Propensity to Blush

Preceding chapters have sought to identify circumstances that elicit a blush, the mechanisms that are involved and implications for the blusher and others present. Nevertheless, while the blush is a ubiquitous phenomenon, some people believe that they blush more often or more intensely than others do, and for many this creates problems so troublesome that they seek professional help. Individual differences in tendency to blush are typically assessed by means of self-report questionnaire, and three approaches to the construction of such questionnaires are now briefly described.

Measuring individual differences

The first approach involves the design of psychometric self-report scales to assess a predisposition to blush. Chapter 4 introduced the Blushing Propensity Scale (BPS) constructed by Leary and Meadows (1991), where respondents rate how likely it is that they would blush in each of the 14 hypothetical circumstances. The scale was discussed in Chapter 4 in the context of classifying blush-making situations but it has also been used to locate individuals along a single dimension of blushing propensity by summing their scores over the items. Responses are made on a five-point scale ranging from ‘I never feel myself blush in this situation’ to ‘I always feel myself blush in this situation’. Leary and Meadows provide evidence of satisfactory internal reliability of the BPS (Cronbach’s alpha = 0.86) and four-week test-retest reliability of 0.81.1 There seem to be no gender differences in scores on the measure, which is consistent with findings from self-report items about the frequency of blushing, which find comparable rates among men and women (Shields et al., 1990). This contrasts with
findings on embarrassability, where women obtain higher scores on average than men (Miller, 1995).

A second type of measure assesses fear of showing somatic symptoms of anxiety. Bögels and Reith (1999) produced the Blushing, Trembling and Sweating Questionnaire (BTS-Q), which comprises several sections: the severity of the fear of blushing, trembling and sweating (6 items referring to each of these symptoms); the physical symptoms associated with blushing (6 items), trembling (4 items) and sweating (3 items); avoidance strategies used to avoid or mask blushing (10 items), trembling (3 items) and sweating (6 items); behavioural problems (6 items) and mental problems (10 items) associated with the set of symptoms; positive beliefs (10 items) and negative beliefs (54 items) about them; their frequency (a single item for each symptom). The scales have satisfactory internal reliability, with alpha coefficients ranging from 0.77 to 0.98. A clinical sample of 92 patients meeting criteria for social phobia scored significantly higher on the set of scales than a control group matched with regard to age and educational level. An indication of the validity of the measure is the finding that a clinical sample of patients whose principal concern was physical symptoms obtained significantly higher scores than patients for whom symptoms were not the main concern. This measure is of potential value for research into blushing propensity since the separate blushing sub-scales seem to have sound psychometric properties. The correlations between the blushing items and the sweating and trembling items have not been researched, so that we do not yet know the extent to which some individuals fear one symptom but not the others. Bögels and Reith (1999) report sizeable correlations between the section scores (with the exception of the positive beliefs about symptoms scale, which has small negative correlations with the other sub-scales), ranging from 0.37 to 0.81, showing that the scales have moderate discriminant validity. Finally, the fear of blushing sub-scale correlates significantly \( r = 0.56 \) with the Dutch version of the BPS (Mulkens et al., 1999).

A third approach asks people directly how frequently or intensely they blush. The participants in Shields et al.’s (1990) study were asked how often and how readily they blushed compared with their same-sex peers. Edelmann (1990b) recruited a sample of self-described chronic blushers from individuals who had written to request a fact sheet advertised in a magazine article about blushing and, among other items requesting information on their blushing and its consequences, respondents completed two six-point self-rating scales, one on the severity of their blushing and one on its effect upon their life. Crozier and Russell