control is linked to embarrassability, concern over social evaluation seems to be a more central component of one's potential for embarrassment. It appears that—regardless of their social skill—if people simply did not care so much what others thought of them, they would not be as embarrassing.

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