

COMMUNICATIVE AND REMEDIAL EFFECTS OF SOCIAL BLUSHING

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ABSTRACT: Three experiments ($N = 90$; $N = 78$; $N = 52$) examined the communicative and remedial properties of blushing. In Experiments 1 and 2, participants read scripts describing incidents that took place in shops. Following the mishap the actor left while displaying a blush (target condition), left the shop without overt signs of shame or embarrassment (baseline condition), or left while displaying shame by nonverbal behaviors other than blushing (comparison condition). Participants were put in the perspective of a shopping observer and were asked to evaluate the actor and the incident. Blushing clearly attenuated the negative evaluation of the incident, lowered the responsibility of the actor, and sustained the actor's trustworthiness. The remedial effects of blushing were even stronger than those of glancing about with the expression of shame. Experiment 2 explored what type of message may elicit these remedial effects and showed that blushing communicates that the actor is strongly attached to the observer's rules, despite the current violation. Experiment 3 provided further evidence for a communicative account of blushing by showing that the actors' blush probability estimates varied as a function of the degree to which the actors shared the rules of the observers. The present findings fit comfortably within a conceptualization of blushing as a remedial gesture.

Social blushing is a very common emotional response and virtually all people blush at least occasionally (Edelmann, 1990). Yet, despite its common nature, the majority of people consider blushing as a highly undesirable response, which they often try to stop or to conceal (e.g., Shields, Mallory, & Simon, 1990). Some individuals experience even so much distress as a result of blushing that they develop a blushing phobia and apply

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for treatment (e.g., Bögels, Mulken & de Jong, 1997). Given its negative appreciation the question arises why people blush in the first place.

Several aspects of social blushing invite speculation concerning its functional properties. Most important in this respect is the fact that the blush response is usually limited to the face (e.g., Simon & Shields, 1996). Interestingly, there is also evidence to suggest that the specific physiological make-up which sustains the blush response (e.g., beta adrenergic receptors in facial veins) is likewise restricted to this specific area of the human body (Mellander, Andersson, Afzelius, & Hellstrand, 1982). Because facial expressions play such a crucial role in human communication (e.g., Goffman, 1967), it is tempting to assume that facial blushing should be considered as a functional communicative signal rather than an epiphenomenon of social attention (cf. Darwin, 1890/1989).

In line with this, Keltner and colleagues (Keltner & Buswell, 1997; Keltner, Young, & Buswell, 1997) argued that displays of embarrassment including blushing may serve appeasement-related functions, although it should be noted that people sometimes blush even when there seems no obvious reason to appease (e.g., after a compliment). Following the appeasement explanation, blushing and other expressions of embarrassment (e.g., gaze aversion; nervous smile) appease observers by ". . . displaying their submissive apology for the transgression and their knowledge of the violated norm" (Keltner, 1995; p. 441). In other words, showing embarrassment would signify the individual's recognition that she/he has committed a social infraction and sincerely regrets it (cf. Goffman, 1967). In turn, this behavior may attenuate the offender's negative social impression (Semin & Manstead, 1982) and/or evoke reconciliation-related behavior in the observers (Tangney, Miller, Flicker, & Barlow, 1996), which helps to restore the social interaction (de Waal, 1989). In a similar vein, displays of shame are proposed to serve appeasement functions. Although there is increasing evidence indicating that there are distinct displays of embarrassment and shame (e.g., Keltner & Buswell, 1996), blushing may well occur in both embarrassing and shameful situations (Shields et al., 1990).

Such an appeasement explanation of the blush response fits comfortably within the communicative account of blushing put forward by Castelfranchi and Poggi (1990). They argued that people are likely to blush if they violate social rules which they share or think they share with the observing group members. In such a situation, the blusher is assumed to communicate that he/she is sensitive to the judgment of the observers and, at the same time, that he/she shares the observers' values. The former would have the function to inhibiting aggression and avoiding the loss of one of the group's loyal members, whereas the latter may serve to