

Relationship Closeness and Embarrassment

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ABSTRACT - Participants read a scenario describing the potentially embarrassing situation of a couple dancing in a club, surrounded by people, where one member of the couple is dancing awkwardly and attracting the attention of the others in the club. The scenario was written so that participants imagined that their partner was the one dancing awkwardly. Participants ($N = 118$) were then asked about their perceptions and emotional reactions. Results indicate that the Inclusion of Other in Self (IOS; Aron, Aron, Tudor, & Nelson, 1991) scale, a cognitive measure of relationship closeness, predicted participant's reported embarrassment. These findings are discussed in light of past research (Thornton, 2003), which did not find the Relationship Closeness Inventory (RCI; Berscheid, Snyder, & Omoto, 1989), a behavioral measure of relationship closeness, to be predictive of embarrassment.

The purpose of the present research was to investigate one's embarrassment, when the person causing the embarrassment was a close other. Previous research (Thornton, 2003) did not find the Relationship Closeness Inventory (RCI; Berscheid, Snyder, & Omoto, 1989) to be predictive of embarrassment. However, it was thought that these findings might have more to do with the range of closeness of the participants than with the theoretical implications of interdependence and closeness on the experience of embarrassment. Thornton attempted to increase experimental realism, by having participants bring their dating partner to the lab and both individuals participate in the experiment at the same time. Participants were required to bring someone they had been dating for at least one month, but given that most participants were in relatively new relationships, there wasn't a wide range of closeness between participants. Therefore, it is possible that the RCI relationship closeness measure, which is a behavioral measure of interdependence, simply was not the best way to measure closeness in this circumstance.

In an attempt at re-evaluating the theoretical implications of relationship closeness and the experience of embarrassment, the present study was aimed at investigating Aron, Aron, Tudor, & Nelson's (1991) cognitive model of relationship closeness. This model of relationship closeness focuses on how close one thinks the relationship is; this is conceptualized as how much one includes the other in the self-concept. This inclusion-of-other-in-the-self conceptualization of closeness, in terms of the "unit" that the two individuals form, is described by Lewin (1948) as overlapping differentiated regions within the life space, and follows the principles of Turner's (1987) Self-categorization theory. Self-

categorization theory (Turner, 1987) is a set of related assumptions and hypotheses about the functioning of the social self-concept. It suggests a "depersonalization" process that occurs because of ingroup-outgroup categorizations. The result of these processes is that individuals in intimate relationships often perceive the relationship as a unit. If this is the case, they should believe that "when my partner does something embarrassing, I have done something embarrassing." According to this theory, a partner's behavior is an indication of one's own competence or ability, because of the perception of the "unit" that results from identification with one's partner. Therefore, it is anticipated that individuals who perceive their relationship in terms of a "unit" will experience greater embarrassment over their partner's foibles than individuals who do not view their relationship as a "unit" when their partner's performance is made salient.

The present research was designed to determine whether the feelings of embarrassment increase with the cognitive closeness of the relationship. Upon completion of the Inclusion of Other in Self (IOS) scale (Aron, Aron, & Smollan, 1992) participants were given a written description of a scenario to read. As this was a replication and extension of previous research (Thornton, 2003), participants were again presented with the scenario of a couple dancing in a club, surrounded by other people. In this context, one member of the couple is dancing awkwardly and is obviously attracting the attention of other dancers. The scenario was written so that participants imagined that their partner was the one dancing awkwardly. After reading the scenario, participants completed a questionnaire designed to assess potential embarrassment as well as their perceptions of the scenario.

Method

Participants

The participants were 118 students (31 males and 87 females) with ages ranging from 17 to 37 years ($M = 27.5$; $SD = 12.9$) drawn from introductory psychology courses at Dowling College. Participation was one way of completing a course requirement. To be included in the study, participants were required to be currently involved in a heterosexual dating relationship.

Measures

Relationship closeness was measured using the Inclusion of Other in Self (IOS) scale (Aron et al., 1992). The IOS scale is a single-item, pictorial measure of closeness, intended to measure individuals' sense of interpersonal interconnectedness. This measure has been found to possess good psychometric properties and acceptable test-retest reliability and discriminant validity (Aron et al.).

The questionnaire that served as the dependent measure was a series of items about how much embarrassment participants thought they might feel if they were in the imagined scenario. Participants responded on a nine-point Likert-type scale (1 = "Not at all embarrassed"; 9 = "Very much embarrassed") to questions such as "In this situation, how embarrassed would you feel?" and "How embarrassed would you be for your partner in this situation?" There were also manipulation check items such as: "How realistic did this scenario seem?" (1 = "Not at all realistic"; 9 = "Very realistic"); "It was easy to imagine myself and my dating partner in this scenario"; and "I seriously imagined the scenario and took care to respond to these items honestly" (1 = "Strongly disagree"; 9 = "Strongly agree").

Procedure

Participants completed the study separately and were greeted by a female experimenter who explained that the research was investigating the experience of embarrassment within a dating relationship. In reference to their current dating relationship, participants were asked to respond to the

IOS measure of relationship closeness (Aron et al., 1992). Participants were then given a written scenario describing a potentially embarrassing social situation. This scenario stated: "Imagine that you and your dating partner are out dancing together for the first time at an unfamiliar club. Surrounding you are friends of both you and your partner. Some of your partner's friends are meeting you for the first time and some of your friends are meeting your partner for the first time. As you begin dancing, you see that your partner is dancing awkwardly and obviously attracting the attention of the other dancers. Your partner is so inept at dancing that the other people on the dance floor begin staring and laughing." After reading the description of this potential social situation, participants completed a questionnaire designed to assess how embarrassed they would feel if they were actually in the described situation, as well as determine the effectiveness of the written scenario. After completion of the questionnaire, participants were debriefed and their questions were answered.

Results

A regression analysis was conducted to determine if reported embarrassment could be predicted by the IOS measure of relationship closeness. Results of the regression indicated that the IOS measure did predict participants' reported embarrassment, $R^2 = .039$, $F(1,116) = 4.733$, $p < .05$, however not as anticipated. In other words, contrary to prediction, participants scoring lower on the IOS closeness measure were more likely than those scoring higher to report that they would feel embarrassed in response to question number 1 (Q1): "In this situation, how embarrassed would you feel?" Similarly, contrary to prediction, participants scoring lower on IOS closeness were more likely than those scoring higher to respond to question two (Q2), "How embarrassed would you be for your partner in this situation?" by reporting more embarrassment for their partner, $R^2 = .039$, $F(1,116) = 4.666$, $p < .05$. Table 1 displays the results of these analyses.

Table 1
Reported Embarrassment for Each Level of IOS Closeness

	IOS	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Coefficients
	N	9	18	12	17	20	23	18	β
Q1	<i>M</i>	6.44	4.89	5.83	4.29	4.60	4.43	4.06	-1.98
	<i>SD</i>	1.74	2.17	2.44	2.66	2.60	2.31	2.98	
Q2	<i>M</i>	7.33	5.89	6.92	4.71	5.15	6.00	5.00	-1.97
	<i>SD</i>	1.12	2.29	1.31	2.49	1.75	2.26	3.05	

Note. IOS = Inclusion of other in Self, and there are seven levels of closeness depicted in this measure. For this sample, IOS closeness $M = 4.35$; $SD = 1.94$, $p = .008$. Also, β = the standardized regression coefficient.

Manipulation checks for the effectiveness of the written scenario lend support to the results suggesting that relationship closeness predicts participant's embarrassment. When asked "How realistic did this scenario seem?" there was no significant difference in response as a result of relationship closeness, $R^2 = .010$, $F(1,116) = 1.175$, *ns*. On a scale from 1 to 9, (with 1 = not at all realistic, and 9 =

very realistic) participants tended to view this as a realistic scenario ($M = 6.22$; $SD = 2.62$). There were also no significant differences in participant responses, as a result of relationship closeness, to the statements, "It was easy to imagine myself and my dating partner in this scenario" ($M = 5.3$; $SD = 2.89$), $R^2 = .021$, $F(1,116) = 2.411$, *ns*, and "I seriously imagined the scenario and took care to respond to these items honestly" ($M = 7.15$; $SD = 2.29$), $R^2 = .016$, $F(1,116) = 1.862$, *ns*.

Discussion

The purpose of the present research was to re-evaluate the theoretical implications of relationship closeness and the experience of embarrassment. Participants who conceptualized the closeness of their dating relationship in terms of "inclusion-of-other-in-self" (IOS) were expected to report greater embarrassment as a result of this close other's poor public performance. Results revealed that, contrary to prediction, participants scoring lower on the IOS were more likely than those scoring higher to report that they would feel embarrassed by their partner's behavior. These findings run counter to the theoretical suggestion that as individuals in intimate relationships become closer, they should increasingly believe that "when my partner does something embarrassing, I have done something embarrassing" (Turner, 1987). In fact, as the perception of the "unit" that results from identification with one's partner increased, participants reported less embarrassment as a result of their partner's behavior.

It is possible that these findings are a result of the idealistic ways people tend to perceive their relationship and partner (Sprecher, 1999). Brickman (1987) has suggested that people rationalize their partner's faults by exaggerating their partner's virtues. Other researchers also found that people perceive their relationship and partner in idealistic ways (e.g., Murry & Holmes, 1993; Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 1996). In fact, partners in stable relationships have been found to perceive that their positive feelings (e.g., love) for their partner increases over time (Sprecher, 1999). In other words, the faults of one's partner are simply overshadowed or masked by the positive, rather than being somehow transformed (Murray et al., 2003). In fact, people seem to create the partner they desire by idealizing them. In this way, the closer the relationship, the more likely people may be to overlook potentially negative behaviors by their partner, and not react with embarrassment to a poor public performance.

The finding that the IOS did predict embarrassment in the present study when RCI relationship closeness (Berscheid, Snyder, & Omoto, 1989) did not in previous research (Thornton, 2003) may well be a function of the participants rather than the theoretical relationship between relationship closeness and embarrassment or the utility of the RCI measure of relationship closeness. In Thornton's (2003) previous research, participants were required to bring someone they had been dating for at least one month to also be a participant in the study. Because the RCI measures behavioral interdependence as an indication of relationship closeness, and most participants were in relatively new relationships, there was not a wide range of relationship closeness between participants (Thornton, 2003). It is therefore possible that future research will also be able to demonstrate the relationship between RCI relationship closeness and embarrassment. Future research is required to replicate and extend the findings of the current study.

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