Embarrassment in Narrative: Why people tell embarrassing stories of themselves

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Introduction

It is peculiar that stories of personal embarrassment emerge in everyday conversation, since they place the narrator in a compromised position and may cause the narrator to lose face or social standing. Yet narrative is an integral part of our thinking, and indeed “the stories that we tell about our own and others' lives are a pervasive form of text through which we construct, interpret, and share experience” (Schiffrin, 1996:167). The fact that people willingly construct and tell narratives of their embarrassing moments suggests that such narratives carry important social and interpretive functions, since stories serve as “ways of interpreting experience and as means of communicating to others” (Baumeister and Newman, 1994:679). In this paper, I will argue that people narrate their embarrassing moments for both interpersonal and personal reasons. People tell embarrassing stories to gain empathy and build rapport among interlocutors, and narration helps the individual recover from an embarrassing episode by reconstructing it as a tellable story.

In this article, prior research on embarrassment and narrative will be reviewed to provide the framework and basis for this study. I will then analyze two narratives of embarrassing episodes, and identify the functions of such narratives by examining features of both the narrative and narrated event. The narrative event, or the act of narration itself, reveals the narrator's interpersonal motives as he negotiates social interaction. The way the narrated event, or the actual embarrassing episode, is constructed reveals the narrator's personal motives, since it represents how the narrator has rewritten the embarrassing moment into his biography. I will argue that people’s interpersonal motives for telling embarrassing stories are to gain empathy and build rapport, and their personal reason is to recover from an embarrassing episode by reconstructing it as a reportable story. The analyzed narratives were set in an interview, where each subject was prompted to recall and narrate an embarrassing episode.
Embarrassment, Narrative Identity and Disclosure

In his seminal work on embarrassment, Goffman (1956:264) characterizes it as a state of emotional discomfort felt in the presence of others, indicated by objective signs of emotional disturbance such as blushing or stuttering. It can take on an abrupt and sudden nature, or it can be sustained at some level throughout a social encounter, where participants speak of an embarrassing situation rather than an incident (Goffman, 1956:265).

The study of embarrassment provides a window into self and identity, although scholars provide varying accounts of how it does so. In early works on embarrassment in microsociology, embarrassment is viewed as an indicator of when an individual has failed in his display of a coherent self in the interaction with others. Goffman (1956:268) argues that during social interaction, individuals are “expected to possess certain attributes, capacities and information which, taken together, fit together into a self that is at once coherently unified and appropriate for the occasion.” Embarrassment occurs when these claims are discredited by an event, and an individual can no longer project the same coherent self in the social encounter (Goffman, 1956:268). Analysis of embarrassment also assists the study of people’s role-performance within social interaction. According to Gross and Stone (1964:3), since embarrassment incapacitates persons for role performance, the analysis of the circumstances in which it occurs reveals the “requirements necessary for role-playing, role-taking, role-making and role performance in general.” These requirements include coherent identities and participants’ control over self and situation, both of which are lost when embarrassment occurs (Gross and Stone, 1964:15). Another view is that embarrassment is associated with a loss of self-esteem, where a person “becomes aware that others perceive him to be deficient” (Modigliani 1968:325). More recently, Babcock (1988:462) provides a contrasting argument for a personal account of embarrassment, where “embarrassment reflects the individual’s recognition that he has deviated from his own standards or personae, not a fear that he has failed or fumbled in the eyes of another.” This paper will bridge the views of these scholars, and consider the coherent self, self-esteem, and deviation from personae theories as possible accounts of embarrassment.

Since recorded narratives are analyzed in this paper, prior work on narrative will be discussed. As defined by Labov (1997:3), a narrative of personal experience is a report of a sequence of events that have entered into the speaker’s biography. Narratives in general may include an abstract, orientation, complicating action clauses, evaluation and a coda (Labov 1997:5-6).

The study of narrative provides methodological tools to examine self and identity, since narrative is a key feature in our construction of social reality. According to Bruner (1991:4), we organize our experience and memory mainly in the form of narrative, and narrative “operates as an instrument of mind in the construction of reality” (Bruner, 1991:6). We recount and interpret our lives in the form of narrative, and in the process construct a narrative identity for ourselves. Indeed, Ricoeur (1991:32) argues that we constantly reinterpret this narrative identity in the light of narratives proposed to us by our culture, and “learn to become the narrator and the hero of our own story”. When we construct our lives in the form of narrative, we “position ourselves in relation to social and cultural expectations”
(Schiffrin 1996:170), and our identities as social beings emerge. In addition, within locally situated narrative events, how people tell their stories to an audience provides a window to their selves and the identity they are trying to project. As Schiffrin (1996:170) states, “the form of our stories (their textual structures), the content of our stories (what we tell about), and our story-telling behavior (how we tell our stories) are all sensitive indices not just of our personal selves, but also of our social and cultural identities.” Thus we not only construct biographical narratives of ourselves, but we also depict or project an identity within the act of narration.

Building upon research on narrative, studies on disclosure have identified specific reasons why people tell autobiographical narratives. As Baumeister and Newman (1994:680) have argued, narratives can be broadly distinguished between those that are “constructed and told primarily as instrumental devices for achieving some effect on other people”, and those that are “constructed in response to the narrator’s needs to make sense of his or her experiences”. Among the interpersonal motives, people construct and tell narratives to “obtain rewards for themselves”, “have others validate their identity claims”, “pass along information” or to “attract other people” (Baumeister and Newman, 1994:680). Personal or interpretive motives for constructing narratives involve fulfilling the needs for purpose, justification, efficacy and self-worth (Baumeister and Newman 1994:681). Furthermore, since embarrassment is a transgressive emotion, research on “troubles-talk” also illuminates this study. According to Pasupathi, McLean and Weeks (2009:116), disclosure is associated with “people’s capacity to interpret experiences in ways that foster coping, adaptation, and growth”. Through disclosure, transgressive experiences can be reworked to “lessen the impact of the transgression and even to make them positive and funny stories” (Pasupathi et al., 2009:116). Such stories “mitigate the negative implications of the transgressions for the self” (Pasupathi et al., 2009:117).

Taken as a whole, research on embarrassment, narrative and disclosure will allow us to analyze narratives of embarrassing episodes, and identify why people tell embarrassing stories of themselves. How the embarrassing episode is reconstructed, the identity which the narrator constructs for himself, and the interactions between narrator and interlocutor will illuminate our understanding of the social and interpretive functions of embarrassing stories.
Analysis of Narratives

Two narratives of embarrassing episodes, “Inappropriate attire” and “Angel and mortal”, will be analyzed in this section. Both stories were told from male university freshmen in an interview setting, where they were prompted to recall and narrate an embarrassing moment that they had. In the first story, the narrator recounts how he showed up for a seminar in completely inappropriate attire, whereas in the second story, the narrator describes a situation where his efforts to charm a girl were flatly rejected. The general theme of both narratives is similar; the narrator feels embarrassed because he has transgressed from the identity he was trying to depict, and has lost control over self and situation. I will analyze the narratives linguistically, by examining the structure and meaning of the narrative clauses. By understanding the narrators’ social maneuvers within the narrative event, and how they have constructed their narratives, I attempt to deduce the reasons why they construct and tell these embarrassing stories.

“Inappropriate attire”

This story, told by Joe, is about how he went to a seminar for a business competition in completely inappropriate attire, specifically a t-shirt, shorts and slippers, when everyone else went in formal wear. Given the formality of the situation, it being an event hosted by the National University of Singapore and Shell, embarrassment ensues when Joe realizes his improper attire has caused him to project an identity inconsistent with one he would like to depict. By showing up in a t-shirt and slippers, not knowing the dress code is formal, Joe had unintentionally portrayed himself as sloppy and indifferent when he would have preferred to display a more proper and decent image of himself.

The narrative begins just as Joe finishes recounting an embarrassing story involving breaking a urinal, which will not be analyzed here, and is prompted by the interviewer to recall and tell another one.

1  Joe: But this is not the funny embarrassment.
2  It’s the kind of... You feel so horrible embarrassment.

He begins this narrative by contrasting it with the previous one, which was of a lighter hearted nature, by describing the current story as “not the funny embarrassment” (1), highlighting the severity of the situation. By evaluating the episode as a “You feel so horrible” type of embarrassment (2), Joe attempts to place the interviewer in his shoes and generate empathy for his plight. This sets an empathetic mood for the rest of the narrative, as the interviewer has been induced to frame the narrative as one in which Joe has found himself in a serious predicament. He continues by orienting the interviewer to his embarrassing situation.

3  Joe: You know there was this case competition right? So there was this...
4  I got into the semi-finals, and as part of getting into the semi-finals we had to...
5  All the participants had to uh... enter into...
Sorry had to take part in a... kinda like a seminar where...

Ok 'cos this competition was co-organised by NUS and Shell.

So people from Shell came down and wanted to tell us about their business

and the attire was to be uh... I think formal?

Yeah it was formal... So just a shirt and a tie.

The gravity of the situation becomes clearer as Joe informs the interviewer that he had made it to the semi-finals of the competition (4), and that all the participants would be turning up for the seminar (5,6). Furthermore, representatives from Shell, a respected company, attended the event to introduce their business (8). The formality of the occasion is thus made very clear. After describing the attire required for the seminar (9,10), Joe explains how the embarrassing situation unfolded.

Joe: So my leader had this email, just that he didn’t email it to me and the other members who were supposed to go because we were representing our group.

So we didn’t know. And right... (laughter)

Interviewer: So what did you wear?

Joe: When we went there right, I went in kinda what I’m wearing... (laughter)

So when I went in right, I saw everybody in formal attire and I was like “oh my god”...

This was... (laughter) I felt so uncomfortable the whole time.

And yeah the slippers didn’t help as well... (laughter) Yeah so...

The reason for Joe’s predicament is revealed in line 11, and laughter ensues from both Joe and the interviewer as he starts to describe what he wore to the seminar. He describes it as “kinda what I’m wearing” (15), which during the interview was a t-shirt, shorts and slippers. He then narrates the most reportable event, showing up and seeing everyone in formal wear, by dramatizing it, exclaiming “oh my god” (16). Joe stresses how he felt “so uncomfortable” during the entire episode (17). These narrative techniques, showing what he wore and emphasizing how he felt, aid the transfer of experience as Joe seeks to place the interviewer in his shoes by making the imagery more vivid and real. This aligns with the emphatic mood Joe set from the beginning.

Interviewer: So did you all make it through to the last round?

Joe: Uh... No we didn’t get past the semi-finals...

Maybe because of that... (laughter)

Yeah it was horrible... It was not even a laughing matter on that day... (laughter)

It was like I was just hoping it would be over soon.

There was only two of us, like just me and this other girl but girl not so bad ‘cos they...

You know they still have some kind of standard that they want to uphold when it comes to dressing,

but for me you know when it’s after classes you can be a bit sloppy its ok...

Yeah that was woah...
Tellingly, a paradox emerges as humour is induced in Joe’s narrative even though he has clearly framed it as “horrible” (2) and “not even a laughing matter on that day” (22). He deliberately incites laughter by joking that “the slippers didn’t help as well” (18) and that he did not get past the semi-finals “Maybe because of that (his inappropriate attire)” (21). While being very clear that the embarrassing episode was awful, Joe has constructed it as a humorous story rather than a solemn one. By doing so, a transgressive experience, one in which Joe had unwillingly displayed a negative image of himself and deviated from his usual personae, has been reconstructed as a funny, reportable story. Coherency is restored within Joe’s autobiographical narrative, since he can readily account for the sloppiness he unwillingly displayed during an episode in his life, and is no longer conflicted with an inconsistent sense of self. Humour also aids in engaging with his interlocutor as it builds rapport and affinity. The interviewer, through hearing the embarrassing episode as a funny story, now becomes a co-narrator of Joe’s life, since “telling others about our everyday emotional experiences permits close others to be collaborators in the process of writing our life stories” (Pasupathi et al., 2009:116). By having somebody else remember the narrative as a funny episode, this version of the narrative is further secured in both Joe’s and the interviewer’s memories.

Through the telling of this narrative, not only does Joe generate empathy and rapport with his interlocutor, his experience and memory of that embarrassing episode are reconstructed as a funny story. The act of narration ensures that a positive version of the story is remembered by both Joe and his interlocutor.

“Angel and mortal”

The next story was told by Sam, and is about a game of Angel and Mortal, in which “angels” were supposed to give gifts to their “mortals” without revealing who they were. He recounts how he made a great effort to charm and please his “mortal”, only to be rejected at the end. Embarrassment ensued as the identity and image he had tried to depict, that of a charming and sweet guy, was utterly discredited when his “mortal” revealed that she was not impressed by her “angel’s” efforts. Sam begins the narrative by describing the game, and the rest of it is as follows.

1  Sam: Ok so for this game that I was playing they wanted to make it...
2  Like my mortal was this girl.
3  And like, I wanted to be, you know, the kind of quite sweet and quite charming kind of guy.
4  You know... I just wanted to play as a nice guy.

Sam orients the interviewer by describing the identity he had tried to portray, that of a sweet, charming and nice guy (3,4). The use of “you know” in lines 3 and 4, and its subsequent use in the rest of the narrative, shows the engagement and affinity he tries to create between himself and his interlocutor. It suggests he wants the interviewer to understand his motives and actions. His description of how he “just wanted to play as a nice guy” also induces empathy in the interviewer. Sam continues the narrative by describing what he did for his mortal.
Sam: So like, the girl was my friend so I decided I wanted to do something kind of extraordinary, 'cos like, you know people just keep giving like chocolates and sweets and food and it's really like so cliché.

So I had this brilliant idea to make towel animals. And I'm not sure if you know about this but if you want you can go and look it up on Google, probably you will see some of them. And I thought that would be a really good idea so what I did was I went to get some towels and every day I would fold one.

Sam further develops his identity as a sweet guy, as he narrates how felt he was doing something extraordinary and brilliant by folding towel animals, instead of giving clichéd gifts like chocolates (5-8). His suggestion to the interviewer to look up towel animals on Google further shows he wants to build affinity and have the interviewer understand his purposes.

Sam: Like the first day I folded an elephant and left it outside her door and like uh...

It was quite interesting... 'cos the first day like uh...

When I just kept doing it and she left notes like “Thank you”...

And you know uh... like “I appreciate it” and stuff like that.

And I thought like “Hey! You’re doing well!” And I thought that you know, I was really turning up the charm and impressing the girl. (laughter)

Direct speech used in lines 15 to 17 aids in the transfer of experience and creation of affinity, as Sam’s experience and feelings are clearly presented to the interviewer. At this stage, an identity of Sam within the narrative event, that is, within the interview itself, begins to emerge. Within the interview, Sam has depicted himself as just wanting to be a nice guy (4), believing that he was doing something brilliant (8), and genuinely thinking that he was doing well to impress the girl (18). He has thus set himself up as a victim and a fool who was mistaken in his good intentions. This identity as a misunderstood person is depicted consistently throughout the narrative, and its implications will be discussed later on. Sam continues his narrative by explaining the events leading up to the embarrassing moment.

Sam: But alas! So what happened is uh...

Right at the end of this whole angel and mortal game there would be a reveal. And during the reveal like um...

The mortal has to go up and share what his or her angel did for him or her, and like what’s something he or she really felt touched by.

And so I was eagerly awaiting my mortal to come up, and to my horror, and great surprise, (laughter)

when she came up she was like “Um... My angel was pretty useless...” (laughter)

And I got the shock of my life 'cos I thought that like all this while I was doing a really good job, but I realised that I kinda failed (laughter) in the regard.
And so like the moment came when I had to go up and reveal that I’m the guy, the useless guy... (laughter)

And I went up...

Just as Joe did in “Inappropriate Attire”, Sam invokes humour in his embarrassing narrative, even though the revelation came to his horror and great surprise (25), and he had the shock of his life (27). He exaggerates what his “mortal” said, joking that she said he was “pretty useless” (26). The use of humour, and Sam’s own portrayal of himself as “useless” (26,31), are aligned with the narrative identity he has thus constructed for himself, that of a buffoon and a victim whose good intentions were misunderstood. While humour helps build rapport with his interlocutor, the identity of a foolish, misunderstood victim that Sam has constructed for himself is a benign one. Just like Joe, Sam could have constructed his narrative in a more solemn tone, and depicted himself as a transgressor. For example, he could have narrated that he was genuinely useless and inept at charming a girl. Instead, the entire episode is framed as a funny story, and the identity Sam has constructed is that of a victim and a fool. This benign identity poses less of a threat to Sam’s sense of self, and is less of a deviation from his ideal personae.

Sam concludes his story in the following lines.

Sam: And to make matters worse it was like I knew her before and she was my friend, and just earlier that night she was telling me how she thinks her angel has no time to do all this stuff... (laughter) And yeah that was pretty much one of the most embarrassing moments of my life.

Findings

Clearly, the narration of embarrassing stories has social and interpretive functions which, once identified, resolve the peculiarity that why people should risk losing face by telling such stories. Narrators of embarrassing stories reconstruct them as funny and harmless situations rather than transgressive ones, depicting identities of themselves as fools or victims within the narrative event. Empathy, affinity and rapport are generated through the use of humour and other narrative techniques, prompting interlocutors to accept and remember the embarrassing episode as a funny, benign one rather than one of wrongdoing or offense. Through this process, the narrator’s coherent of self and personae is restored, as he or she, together with the present interlocutors, rewrite a transgressive and embarrassing memory as a funny and benign one. These important reasons explain why people tell embarrassing stories of themselves.
Works Cited


