

Exploring Egoistic versus Altruistic Motives for Helping Another in an Embarrassing Situation

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Abstract

People experience pratfalls. Most individuals can recount with vivid detail situations in which their competence or appearance was compromised but only realized it later on their own, perhaps by looking in the mirror. Preventative Face-Saving (PFS) is the act of informing someone about an embarrassing predicament that person is unwittingly experiencing in order to protect that person from future embarrassment in front of a larger or more important audience (Ault & Cunningham, 1999). The present study used Structural Equation Modeling of scenario responses to test altruistic versus egoistic motivations for helping in both high and low embarrassment situations. This study compared two models of motivations for helping in embarrassing situations based on responses from 143 participants who read scenarios involving high- and low-level embarrassing predicaments in which they had the opportunity to indicate their likelihood of helping on a 1-9 scale, with 1 = not at all and 9=very likely. Results support egoistic motivations, such as one's own embarrassment at helping and the extent to which one would want to receive help in the situation, in high embarrassment situations. Results further point to avoidance of guilt as a major motivator in this type of helping regardless of the level of embarrassment.

Keywords: Guilt, perspective-taking, self-conscious affect, embarrassment, altruism

Imagine you just watched a fellow scholar give an excellent research presentation at a conference. The talk was well-received, and a lively discussion session followed. At the conclusion of the presentation, you approach your colleague to introduce yourself and talk to her about her research. Upon approach, you observe a large piece of food visibly lodged between her front teeth. What do you do? Do you tell her because you are imagining yourself in her shoes? Do you decide not to help because you risk embarrassing yourself or her? Do you do nothing?

As Bethall, Lin, and McFatter (2014) described, situations like this can lead to a dilemma in which the individual is torn between showing empathy versus avoiding embarrassment. Embarrassment and empathy are both self-conscious emotions that serve to encourage moral and social thoughts and behaviors in the context of interpersonal relationships (Bethall et al., 2014). Whether or not the person chooses empathy versus avoidance of embarrassment can greatly affect the outcome of the situation.

As social creatures, we tend to be concerned with our appearance to others to the extent that we put ourselves through difficult circumstances to present ourselves the way we wish to be seen. We also tend to forget that embarrassment may have evolved as a mechanism for ensuring cultural norm adherence (Miller, 1996) and, therefore, has deep-seated biological origins that guide our behavior more often than we may guess. Thus, embarrassment can inhibit helping if choosing to help goes against the norms (Zoccola, Green, Karoutsos, & Sabini, 2011). This dilemma is magnified by the lack of agreed-upon norms for how to deal with this situation. While personal accounts indicate that this dilemma occurs frequently among people, even those who know each other, very little research (see Ault & Bettler, 2006; Ault & Cunningham, 1999) has examined whether and why people save others' faces in this manner.

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Helping Behavior

Most research on helping has focused on situations involving emergencies (Latane & Darley, 1970), donation of time or effort to a cause or individual in need (Batson, 1997; Dovidio Schroeder & Allen, 1990; Maner, Luce, Neuberg, Cialdini, Brown, & Sagarin, 2002), or alleviation of pain or suffering (Batson, 1981; Cameron, Spring & Todd, 2017). These kinds of help, and the decisions made about helping, may apply to embarrassment as well. It will, therefore, be useful to review some of the major theoretical models explaining decision making in helping in order to understand how they may apply to helping in embarrassing situations.

Negative State Relief Model. One of the ongoing debates in the helping literature (e.g., Batson, 2002) is whether people perform gestures of helping primarily for self-serving reasons (“egoism”) or whether helping to alleviate the other’s suffering is, in fact, the primary goal (“altruism”). The Negative State Relief Model (Cialdini, Kenrick, & Baumann, 1982) proposes that helping is driven by the motivation to escape one’s own distress caused by seeing the other’s discomfort. In order to rid oneself of aversive arousal, one may remove the aversive stimulus, either by alleviating the other’s suffering or by escaping the situation by physically leaving. Dovidio, Piliavin, Gaertner, Schroeder, and Clark (1991) proposed the Arousal-Based Cost-Reward Model of intervention, which shares with Cialdini et al.’s (1982) model the desire to reduce aversive arousal. In deciding whether to help or leave, Dovidio et al.’s (1991) model proposes that people weigh the costs versus the benefits of becoming involved. The Negative State Relief and Arousal-Based Cost-reward models, then, propose a predominantly self-serving motive for helping behavior – namely, to escape one’s own discomfort.

The empathy-altruism hypothesis. According to Batson (1997, 2002), experiencing empathy towards another person, or experiencing the others’ emotions vicariously, may truly motivate people to help out of concern for the other rather than for the self. A number of studies have shown that, when participants are induced to imagine the feelings of a suffering confederate, they will often choose to alleviate the other’s discomfort rather than leave the experiment to escape the situation (e. g., Batson, 1997, 2002). Others have shown, however, that, if offered the chance to leave the situation along with a mood-enhancing alternative such as a comedy tape, participants are not especially helpful (e.g., Schaller & Cialdini, 1988). Neuberg, Cialdini, Brown, Luce, Sagarin, and Lewis (1997) have further suggested that empathy results in a kind of superficial helping when the costs to oneself are low. Still others have shown that altruism contributes only shared variance with egoism, and is not itself a significant mediator of helping (Maner, Luce, Neuberg, Cialdini, Brown, & Sagarin, 2002). These results suggest that egoism, and not altruism, is ultimately the motive for helping. Batson and others (e. g., Batson, 1981, 1997; Batson, Sager, Garst, Kang, Rubchinsky & Dawson, 1997; Dovidio et al., 1990), however, contend that empathy can lead to a real altruistic motive to help, which exists separately from egoistic concerns. Therefore, both egoism and altruism may be operating simultaneously, but their effects sum such that whichever is more powerful in any given context will win out.

The Present Study

Prior investigations into helping behavior have thus involved arousal from danger, sadness, or other distress. For the present study, Preventative Face-Saving (PFS; Ault, 1999) was identified as a form of beneficial impression management (Schlenker & Britt, 1999) in which an individual attempts to repair another’s impaired self-presentation. Specifically, PFS involves an individual informing an unwitting other about that other’s embarrassing predicament in order to protect that person from future embarrassment in front of a larger or more important audience (Ault, 1999; Ault & Bettler, 2006). Although PFS is a helping behavior, it is unclear whether it is guided by the same influences that impact helping in more traditionally examined paradigms.

Empathy and Perspective Taking. In the context of PFS, empathic embarrassment is an uncomfortable emotion that would-be-helpers experience vicariously for the person in the predicament. In the context of this study, empathic embarrassment was operationalized as the extent to which participants perceived the embarrassment of the situation overall, or their generalized embarrassed arousal at the situation. That is, empathic embarrassment determines the level of embarrassment the person associates with the situation. Empathic embarrassment differs from empathy, which involves how embarrassed the would-be-helper imagines the *other* feels (“How embarrassing is this situation for the other person?”). One’s empathy indicates the degree of discomfort the other is assumed to be experiencing, were they to discover the faux pas.

Further, empathy differs from perspective-taking, or putting oneself in the place of the other. Baston, Carpenter, Dulin, Harjusola-Webb, Stocks, Gale, Hassan, and Sampat (2003) found that imagining oneself in another’s place (perspective taking) does little to increase helping, but imagining how the other feels (empathy) does

increase helping. In the context of the present study, perspective-taking was operationalized as the extent to which the would-be-helper would want to be told about the situation if they were in the other's place. So, perspective-taking indicates the degree to which the individual would desire help. In this respect, empathy is other-oriented (focused on the other's potential feelings) while perspective-taking is self-oriented (focused on one's own discomfort and whether one would want help or not in that situation).

Guilt. Baumeister, Stillwell and Heatherton (1995) defined guilt as “an interpersonal phenomenon based on close relationships, especially in certain interactions with intimate partners” (p. 255). This definition differs from traditional depictions, which typically have regarded guilt as “a largely intrapsychic phenomenon based on self-judgment” (Baumeister et al., 1995; p. 255). These definitions are not mutually exclusive, and both Baumeister et al.'s definition and traditional definitions apply in many circumstances and can be extended to non-close others. That is, one can experience emotional discomfort in response to the plight of a stranger (Baumeister et al., 1995) if one feels personally responsible in at least some part for that person's suffering, or at least in their failure to alleviate alterable suffering. Guilt, unlike embarrassment, is linked to areas of the brain related to perspective-taking and commands to alter behavior (Jankowski & Takahashi, 2014), further supporting its capacity to motivate change (Henniger & Harris, 2014). Most relevant to the present study, guilt benefits relationships (we extend this to include brief interactions with strangers) by promoting prosocial behavior (Baumeister et al, 1995). Finally, guilt is a motivating emotion. Even toddlers who exhibit guilt (rather than shame) at a transgression they commit exhibit behavior to atone for their negative actions rather than avoiding the situation (Dummond, Hammond, Satlof-Bedrick, Waugh, & Brownell, 2017).

In order to compare the influence of egoism and altruism on PFS, this study examined the influence on helping of individuals' own feelings, (e. g., embarrassment about helping, guilt at the thought of not helping). The goal was to compare the influence of individuals' feelings with their perception of the other's feelings, (e. g., “Does the other want to know?”), on participants' willingness to engage in PFS.

In Dovidio et al.'s (1991) cost-reward model of helping, if costs are low, then helping should be relatively easy and, thus, likely. Costs of helping in the case of PFS include high levels of embarrassment during the interaction, uncertainties about how to respond to such a scriptless situation, and perceptions of whether one will offend the other or further embarrass them. Benefits of helping include escaping the aversive arousal and avoiding guilt for failing to help, as well as knowing that one did a good deed.

Because embarrassment is a self-conscious emotion (Miller, 1996), we propose that egoistic motives will outweigh altruistic motives and ultimately drive PFS. Embarrassment is defined as an unpleasant, self-reflective emotion occurring when individuals are perceived as having acted incompetently and, thus, are at risk of displaying a negative identity in front of a real or imagined audience (Cupach & Metts, 1994). The experience of embarrassment is linked to brain areas representing knowledge of social concepts (Jankowski & Takahashi, 2014), such as unacceptable or disappointing behavior. Embarrassment, therefore, results from awareness that one has transgressed and has compromised their social identity (Cupach & Metts, 1994).

When empathizing with another about an embarrassing plight, one becomes self-conscious, and, thus, self-concerns are made salient. Unlike situations in which focusing on another's feelings may induce negative affect such as sadness, focusing on another's embarrassment usually makes us embarrassed. According to Miller (1996), individuals need not experience an embarrassing predicament themselves in order to experience embarrassment. People commonly experience “empathic embarrassment” (Miller, 1996) when observing others' predicaments. A bystander may experience empathic embarrassment when watching a stranger's behavior and merely vicariously experiencing the person's embarrassing predicament. This is true even when the stranger's plight is irrelevant to the observer's own self-presentation.

To summarize, when encountering another in an embarrassing predicament, several possibilities emerge: One may tell the other about the predicament to alleviate their own discomfort, as the negative state relief model would predict. Conversely, one may tell the other about the predicament to save the other's face before a future audience, as the empathy-altruism hypothesis would predict. Or one may do nothing – simply rid themselves of empathic embarrassment by leaving the scene. Leaving without helping, however, potentially leaves one vulnerable to future feelings of guilt. While still an egoistic concern, we propose that avoidance of future guilt for failing to help – not simply the desire to rid oneself of uncomfortable empathic embarrassment – is a considerable influence on PFS and potentially on all types of helping behavior.

Research Goals

This study examined whether individuals would hypothetically engage in PFS behavior for a non-close other in an embarrassing situation. The goal of the study was to explore the relative predictive power of internal

variables such as guilt and empathy on likelihood of helping using two structural models: one for high- and one for low-embarrassment situations.

Hypotheses

We expected that a comprehensive model of PFS, regardless of situational embarrassment, would involve guilt (avoidance of which would serve as a motivator to help), self-embarrassment at helping (aversive arousal as a cost to helping), one's own imagined desire to be helped if in a similar situation (perspective-taking) – all egoistic predictors – and overall embarrassment at the person's situation (empathic embarrassment), the other's imagined embarrassment at being told (a cost to helping), and other's presumed embarrassment in the situation (empathy). We predicted that a major motivator of PFS was reducing empathic embarrassment, or avoiding aversive arousal, as proposed by Cialdini et al. (1983). Therefore, we tested two models based on level of embarrassment associated with the situation. Overall level of embarrassment associated with the predicaments (empathic embarrassment) should influence the amount of helping and the internal responses that predict helping. Dovidio et al. (1991) suggest that people weigh costs and benefits prior to helping. More embarrassment creates greater costs to the would-be-helper, but also greater need for the person in the predicament. Because of increased costs in highly embarrassing situations, we predicted that egoistic concerns would be more influential to helping than would altruistic or other-concerns. However, we also predicted that egoistic concerns would influence helping more than altruistic concerns in both high and low embarrassment situations because of the inherent self-focus created by others' embarrassment. We expected that less egoism would be expressed as a motivator for low embarrassment than high embarrassment situations because of the lower costs and rewards involved.

We also predicted that one's own embarrassment at helping would reduce the likelihood of helping, motivated as well by the desire to avoid aversive arousal. Merely escaping the situation without helping, however, would reduce one type of aversive arousal (empathic embarrassment) but would increase another type (future guilt at not having helped). Therefore, we predicted that projected feelings of future guilt would positively predict helping. Further, we predicted that guilt would mediate both the relationship between empathy and helping and the relationship between perspective-taking and helping. This is because the extent to which one empathizes with another should predict the amount of guilt one would feel for failing to help. Put another way, the larger the disparity between how someone wants to be treated by others and how they treat others, the more guilt that person should feel. If avoiding aversive arousal is the goal of helping, then guilt would be a major influence.

Method

Participants

One hundred and forty-three (93 women and 50 men) undergraduate students ($M_{\text{age}} = 21.81$, $s = 3.56$; 86% Caucasian) from a southeastern university participated in this study to receive either partial fulfillment of a course requirement or extra credit in their psychology course.

Materials and Procedure

Participants reported to the lab individually, and up to 10 participants were run concurrently. Participants each read eight paper-and-pencil scenarios, each of which placed the participant in the role of observer to another person's embarrassing predicament. Each scenario involved a different predicament so that they did not seem to be related, but in all eight cases the person in the predicament was of the same sex as the participant. The predicaments were all written to be relatively easy to repair quickly, and in each case the participant was likely to be the last person to see the other prior to the other encountering another audience. The nature of the predicaments differed in that four scenarios involved private-self embarrassing predicaments and the other four involved public-self predicaments. Private-self domain refers to the extent to which the predicament involves something normally outside the view of the public (e. g., undergarments), while public-self domain involves aspects of self that are typically available to the public (e. g., one's outer clothing). With the exception that private predicaments were generally considered more embarrassing than public ones, these manipulations were created for another purpose and will not be discussed further (see key for Table 1 for a list of scenarios).

Table 1. Means of reported levels of embarrassment in general, for self, and for other and helping

	In General		For Self to Tell		For Other		Helping	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Split pants	6.00 _f	1.83	3.47 _c	1.97	5.96 _f	1.84	5.72	2.29
Fly down	5.19 _e	2.08	2.91 _{b,c}	1.89	5.82 _f	1.69	4.93	2.38
Food on face	5.75 _f	5.44	2.89 _b	2.21	5.33 _f	2.44	4.43	2.61
Wrong bathroom	4.57 _d	2.29	2.26 _b	2.14	4.37 _d	2.35	5.18	2.69
Singing in shower	3.37 _c	2.25	2.88 _c	2.47	4.46 _d	3.10	1.29	2.04
Food on shirt	3.20 _c	2.06	1.98 _a	2.32	3.28 _c	2.26	5.05	2.09
Misspeak	3.98 _d	2.25	2.47 _b	1.17	4.27 _d	1.86	4.07	2.42
Wrong Video	2.59 _b	2.08	1.35 _a	1.89	2.83 _b	2.01	6.22	2.42

Note. Means with different subscripts differ significantly at $p < .05$.

Note. Shaded items used in high embarrassment model.

Split pants – person in scenario is on his/her way to a party and has unknowingly split his/her pants very visibly

Fly down – person in scenario obviously has his/her fly (i.e., zipper) down, about to enter crowded lobby

Food on face – person in scenario has a gob of mayonnaise on his/her face, about to give a presentation

Wrong bathroom – person in scenario was about to enter the bathroom intended for the opposite sex.

Singing in shower – person is singing loudly and off key in a public locker room, where he/she believes he/she is alone.

Food on shirt – person in scenario was about to have his/her picture taken with white substance on his/her dark shirt

Misspeak – person in scenario repeatedly misused an important term while practicing for a presentation

Wrong Video – person in scenario was about to unknowingly use a tape of Barney instead of the intended recording for a class presentation.

Participants responded to twelve questions following each scenario. Seven of those questions were directly related to the present hypotheses, while three were manipulation checks.¹ Specifically, they were asked: (1) How likely are you to do or say something to inform this person of his or her predicament? (2) To what extent would it embarrass you to inform him or her of this predicament? (3) To what extent do you think it would embarrass the other person to be informed? (4) To what extent would you feel guilty if you did *not* inform the person of his or her situation? (5) To what extent would you want someone else to inform you if you were in that situation? (6) How embarrassing is this situation in general? (7) How embarrassing is this situation for the other person? Participants responded to each of these questions on a 9-point Likert-type scale, where 1 = Not at all, 4 = Somewhat, and 9 = Very much. These questions were followed by two open-ended questions which were as follows: “Have you ever been in either situation (being informed or informing someone else of an embarrassing predicament), and if so, what happened?” They were given space to write in their responses. Finally, they were asked, if they indicated on the questionnaire that they would intervene, to write exactly how they would go about it (e.g., either verbally or using gestures). We plan to examine these qualitative responses later to understand better individuals’ motivations, as well as strategies, for helping or not. They were not included in these analyses and will not be discussed in the present study.

¹ The manipulation checks were as follows: 1) If this person’s level of embarrassment was a “5,” how would you rate your embarrassment to theirs? (2) To what extent would informing this person about the situation allow the person to alter the problem? (3) How easy is it for the person to fix the problem quickly?

Results

Quadratic Trend Analysis

We performed a quadratic trend analysis on the helping dependent variable for the eight scenarios. We expected to find an inverted U-shaped curve, where the level of embarrassment associated with each predicament was related to likelihood of helping. Specifically, low embarrassment levels were presumed to be viewed as relatively minor and unimportant, and therefore likely to receive little help. Somewhat higher levels were expected to warrant more need for help and to be worth the risk of self-embarrassment by informing the other about the predicament. Once the level of embarrassment became particularly high, however, helping was expected to decrease, with self-embarrassment from informing the other outweighing the egoistic or prosocial motive of saving the other from future embarrassment. The quadratic trend analysis was significant, $F(7,140) = 18.32, p < .05, \eta^2 = .27$, indicating that, as embarrassment level increased, likelihood of helping increased, reached a plateau, and then decreased. See Table 1 for mean embarrassment ratings for self, other, and in general for each scenario.

Structural Models

Two exploratory models further examined the predicament that participants might experience regarding helping. Participants may have performed a brief cost-benefit analysis when witnessing another's either highly (Model 1) or slightly (Model 2) embarrassing predicament. As demonstrated by the quadratic trend, people in highly embarrassing situations are reportedly less likely to receive help even though help might be most needed in those situations. The first model thus focused on predicaments where the potential costs (embarrassment) and benefits (more need of help) of helping were highest. Of the eight scenarios, we chose the four scenarios that participants judged to be the most embarrassing (those with the highest mean embarrassment ratings, relating to the overall level of embarrassment associated with the predicament) and performed a LISREL analysis on these variables in order to examine how the various factors impacted PFS (i.e., helping) in high need-for-help situations. This model was compared to a second structural model based on the least embarrassing predicaments (the four lowest-embarrassment rated scenarios) to examine the differences between the models. While we divided these scenarios into groups based on their relative embarrassment ratings, there was some variability and some situations were somewhat moderate in their ratings. Table 1 shows the mean ratings upon which the groupings were based. Multicollinearity tests indicated all VIFs of between 1.5 and 3.00, suggesting that the paths were appropriate to run.

In the first model $R^2(7) = 11.36, p = .12, GFI = 0.98$, and $AGFI = 0.93$, there were two non-significant paths (from 'other's embarrassment at situation' and 'other's embarrassment at being told' to 'perspective taking') which were removed to create the final Model 1, presented in Figure 1. These paths to perspective taking likely indicate how concern for the other would predict imagining the extent to which the other desires help. Thus, these non-significant paths would reflect empathy rather than egoism. Figure 2 depicts the low embarrassment model, with $R^2(6) = 8.03, p = .24, GFI = 0.98$, and $AGFI = 0.94$. Two paths were non-significant and were dropped (from 'other's embarrassment at situation' to 'helping' and 'other's embarrassment at being told' to 'perspective taking'). These non-significant paths suggest a lack of influence on 1) helping from empathy, and 2) perspective-taking from concern for other's embarrassment at being helped. These non-significant paths suggest other-concerns appear to may be less influential than self-concerns.

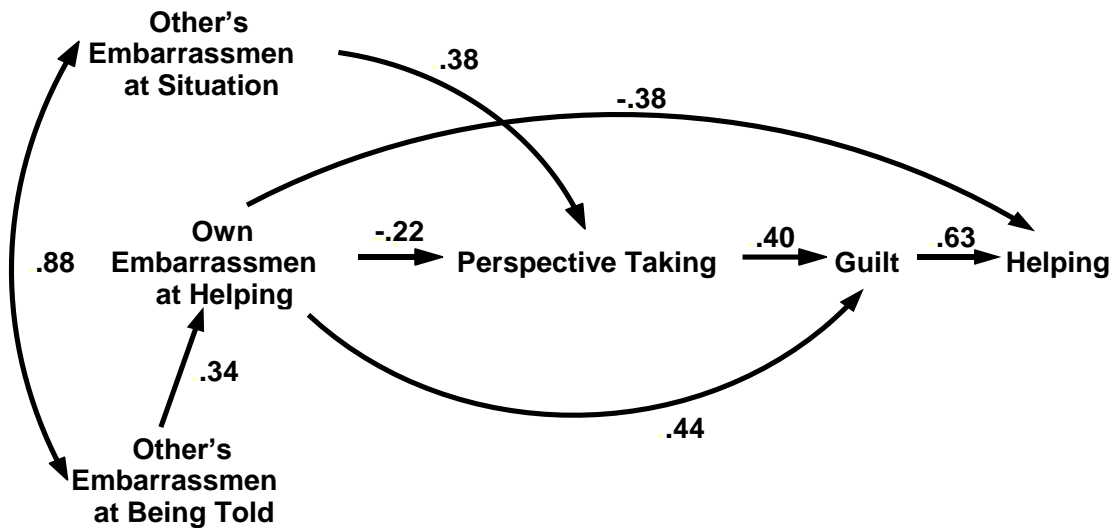


Figure 1.
High Embarrassment Model

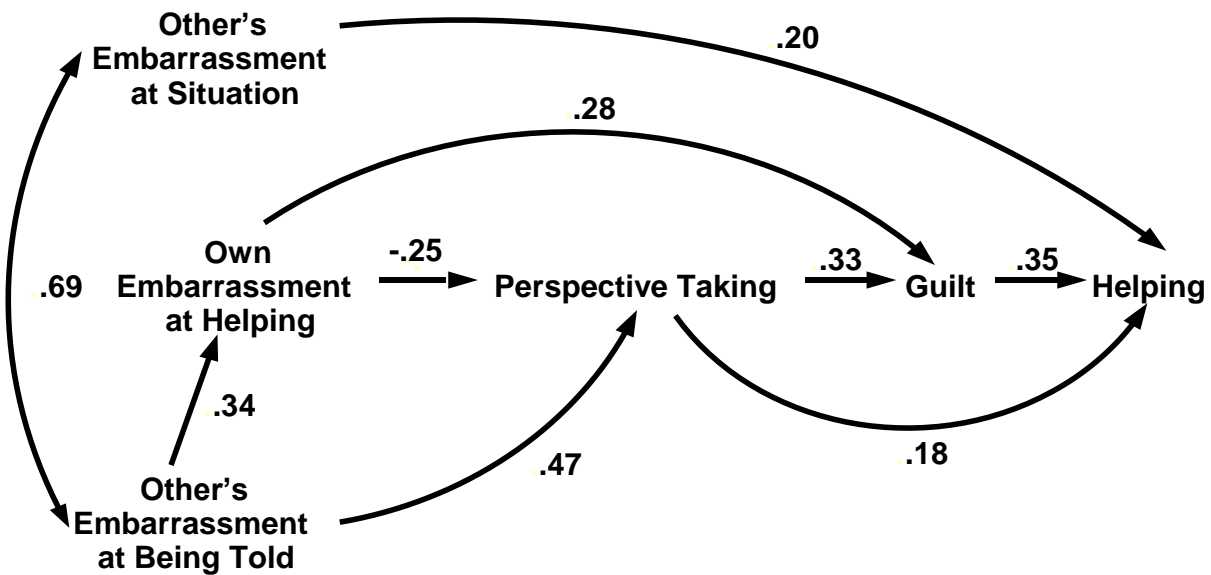


Figure 2.
Low Embarrassment Model

Moving from left to right in Figure 1, other's presumed embarrassment, or empathy, did not directly impact helping but showed a direct effect on perspective taking ($R = .38$), or the extent to which the participant would like to receive help if in a similar situation. In Figure 2, however, empathy directly, albeit weakly, predicted helping ($R = .20$). Therefore, empathy showed a direct effect on helping in the low, but not high, embarrassing scenarios. By contrast, in high embarrassment scenarios, participants' empathy only predicted their own perspective-taking or self-interest in being helped.

The other's presumed embarrassment at being told about the predicament, which is a cost of helping, directly and positively influenced the participant's own embarrassment at helping in both models ($R = .34$). In the high embarrassment model, the participant's own embarrassment at helping showed a negative direct effect on helping ($R = -.38$). That is, the other's presumed embarrassment at being told only indirectly affected helping by influencing the participant's own embarrassment at helping in the highly embarrassing model. Greater embarrassment, then, predicted less likelihood of helping, as would be expected given that one's own embarrassment at helping is a cost of helping. In the low embarrassment model, other's presumed embarrassment at being told directly affected own embarrassment at helping ($R = .34$), but own embarrassment at helping did not show a direct effect on helping, only on imagined future guilt at not helping ($R = .28$).

One's own embarrassment at helping also showed a direct, although weak, effect on perspective-taking ($R = -.22$ in the high embarrassment model; $R = -.25$ in the low embarrassment model), such that more embarrassment at helping was associated with less desire to be told oneself if in a similar situation. Perspective-taking directly affected only imagined future guilt at not helping ($R = .40$) in the high embarrassment model, but directly affected helping ($R = .18$) weakly in the low embarrassment model. One's own embarrassment at helping also showed a direct effect on guilt in both models. This relationship was stronger in the high ($R = .44$) than in the low embarrassment model ($R = .28$).

Finally, the guilt that the participant would feel by not helping seems to be one of the strongest predictors of helping, as it had the largest direct effect on the dependent variable in both the high ($R = .63$) and low ($R = .35$) embarrassment models. Avoidance of guilt, then, may be a behavioral motivator that increases the likelihood of helping. It appears that the participant's own desire to be helped were they in a similar situation and their own embarrassment at helping are at least two of the factors most influential in producing the participant's feelings of guilt. Avoidance of guilt may be an especially important variable in determining likelihood of helping in highly embarrassing situations. Note that own embarrassment at helping positively and directly influenced the guilt participants reported they would feel if they did not help. Yet, working against the effects of future guilt, own-embarrassment negatively and directly influenced helping in Figure 1. Even though participants were disinclined to help when that action would bring embarrassment upon themselves, the positive effect of guilt on helping was stronger than the negative effect of own-embarrassment at helping. This conflict is not evident in less embarrassing situations, in which self-embarrassment does not directly affect helping.

Discussion

The purposes of this study were to 1) examine the relationship among variables that influence PFS (helping), 2) test the relative power of egoistic versus altruistic motives to predict PFS, and 3) to compare models of helping in high- and low-embarrassment situations, which align with high and low cost-reward scenarios. These results suggest that egoism, or self-concerns such as one's own embarrassment, guilt, or own desire to be told, influence the likelihood of helping more than do altruistic or other-concerns (such as the other's imagined embarrassment at the situation or the other's embarrassment at being helped), especially in highly embarrassing situations. Results also point to imagined future guilt at failing to help as an important predictor of PFS. The goal of this study was to examine how egoistic versus altruistic motives impacted helping when the feelings involved self-conscious rather than other-oriented emotions. The present study examined the influence of internal participant variables – namely guilt, empathy, and embarrassment – on participants' likelihood of engaging in PFS for a non-close other in a hypothetical situation. The less embarrassing the situation, the easier it is to tell another. However, there is also less motivation to do so. As embarrassment increases, so do both costs and benefits of helping until, finally, some situations are simply too embarrassing to address, and participants are overwhelmed with arousal and unable to perform the helping behavior.

If indeed people help others in embarrassing situations for egoistic reasons more than for altruistic reasons, this does not necessarily threaten the empathy-altruism hypothesis for helping in other domains. First, other-concerns did influence self-reported likelihood of helping to some extent, especially in low-embarrassment situations. Second, embarrassment is a different kind of emotion than others that have been tested in the past with respect to helping. Empathy typically involves emotions such as warmth, tenderness, kindheartedness, and feeling emotionally moved by the other's situation (Batson, 1997, 2002). Embarrassment, while powerful, is a self-conscious rather than an other-oriented emotion. This study examined helping in an ambiguous, scriptless situation among strangers, or non-close others. These results align with Cialdini, Brown, Lewis, Luce, and Neuberg's (1997) findings that closeness increases the likelihood of helping in a number of situations, although they did not examine helping one to avoid embarrassment or social judgment. While close others' pratfalls were not tested, it is likely that strangers receive less help than relationships partners or family members, for example.

Conclusions and Implications

This study demonstrates the important role of imagined future guilt for failing to help on one's ultimate decision to help. It also provides a foundation for future studies that may manipulate empathy, guilt or guilt salience, and egoism. Underscoring the importance of expected emotional experiences following a social decision, Krettenauer, Jia, and Moslef (2011) found that adolescents were more likely to help in prosocial (rather than antisocial) scenarios if they expected to feel pride, while they were more likely to avoid anti-social decisions when they expected to feel guilt for deciding poorly. Clearly, guilt is a motivator for avoiding negative consequences – including the feeling of guilt itself. Other variables, such as expected feelings of pride or good citizenship, might weight more highly in PFS, and should be examined in the future. Extraversion and Agreeableness are stable individual differences that may interact with these other self-conscious emotions and should be measured in future studies. One's own embarrassability (Kelly & Jones, 1997) also will likely moderate the relationship between helping and the other variables examined here, as Zoccola et al. (2011) found the experiencing of embarrassment an inhibitor to helping. Further, the nature of the relationship might be examined. Those in close relationships typically count on one another to help them protect their social identity (Rowatt & Cunningham, 2001). Thus, closeness might increase perceived embarrassment for the other but also more likelihood of helping due to comfort with the close other and awareness of their desire to be helped.

With such a common situation, it is surprising that we have not agreed upon a cultural response to pointing out people's pratfalls when it would benefit them. Anecdotes of graduate students defending their dissertations with food on their faces or instructors going to class with unzipped flies suggest a need for us to define the norms of this kind of experience in order to prevent discomfort for all parties involved. First impressions are incredibly powerful (Ambady, Hallahan, & Rosenthal, 1995; Rule, Moran, Freeman, Whitfield-Gabrieli, & Ambady, 2011), and if one's competence is questionable because of an unwitting embarrassing predicament, helping that other to maximize their self-presentation, when it is clearly important, is critical. Further, work atmospheres will benefit from avoiding the discomfort of having to decide whether to tell someone, especially a boss, about these kinds of hassles.

Limitations

The present study created scenarios by manipulating a number of variables not addressed in this analysis, such as the type of predicament (appearance or performance, and public versus private). Therefore, these scenarios, while varied, were not created for the purpose of a LISREL analysis. However, prior analysis of levels of embarrassment associated with the scenarios lent itself well to a comparison of two different experiences with others' embarrassing predicaments.

The self-report method is always a concern, including issues of honesty, ability to vicariously experience the scenario, and whether self-report is indicative of how participants would respond in real life. Data were examined for poor (e.g., inattentive) responses, and a post-interview was performed with each individual to establish interest and comprehension of the study's purpose in order to eliminate anyone who clearly was not paying attention.

While a larger sample is always desirable, the number of paths run were represented by at least 10 participants each (Segars, 1998), indicating an adequate sample size for the study. In addition, the data are correlational, and thus no causal relationships can be identified.

Future Research

Experimental research manipulating salience of empathy, perspective-taking, and guilt will allow us to make causal inferences regarding the mechanisms behind decisions to help or not. Personality variables, too, should be examined. In particular, individuals' own tendency to embarrass easily or not, their tendencies to experience self-conscious emotions such as guilt and shame, and willingness to be helpful as measured by agreeableness would all be useful in explicating the relationship between individual differences and PFS.

Epilogue

As a species, we strive to be liked and accepted at the same time that we strive for a clear picture of who we are. In the spirit of the looking glass self (Cooley, 1902), we look to others' responses to us in order to catch a

glimpse of who we are. We depend on others to give us an accurate portrayal of how we are appearing to others. We fear rejection, yet we tend not to seek negative feedback that might help us improve our images and indeed our health.

Because we do not seek such feedback, can we count on others in our social world to protect our images when they might be damaged by inappropriateness? According to this study and others that have examined similar phenomena, the answer is, generally, “no.” When we are in situations that are most threatening to our self-presentation, we do not receive wanted help from non-close others. Our best hope is to form relationships with others who will protect our identities and whose identities we, in turn, will protect. Future research should reveal behaviors in which individuals can engage that will reduce situational ambiguity, create a normative response, and, thus, improve the likelihood that others will help them by informing them of their embarrassing predicaments. Until then, double check your fly.

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