

Social Transgressions, Social Perspectives, and Social Emotionality¹

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This paper reports two studies on the interrelations involving social transgressions, the perspectives from which the actor who commits such a transgression is evaluated, and the extent and quality of the emotionality experienced by the actor. The first experiment examined subjects' perceptions of vignettes depicting transgressions that were either low or relatively high in apparent intent. The phrasing of the situation descriptions and ensuing questions led subjects to rate the actor in each vignette from one of four social perspectives, corresponding to self-image, public image, subjective public image, and inferred subjective public image. As predicted, dispositional ratings made from the two latter perspectives were more evaluatively negative than were ratings made from the two former perspectives, and ratings were more negative where the transgressions were relatively high in apparent intent. In the second experiment, the quality of the actor's posttransgression subjective public image was varied (positive, neutral, or negative), and subjects were asked to rate how the actor felt. As predicted, ratings of negative emotionality were higher and ratings of positive emotionality were lower when subjective public image was negative. The results of the two studies are interpreted as supporting an impression management theory of social emotionality.

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The studies reported here are concerned with the evaluation of those who commit social transgressions, and with the relationship between such evaluation and the negative social emotions often experienced by actors who make blunders or *faux pas*. Social emotions are defined as those affective states that are experienced either exclusively or with greater intensity before a real or imagined audience (cf. Semin & Manstead, in press). A classic example of this social emotionality is the embarrassment an individual tends to experience, say, after upsetting a tier of cans in a crowded supermarket, or after introducing somebody by the wrong name. The experience of social emotions in situations involving the violation of social norms is thought to be closely related to the image of the actor who commits the transgression (cf. Modigliani, 1968, 1971; Semin & Manstead, in press). This image can be construed from a number of different social perspectives, and these will be examined in turn.

Because the social transgressions of the type we have in mind are typically accidental and episodic in nature, they should carry very limited implications for the actors' *self-image* (SI). In other words, the actor's self-image should not be greatly disturbed by such transgressions. This reasoning is consistent with Modigliani's (1968, 1971) failure to support his contention that embarrassment is accompanied by a loss of "situational self-esteem," and with our earlier (in press) study, which found that actors were seen to evaluate themselves neutrally following unintentional social transgressions. If we now consider an observer's impression of the actor—what we shall call the actor's *public image* (PI)—it is assumed that this too is unaffected by the actor's blunder, since the transgression is typically unintentional and is usually of no great consequence to an observer. In other words, observers are not inclined to make dispositional attributions to actors under such circumstances, a possibility acknowledged in passing by Jones and Nisbett (1972, p. 80).

A third perspective from which the actor's image can be construed is the actor's perception of how he or she is seen by an observer—what we shall call the actor's *subjective public image* (SPI). Let us assume that the actor is aware of the fact that he or she has violated a socially endorsed rule, and knows that he or she can execute it competently in the normal course of events. In this particular instance, however, the execution fails and this failure is witnessed by an observer. The actor will also be aware that *regular* failure on the part of an individual to perform "routine activities" such as walking, holding a conversation, and so on, would lead others to evaluate this individual negatively. It is argued that the actor's personal involvement in the encounter following the blunder results in a peculiarly egocentric orientation, leading the actor to imagine that observers construe him or her not simply as a "figure" against the backdrop of routine activity but as a figure with *personal identity*, who fails to perform competently on this

occasion and who may do so again in the future. In other words, it is argued that actors who commit social transgressions assume their public image to be negative. They are naive attribution theorists, drawing conclusions about the inferences others make as a result of the transgression.

A fourth perspective from which the actor's image can be considered is the *observer's perception* of the actor's subjective public image—what we shall call the actor's *inferred subjective public image* (ISPI). Quite simply, it is proposed that the observer who witnesses an actor's blunder has empathic access to the actor's SPI and that the inferred subjective public image will therefore also be negative.

The central hypothesis arising from these considerations is that the actor's image will vary in evaluative terms as a function of the perspective from which it is construed. Specifically, it was expected that the image as perceived from the two "metaperspectives" (SPI and ISPI) would be more negative than that perceived from the two "direct perspectives" (SI and PI). A further issue concerns the role played by the apparent intent underlying the transgression. Following correspondent inference theory (Jones & Davis, 1965), it was predicted that transgressions with an element of apparent intent would be more likely to give rise to negative evaluations of the actor than would transgressions with no apparent intent. However, there was no basis for anticipating that social perspective and apparent intent would interact in determining evaluations of the actor. Even where apparent intent was relatively high, therefore, the two metaperspectives were expected to result in more negative evaluations than the two direct perspectives. These hypotheses were tested in the first of the two studies to be reported.

EXPERIMENT 1

Method

Overview. In a role-playing study, subjects were presented with four descriptions of situations involving social transgressions. On the basis of pretests, two of these transgressions were known to have high apparent intent, while the other two were known to have very low apparent intent. For half of the subjects these vignettes were described from the point of view of the actor concerned, and subjects were asked to answer from the actor's position. Some had to make self-evaluative ratings on behalf of the actor (SI), while others had to make similar ratings to indicate how the actor thought he or she would be evaluated by a bystander (SPI). For remaining subjects the vignettes were described from the point of view of an observer who witnesses the transgression, and subjects were asked to respond from

the observer's perspective. Some had to make evaluative ratings of the actor (PI), while others had to make similar ratings to indicate an observer's perception of how the actor thought he or she would be evaluated by a bystander (ISPI).

Subjects. Sixty 1st-year undergraduate students of psychology at the University of Manchester participated in this study. Participation was in partial fulfillment of a course requirement.

Materials. On the basis of pretests, four situation descriptions were selected. The two "low intent" vignettes involved dropping an object on display in a store while examining it ("store"), and spilling a drink over some strangers while in a pub ("pub"). The two "high intent" vignettes involved having a discussion at a party and criticizing the inhabitants of a country in front of someone who turns out to be from that country ("party"), and being discovered at a library checkout point with an unstamped library book in one's bag ("library"). As explained previously, these vignettes were described either from the actor's or from an observer's point of view (e.g., "You have just bought a round of drinks in a pub. In trying to carry them, you spill a pint over some strangers sitting at another table" or "You are drinking in a crowded pub. You notice someone who has just bought a round of drinks. In trying to carry them, this person spills a pint over some strangers sitting at another table").

Procedure. Half the subjects received four vignettes described from the actor's perspective, while the other half received four vignettes described from an observer's perspective. Half of those receiving actor vignettes were asked, "How would you describe yourself, on the basis of your behavior in this incident?" (SI), while the other half were asked, "How do you think a bystander would describe you, having witnessed the above incident?" (SPI). Half of those receiving the observer vignettes were asked, "How would you describe this person, having witnessed the above incident?" (PI), while the other half were asked, "How do you imagine *this person thinks* he or she would be described by others who have witnessed the above incident?" (ISPI). Fifteen subjects were randomly allocated to each of these four subgroups, and presentation of the four vignettes was randomized within each condition.

Subjects were instructed to respond to these questions by circling 1 point on each of 10 7-point bipolar "dispositional" rating scales. These scales had end points labeled cautious-reckless, sociable-unsociable, unpleasant-pleasant, tolerant-intolerant, insincere-sincere, friendly-unfriendly, cold-warm, reliable-unreliable, unpopular-popular, likable-unlikable. The 7 scale points were verbally anchored by the terms *very, moderately, slightly, neither, slightly, moderately, and very*. These dispositional rating scales were intended to tap a broad evaluative dimension of impression formation.

Results

Prior to data analysis, 4 of the 10 rating scales were reversed in order to render all these scales consistent with respect to evaluative connotation. A composite dispositional rating index was then formed by averaging across the 10 scales. The reliability of this index was assessed by computing Cronbach's alpha. The resulting coefficient ($\alpha = .847$) was deemed to be satisfactorily high.

Scores on this dispositional rating index were entered into a two-way analysis of variance, with perspective (SI, PI, SPI, or ISPI) as a between-subjects factor and intent (high or low) as a within-subjects factor. This analysis revealed that the perspective manipulation produced a significant main effect ($F(3, 56) = 2.99, p < .04$). The mean scores for each level of the perspective manipulation are shown in Table I. It can be seen that the pattern of means is consistent with the first hypothesis and that the metaperspectives SPI and ISPI did result in reliably more negative dispositional ratings than did the direct perspectives SI and PI.

The analysis of variance also revealed a significant main effect due to the intent manipulation ($F(1, 120) = 111.66, p < .001$). Consistent with the second hypothesis, the dispositional ratings made in the low intent condition were less negative ($M = 4.24$) than were those made in the high intent condition ($M = 4.98$). The interaction between perspective and intent was nonsignificant.

Discussion

The results of this first study support the proposition that actors who commit a social transgression are seen to *assume* that observers make negative dispositional attributions on the basis of the actor's behavior, although actors themselves are not seen to make negative *self-attributions*

Table I. Mean Dispositional Rating Index Scores, by Social Perspective^{a,b}

Social perspective			
SI	PI	SPI	ISPI
4.45 _a	4.38 _a	4.80 _b	4.82 _b

^aHigher scores indicate more negative ratings (7-point scale).

^bMeans not sharing a common subscript differ significantly ($p < .05$) by Duncan's multiple-range test.

and observers are not seen to make negative attributions to the actor. These findings are consistent with those obtained in a previous study (Semin & Manstead, *in press*). A further feature of the present findings is that observers were seen as being able to empathize with the actor's assumption that his/her transgressive behavior results in negative evaluations by observers.

The role played by variation in the apparent intent underlying the transgression also conformed to predictions, in that dispositional attributions to the actor were more negative when the transgression was relatively high rather than low in apparent intent. This finding is consistent with one of the principal assumptions of the Jones and Davis (1965) theory of correspondent inferences, namely, that behavior has to be seen as having been intended before observers draw dispositional inferences about the actor.

Finally, it is noted that the present findings do not conform to the Jones and Nisbett (1972) proposition that actors tend to make situational attributions for behavior, while observers tend to make dispositional attributions for that same behavior. In the present study, ratings made from the PI perspective were no more extreme than were ratings made from the SI perspective. Previous work (e.g., Gould & Sigall, 1977; Regan & Totten, 1975) found that instructions either to empathize with an actor or simply to observe an actor were sufficient to produce divergent attributions among observer subjects, but the present manipulation of direct social perspectives did not yield any attributional discrepancy. Of course, there are a number of differences between the present study and this previous work that might account for the apparent inconsistency in findings. Both Regan and Totten (1975) and Gould and Sigall (1977) presented their subjects with videotaped rather than written vignettes. Furthermore, the two earlier studies were primarily concerned with the extent to which observer subjects exposed to different instructional sets made divergent attributions on a situational-dispositional continuum, whereas the present focus is exclusively on the evaluative nature—and therefore the extremity—of dispositional attributions. One might nevertheless have expected to find evidence that ratings made from the PI perspective would be more negative, and therefore reflect a greater tendency to make dispositional attributions, than those made from the SI perspective. The failure to find such a difference cannot be accounted for simply in terms of the accidental, and therefore trivial, nature of the behavior in question because, even under relatively high apparent intent, there was no reliable difference in extremity of attribution.

While the present findings support the notion that actors' social transgressions are seen as having negative consequences for the way they

think they are evaluated by observers, but not for the way they evaluate themselves or the way in which others actually do evaluate actors, this study did not examine the relationship between the quality of the actor's subjective public image and the quality and degree of his or her social emotionality. This latter issue was therefore addressed in a second investigation.

EXPERIMENT 2

The aim of this study was to clarify the relationship between social evaluation and social emotionality by manipulating the quality of the actor's subjective public image following a social transgression, and examining the impact of this manipulation on reported emotionality.

Since it was shown in Experiment 1 that neither the actor's self-image nor his/her public image is significantly modified by committing a social transgression, it follows that the source of any negative emotionality experienced by the actor following the transgression does not reside in the quality of social evaluations made from either of these direct perspectives. On the other hand, it was found that the two metaperspectives (SPI and ISPI) were those from which the actor was negatively evaluated. It is therefore argued that social emotions ensuing from unintentional social transgressions have their origin in the negative quality of the actor's subjective public image following the transgression. In other words, the actor experiences tension, embarrassment, anxiety, etc., because he or she imagines that others evaluate him/her more negatively as a consequence of the witnessed blunder, despite the fact that the actor's self-image is unaffected by the incident.

Support for this line of reasoning was found in a previous study (Semin & Manstead, in press). There it was shown that the amount of negative emotionality ascribed to an actor following a social transgression was positively and reliably correlated with the size of the discrepancy between ratings of the actor's self-image and ratings of the actor's subjective public image. However, the correlational nature of this evidence precluded any inferences about the nature and direction of any causal relationship between social emotionality and evaluative discrepancy. In the present study the quality of the actor's subjective public image was experimentally manipulated within each of three situation descriptions. It was hypothesized that reported negative emotionality would be a positive function of the negativity of the actor's subjective public image.

Method

Subjects. Thirty-six undergraduate students at the University of Sussex participated in this study on a voluntary, unpaid basis.

Materials. On the basis of pretests, three situation descriptions were selected. These were matched as closely as possible with respect to mean ratings of (1) the actor's embarrassment following the blunder, (2) the perceived intentionality of the transgression, (3) the actor's responsibility for the transgression, and (4) the degree of social anxiety generated by the incident. The three vignettes selected involved answering a TV quiz program question at great length and with elaborate justifications, only to find that one is wrong; having a discussion at a party and criticizing the inhabitant of a country in front of someone who turns out to be from that country; and having to admit to someone for whom one has promised to do a favor that one still has not done it. Each of these three vignettes was described from the actor's point of view.

SPI Manipulation. Following each situation description, the quality of the actor's subjective public image was manipulated by adding one of the following sentences: (1) "However, the impression you have of the reactions of this person (the audience) is that he (they) is (are) favorably and sympathetically disposed toward you and is (are) prepared to overlook the incident" (*positive SPI*); (2) "However, the impression you have of the reactions of this person (the audience) is that he (they) is (are) unconcerned and not really interested one way or the other" (*neutral SPI*); (3) "The impression you have of the reactions of this person (the audience) is that he (they) is (are) unfavorably and unsympathetically disposed toward you" (*negative SPI*).

Procedure. Each subject received all three situation descriptions, each of which was paired with a different level of the SPI manipulation. The pairing of situations with levels of SPI was counterbalanced across the experiment, such that six subjects were exposed to each of the six possible combinations. The order of presentation of vignettes was also counterbalanced within each of these combinations. Following each vignette, subjects were asked, "How would you describe your feelings in this situation?" and were instructed to respond to this question by circling 1 point on each of 12 5-point unipolar rating scales. Adjacent to each scale was one of the following emotional descriptors: tense, happy, excited, self-conscious, upset, amused, embarrassed, calm, anxious, relaxed, nervous, self-confident. The 5 scale points were anchored by the terms *not at all*, *a little*, *moderately*, *very*, and *extremely*. These rating scales were intended to tap both positive and negative emotional reactions.

Results

Six of the 12 emotion rating scales were assumed to tap negative affect. These were tense, self-conscious, upset, embarrassed, anxious, and nervous. Scores on these six scales were averaged to form a single index of negative emotionality, and the reliability of this index was found to be satisfactory (Cronbach's alpha = .911). Similarly, another five of the emotion rating scales were assumed to tap positive affect. These were happy, amused, calm, relaxed, and self-confident. Averaging the scores on these five scales to form a single index of positive affect also resulted in a highly reliable index (Cronbach's alpha = .854).

Scores on these two indices were then entered into separate one-way analyses of variance, using quality of SPI (positive, neutral, or negative) as a within-subjects factor. Since the three situation descriptions had been carefully matched on the basis of pretests, no attempt was made to partial out variation in scores due to differences between situations. Analysis of the negative emotionality index scores revealed a highly significant main effect ($F(2, 70) = 25.08, p < .0001$). Further analysis showed that the mean score for the negative SPI condition ($M = 3.64$) was significantly greater ($p < .01$, Newman-Keuls) than the mean scores for both the neutral SPI condition ($M = 2.62$) and the positive SPI condition ($M = 2.54$), although the latter two conditions were not reliably different from each other.

Analysis of the positive emotionality index scores also revealed a significant main effect ($F(2, 70) = 11.36, p < .0001$). Further analysis indicated that the mean score for the negative SPI condition ($M = 1.48$) was significantly lower ($p < .01$) than the mean scores for both the neutral SPI condition ($M = 2.09$) and the positive SPI condition ($M = 2.08$). Once again, the latter two conditions did not differ reliably from each other.

Discussion

The results of the second study provide good support for the prediction that ratings of negative emotionality would be a function of the negativity of the actor's subjective public image. Scores on the negative emotionality index were significantly higher and those on the positive emotionality index were significantly lower when the actor's subjective public image was negative than when it was either neutral or positive. It is interesting to note that the positive SPI condition neither reduced negative affect nor enhanced positive affect by comparison with the neutral SPI condition. This lack of difference between the neutral and positive SPI

conditions might either reflect the fact that subjects found the positive SPI condition to be lacking in credibility, or result from the fact that being ignored, as in the neutral condition, is from the actor's point of view the best possible outcome of a blunder committed in public, and cannot be improved upon by knowledge that the audience thinks well of the actor. While the second of these two possible explanations seems more intuitively appealing, the present data do not provide any means of discriminating between them.

One question that naturally arises in the light of the present findings is why it is that the actor's assumption that he or she is evaluated negatively following a social transgression should give rise to emotional experience. This question can perhaps be answered best by considering what might happen should the actor *not* experience any emotional reaction. The actor who does not experience affect following a public blunder will not, unless by dissimulation, communicate to others through nonverbal channels that he or she is feeling emotional. The actor who does not display emotion following a disruptive incident would encourage observers to infer that the disruption is not an unusual occurrence for this actor, who therefore either has no respect for the rule or norm in question or lacks the basic competence required to behave appropriately. Either way, the actor who does not appear to feel emotional will encourage the audience to make dispositional inferences on the basis of the witnessed incident. The point is that emotional responses, such as embarrassment, are reasonably easy to decode via nonverbal channels (cf. Buss, 1980; Edelman & Hampson, 1979, 1981; Goffman, 1956; Modigliani, 1971) and can therefore serve as a signal to observers that the transgression they have witnessed is an exceptional occurrence for this actor. This line of reasoning suggests that the apparent experience of emotion following a blunder serves a social function whether the actor knows it or not, for it reassures the observer that the actor recognizes that some norm or rule has been violated, and it might therefore lead observers to view the actor more positively than would otherwise be the case. The present authors have recently found evidence consistent with this suggestion (Semin & Manstead, submitted).

The affective consequences of social transgressions have also been considered in a different context by researchers concerned with the relationship between mood and helping behavior. Several studies have shown that committing a transgression results in increased helping behavior (e.g., Freedman, Wallington, & Bless, 1967; Regan, 1971; Regan, Williams, & Sparling, 1972; Wallace & Sadalla, 1966). Cialdini, Darby, and Vincent (1973) have proposed a "negative state relief" model to explain these transgression-helping effects. This model holds that transgression produces negative affect, that altruistic behavior alleviates negative affect because it is personally gratifying for the altruist, and that the transgressor's enhanced

helping behavior therefore reflects an attempt to relieve negative affect by helping others.

The present theoretical approach shares with the Cialdini et al. (1973) proposed explanation the idea that committing a transgression leads to negative affect. However, we would anticipate that at least some portion of the negative affect resulting from a transgression committed in public would arise from the actor's belief that his or her subjective public image is diminished by the transgression, and that the amount of negative affect experienced would therefore be greater in the case of public transgressions. Consistent with such an interpretation are two studies showing that transgressions believed by subjects to be private had a substantially reduced impact on helping behavior (Katzew, Edelsack, Steinmetz, Walker, & Wright, 1978; Wallace & Sadalla, 1966).

Taken together, the present studies provide a good measure of experimental support for a new theoretical model, which holds that the social emotionality that is often experienced by actors following unintentional social transgressions has its origin in the quality of the actor's subjective public image. The more negatively the actor thinks he or she is being evaluated by others who have witnessed the blunder, the more negative will be the actor's emotional experience. It seems possible that this experience of emotion will, by being apparent to observers, help to preempt the negative evaluations that the actor assumes others to make as a result of the transgression.

It might be objected that the present findings are limited by virtue of the fact that they arise from studies employing a role-playing methodology. Nisbett and Wilson (1977) have argued that people do not have access to cognitive processes that cause behavior. This argument leads inexorably to the conclusion that nothing would be gained by having subjects actually commit social transgressions, since interrogating these subjects about the reasons for any negative affect arising from such transgressions would, in Nisbett and Wilson's view, result in reports based on "implicit, a priori theories about the causal connection between stimulus and response" (p. 233). Because these implicit theories are thought to be shared by subjects and observers alike, the Nisbett and Wilson argument "leads to the expectation that observer predictions should be as accurate as subject reports" (Nisbett & Bellows, 1977, p. 615).

Recent critiques of the Nisbett and Wilson thesis all point strongly to the conclusion that it is too extreme and that under certain conditions subjects are able to report accurately on their mental processes (Ericsson & Simon, 1980; Rich, 1979; Smith & Miller, 1978; White, 1980). While this implies that, under such conditions, subjects' perceptions of causal factors will generally be more accurate than those of observers, this does not necessarily imply that observers' perceptions will be inaccurate. In particular,

we would suggest that when the events on which observers are asked to report are familiar to them, at least in kind if not in specific details, then their reports are likely to be an accurate reflection of the reports they would make had the events in question actually befallen them. It is therefore contended that the use of a role-playing methodology in the present studies does not seriously limit the validity of the findings, although it is recognized that this remains a matter of conjecture in the absence of a conclusive demonstration. It should perhaps be added that in opting for a role-playing methodology for these studies, the investigators had in mind the ethical problems associated with having subjects commit transgressions, as well as the procedural difficulties that would be involved in running in situ experiments.

Clearly, there are still many questions concerning social emotionality that remain unanswered. For example, the present studies have focused exclusively on social transgressions, and therefore upon negative emotional states. It may be that actions that *enhance* the actor's subjective public image lead the actor to experience *positive* emotions, in parallel fashion. Furthermore, it is not clear whether emotional states such as embarrassment and self-consciousness, which have been defined as social emotions in that they are experienced almost exclusively in a public context, have counterparts among the positive emotions. It may be that pride and love are positive social emotions. Finally, the central role that the actor's subjective public image has been shown to play in connection with relatively trivial social transgressions, whether these are patently accidental or carry the possibility of having been intended, may not extend to disruptions and transgressions of a more serious nature. Indeed, it seems likely that transgressions that lead the actor to feel guilty or ashamed, rather than self-conscious or embarrassed, do so precisely because the actor's *self-image* is diminished by the transgression. Further research is needed to clarify the relationship between the relatively narrow range of emotional reactions that have been studied here and the wider context of emotional experience.

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