



Validation and correlates of the vicarious embarrassment scale



Ahmet Uysal^{a,*}, Gülçin Akbaş^b, Elif Helvacı^a, İrem Metin^c

^a Middle East Technical University, Department of Psychology, Ankara, Turkey

^b Başkent University, Department of Psychology, Ankara, Turkey

^c Atılım University, Department of Psychology, Ankara, Turkey

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 31 December 2012

Received in revised form 11 November 2013

Accepted 13 December 2013

Available online 8 January 2014

Keywords:

Embarrassment

Empathy

Perspective-taking

ABSTRACT

Vicarious embarrassment can be defined as embarrassment resulting from witnessing embarrassing behaviors of strangers. We developed a scale to measure individual differences in the tendency to experience vicarious embarrassment, and examined its association with related constructs. In Study 1, we found that vicarious embarrassment is associated positively with susceptibility to embarrassment, empathy, perspective-taking, and fear of negative evaluation, while it is associated negatively with self-esteem. In Study 2, we found that vicarious embarrassment is uniquely associated with embarrassment in response to a poor performance of a stranger on a TV show, independent of susceptibility to embarrassment, empathy, perspective-taking, and fear of negative evaluation. Although the limited literature on this topic focused on the role of empathy in this type of embarrassment, these findings suggest that there is more to vicarious embarrassment than empathy or perspective-taking.

© 2013 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Embarrassment is a self-conscious, unpleasant emotional response that results from violation of social conventions and expectations. Embarrassed individuals often feel that their self-image is threatened in the eyes of the others (Sabini, Siepmann, Stein, & Meyerowitz, 2000; Tangney, Miller, Flicker, & Barlow, 1996). Researchers suggested that embarrassment serves to restore social relations by acting as a nonverbal apology (Dijk, De Jong, & Peters, 2009; Goffman, 1956). More broadly, embarrassment has been conceptualized as a signal of one's prosociality and commitment to social relationships (Feinberg, Willner, & Keltner, 2012). Thus, embarrassment is associated with higher levels of fear of negative evaluation and lower self-esteem (Miller, 1995).

However, individuals sometimes also feel embarrassed in response to witnessing the embarrassing behaviors of others. For instance, seeing someone give a bad speech or presentation, or watching poor performances on TV shows like American Idol, may lead to feelings of discomfort and embarrassment in the observers. This emotional response to the mishaps of others is known as empathic embarrassment (Miller, 1987) or vicarious embarrassment (Krach et al., 2011).

At first glance, vicarious embarrassment (VE) might appear to be a more specific form of embarrassment. For instance, if the target (a person who is behaving in an embarrassing way) is a close other or an in-group member, vicarious embarrassment can be

conceptualized as being the same as embarrassment, an emotional response to a threat to one's self-image via their social identity (Chekroun & Nugier, 2011). However, vicarious embarrassment can occur even when the target is a stranger (Miller, 1987), independent of the target's intentionality of the embarrassing behavior or awareness of the nature of the situation (Krach et al., 2011). Moreover, even in situations where the targets do not display embarrassment, observers could still experience vicarious embarrassment if they imagine themselves in the target's situation or if they have a tendency toward perspective-taking (Hawk, Fischer, & Van Kleef, 2011). Research also shows that vicarious embarrassment is associated with fear of negative evaluation (Thornton, 2003), and liking the target promotes vicarious embarrassment (Stocks, Lishner, Waits, & Downum, 2011). These findings suggest that vicarious embarrassment is related to but different from embarrassment. It is related to embarrassment in the sense that it is an emotional response to violation of social norms and conventions. It is different from embarrassment in the sense that the person is merely an observer of a norm violating behavior that is displayed by a stranger. It appears as a complex emotional response involving fear of negative evaluation, empathy, perspective taking, and embarrassment. Therefore, we propose that individual differences in the tendency to experience vicarious embarrassment would be different from individual differences in susceptibility to embarrassment, as well as, in other related constructs.

1.1. The present studies

First, we are not aware of any measures that assess vicarious embarrassment as an individual difference variable. However,

* Corresponding author. Address: Middle East Technical University, Department of Psychology, Dumlupınar Blv. No: 1, 06800 Ankara, Turkey. Tel.: +90 312 2105943. E-mail address: uahmet@metu.edu.tr (A. Uysal).

everyone may not be susceptible to this emotion to the same extent. We propose that there are individual differences in the tendency to feel vicarious embarrassment; therefore, the first goal of this research was to develop a scale to measure VE and assess its association with other related constructs.

Second, as the term “empathic embarrassment” implies, the limited literature on this phenomenon focuses on the role of empathy. Even in situations where a target does not display any embarrassment, researchers suggested that environmental cues may still trigger empathy in the observers (Hawk et al., 2011; Miller, 1987). However, we think that embarrassment in response to the behaviors of others may not be completely due to empathic responding. Therefore, a second goal was to examine the uniqueness of the VE scale, with regard to individual differences in empathy, perspective-taking, susceptibility to embarrassment, and fear of negative evaluation.

In Study 1, we measured VE with an eight item scale, and examined its association with related constructs such as empathy, perspective-taking, susceptibility to embarrassment, fear of negative evaluation, and self-esteem. We expected that VE would be associated positively with empathy, perspective-taking, susceptibility to embarrassment, and fear of negative evaluation. On the other hand, we expected a negative association with self-esteem, as individuals with low self-esteem are more susceptible to embarrassment (Miller, 1995).

In Study 2, we used the VE scale and examined its unique association with the experience of vicarious embarrassment in a laboratory setting. That is, we tested whether the VE scale would predict embarrassment in response to an embarrassing performance by a stranger in a video clip, independent of susceptibility to embarrassment, empathy, perspective-taking, and fear of negative evaluation.

2. Study 1

2.1. Method

2.1.1. Participants and procedure

Undergraduate students ($N = 182$, 107 female, 75 male) from introductory psychology classes participated in the study in exchange for extra credit. Participants' ages ranged from 18 to 29 years ($M = 21.6$, $SD = 1.74$). Participants completed an online questionnaire packet that included measures of empathy, perspective-taking, susceptibility to embarrassment, vicarious embarrassment, fear of negative evaluation, and self-esteem, along with other measures that are not related to this study.¹

2.1.2. Materials

2.1.2.1. Empathy and perspective-taking. Empathy and perspective-taking were measured by the two subscales of the Interpersonal Reactivity Index developed by Davis (1980). The empathy subscale contains seven items (i.e., “I often have tender, concerned feelings for people less fortunate than me”), and the perspective taking subscale also contains seven items (i.e., “I try to look at everybody's side of a disagreement before I make a decision”). Participants rated the items using a scale of 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*), with higher scores indicating higher empathy and perspective-taking. The alpha reliability coefficients were .81 and .80 for the empathy and perspective-taking subscales, respectively.

¹ The other constructs measured in the package were self-concealment, basic need satisfaction, parental control, self-monitoring, and emotion regulation. None of these scales were significantly correlated with VES (except for self-concealment in Study 1, $r = .20$, $p < .01$). The order of the scales were fixed and the VE scale always appeared first in both studies.

2.1.2.2. Susceptibility to embarrassment. Susceptibility to embarrassment was measured by 10 items selected from the Susceptibility to Embarrassment Scale (SES; Kelly & Jones, 1997). Participants rated the items (e.g., “I feel humiliated if I make a mistake in front of a group”) on a 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) scale, with higher scores indicating higher susceptibility to embarrassment. In the current study, the alpha coefficient was .88.

2.1.2.3. Vicarious embarrassment. Vicarious embarrassment was measured by the Vicarious Embarrassment Scale (VES), an eight item scale developed by the authors for this study (Table 1). Two items were adapted from the Susceptibility to Embarrassment Scale (e.g., “I feel embarrassed if someone makes a mistake in front of a crowd”), and six additional items were developed by the authors to capture the tendency to feel embarrassed on behalf of strangers. Participants rated the items on a 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) scale, with higher scores indicating higher levels of vicarious embarrassment. In the current study, the alpha coefficient was .92.

2.1.2.4. Fear of negative evaluation. Fear of negative evaluation was measured by the Fear of Negative Evaluation Scale (Leary, 1983). The scale consists of 12 items (e.g., “I worry about what other people will think of me even when I know it doesn't make any difference”). Participants rated the items on a 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) scale, with higher scores indicating higher fear of negative evaluation. In the current study, the alpha coefficient was .93.

2.1.2.5. Self-esteem. Self-esteem was measured by the Rosenberg Self-esteem scale (Rosenberg, 1965). Participants rated the items (e.g., “On the whole, I am satisfied with myself”) on a 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) scale, with higher scores indicating higher levels of self-esteem. In the current study, the alpha coefficient was .92.

2.2. Results and discussion

2.2.1. Factor structure

Initially, we examined the factor structure of the scale. We conducted an exploratory factor analysis using principal axis factoring extraction method. There was only one factor with an Eigenvalue greater than one. The factor accounted for 61.45% of the variance. Communalities and factor-loadings of the items are provided in Table 1.

Next, we conducted confirmatory factor analysis using the MPLUS software (Muthen & Muthen, 2010). All items were defined as indicators of one latent variable, and we used the maximum likelihood estimation. However, the model fit was not acceptable ($\chi^2(20) = 72.9$, $p < .001$, RMSEA = .12, SRMR = .04). An examination of the residual correlation matrix indicated considerable residual correlations between items 1 and 2, and items 5 and 7. Items 1 and 2 were semantically similar, thus we modified the model to allow for residual correlation between the two error terms. However, we had no theoretical justification for the residual correlation between items 5 and 7; thus, we did not make any further modifications. The final model with correlated errors for items 1 and 2 provided an acceptable fit to the data ($\chi^2(19) = 33.6$, $p = .02$; RMSEA = .06, SRMR = .03).² The factor loadings for the confirmatory factor analysis are provided in Table 1.

² When we also allowed for residual correlations between items 5 and 7, the model showed a good fit ($\chi^2(18) = 24.7$, $p = .13$, RMSEA = .05).

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/890517>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/890517>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)