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The impact of verbal feedback about blushing on social discomfort and facial blood flow during embarrassing tasks

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Abstract

To investigate whether verbal feedback about blushing influences subsequent social discomfort or blushing itself, changes in facial blood flow and ratings of blushing and embarrassment were investigated in high ($N=28$) and low scorers ($N=28$) on the Blushing Propensity scale while singing and reading aloud, and while listening to audiotapes of their performance. After each task half of the participants were told that they had blushed, and the rest were told that they had not blushed. Blood flow increased progressively in participants with high blushing propensity scores who were given “blushing” feedback, but not in the other participants. This finding suggests that expecting to blush may become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Verbal feedback about blushing strongly influenced subsequent social discomfort, and mimicked the effects of blushing propensity on ratings of embarrassment and blushing intensity. In sum, the findings support the view that preconceptions about blushing propensity are shaped by past learning experiences, that concern about blushing is a major source of discomfort in embarrassing situations, and that these concerns are often unrelated to the actual intensity of blushing.

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1. Introduction

Many people who suffer from social phobia are concerned that signs of anxiety or embarrassment during social interactions indicate social ineptitude (Rapee & Heimberg, 1997). Since blush-

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ing is a clearly visible sign of embarrassment for many people, concerns about blushing being detected by others can result in avoidance of otherwise rewarding social interactions.

Concerns about blushing may originate from experiences in which blushing contributed to social discomfort. For example, being teased about blushing or actually being caught blushing could raise concerns about blushing thereafter in potentially embarrassing or anxiety-provoking situations. Mulkens and Bögels (1999) investigated this notion in undergraduate students and in people with a phobia that involved a fear of blushing in social situations. In both the undergraduate and clinical samples, a greater proportion of highly fearful than less fearful participants reported uncomfortable or traumatic experiences in association with blushing. Furthermore, more of the participants who were concerned about blushing had a close friend or family member who was troubled by blushing than in the low fear groups.

While consistent with the theme that concern about blushing stems from past aversive experiences, it is possible that recall was influenced by memory biases (Mulkens & Bögels, 1999). For instance, situations that involve blushing would probably be more significant, and thus more likely to be remembered, for people who are concerned about blushing than for those who are not. Thus, the present study aimed to investigate the association between social discomfort and concerns about blushing in a laboratory setting. In particular, it was hypothesized that informing participants that they had blushed would heighten concerns about blushing and add to social discomfort (embarrassment) in subsequent tasks. Conversely, informing participants that they had not blushed should alleviate embarrassment. Support for these hypotheses would strengthen the view that feedback given in socially uncomfortable situations influences perceptions about the likelihood of blushing and associated concerns about blushing.

The second aim was to investigate the effect of verbal feedback on changes in facial blood flow. By and large, physiological signs of blushing seem to be unrelated to blushing propensity scores (i.e. the degree to which people expect to blush in embarrassing situations), to social anxiety, or even to self-reports of embarrassment or the intensity of blushing in provocative situations (Drummond, 1997, 2001; Gerlach, Wilhelm, Gruber, & Roth, 2001; Mulkens, de Jong, & Bögels, 1997; Mulkens, de Jong, Dobbelaar, & Bögels, 1999). Nevertheless, it remains possible that people who are concerned about blushing do blush in a greater range of situations than those without this concern (Drummond, 2001). For example, Gerlach et al. (2001) investigated blushing in socially anxious people with and without a fear of blushing and in control participants while they and a small audience watched a videotape of themselves singing, held a conversation with someone of the opposite sex, and gave a prepared talk to a small audience. Blushing was greater in people who were frightened of blushing than in controls while they watched the videotape, but not during the other two tasks. It is tempting to speculate that concerns about blushing were greater while watching the videotape (a passive task that permitted attention to be focused on somatic sensations associated with blushing) than when holding a conversation or delivering a prepared talk (i.e. procedures that required attention to be focused on the task at hand). That is, concerns about blushing might peak during tasks that permit attention to be focused on somatic sensations. To investigate this possibility, changes in facial blood flow were monitored during two active tasks that differed in expected level of social discomfort (singing and reading aloud) and during two passive tasks where participants listened to audiotapes of themselves singing and reading.

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