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**Expressing embarrassment (or not) : which effects on produced impression on others and on attributed social value?**

**Exprimer son embarras (ou pas) : quels effets sur l'impression produite sur autrui et sur la valeur sociale attribuée?**

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**Abstract:**

*Introduction.* Embarrassment is a negative but prosocial emotion, which often arises from the transgression of a social norm. Its expression thus plays a crucial role in the social perception.

*Objective.* The aim of this paper is to document this role during both ordinary and extraordinary situations (i.e., with stakes).

*Method.* Using scenarios' method, 27 participants and 100 recruiters evaluated persons expressing embarrassment or not.

*Results.* Study 1 showed that during ordinary situations, nonverbal expression of embarrassment led to make a good impression by signalling desire of appeasement and prosociality. In contrast, Study 2 revealed that during a job interview, verbal expression of embarrassment through defensive tactics was rather negatively perceived.

*Conclusion.* The manipulation of emotions as emotive communication tools will be discussed.

**Key-words:** embarrassment; emotional expression; emotive communication; job interview; impression management

**Résumé :**

*Introduction.* Emotion négative mais prosociale, l'embarras émerge souvent suite à la transgression d'une norme sociale. Son expression joue alors un rôle décisif dans la perception sociale.

*Objectif.* L'objectif de cet article est de documenter ce rôle dans des situations ordinaires et « extra-ordinaires » (i.e., avec enjeu).

*Méthodologie.* A l'aide de scénarios, 27 participants tout-venants et 100 recruteurs ont évalué des personnes exprimant ou non de l'embarras.

*Résultats.* L'Etude 1 a montré qu'en situations ordinaires, l'expression non verbale d'embarras permettait de faire bonne impression, signalant une tendance à l'apaisement et à la prosocialité. L'Etude 2 a révélé que lors d'un entretien d'embauche, l'expression verbale de l'embarras par des tactiques défensives était plutôt perçue négativement.

*Conclusion.* L'instrumentalisation des émotions comme outils de communication émotive sera discutée.

**Mots-clés :** embarras ; expression émotionnelle ; communication émotive ; entretien d'embauche ; gestion des impressions

In June 2016, the actor and UN Women Global Goodwill Ambassador Emma Watson, was answering a journalist's questions in all seriousness when her phone went off, revealing her ring tone to be Tina Turner's suggestive hit "Steamy Windows". "*That's so embarrassing (...) I'm really sorry*" she gasped, all flustered. Her interviewer broke out laughing but then came to her rescue by saying it was the best ring tone he had ever heard. The emotion Emma Watson felt here, embarrassment, occurs frequently in everyday life (Shimanoff, 1984) and manifests itself in many different ways: "*...fumbling, stuttering, an unusually low- or high-pitched voice (...), blanching, blinking (...), vacillating movement*" (Goffman, 1956). Embarrassment, alongside shame, guilt, pride, and jealousy, among others, is referred to as a *self-conscious* emotion because it is triggered by events that undermine or reinforce one's self-image (Harter, 1999; Keltner, 1996; Lewis, 2008; Niedenthal, Krauth-Gruber, & Ric, 2006; Tangney, Mashek, & Stuewig, 2005) and because it occurs only in the real or imagined presence of others (Marcus & Miller, 1999; Miller, 2001).

Although embarrassment is uncomfortable, it has important social functions (e.g., Castelfranchi & Poggi, 1990; Harris, 2006; Leary, Landel, & Patton, 1996; Miller, 1996), which raises the question of how displaying embarrassment affects others' impressions of the embarrassed person and the social value they attribute to that person. The present paper addresses this issue by examining others' perceptions and evaluations of a person who shows embarrassment after transgressing a social norm in two situations with different stakes: *a*) an everyday situation not requiring impression management tactics, and *b*) an "exceptional" situation, in this case a job interview, where such tactics are commonly used. By "exceptional" we mean a high-stakes situation involving predefined roles (in job interviews, the recruiter is the evaluator and the applicant is evaluated) and specific norms and rituals (e.g., Dubois, 2005; Levashina & Campion, 2006), in contrast to everyday situations, which are more inconsequential, less explicitly evaluative, and less ritualized.

### **Functions and modes of displaying embarrassment**

Embarrassment usually occurs when, in the presence of others, there is a discrepancy between an individual's behavior and their personal standards, which undermines the self-image they hope to project to others, or a discrepancy between a behavior and the norms of the situation in which that behavior occurs (for a review of models of embarrassing situations, see Maire, Agnoletti, & Zagar, 2019). As the guarantor of a harmonious social life (Goffman,

1955), embarrassment is a prosocial emotion in two respects. First, feeling embarrassed after a transgression spurs people to remedy the harm done: for example, it increases the probability that someone will help another by completing a survey (Apsler, 1975; Cann & Goodman Blackwelder, 1984). Second, embarrassment's negative valence means it acts as an aversive signal that encourages an individual to avoid repeating the transgression and to maintain stable, fluid, and predictable interpersonal relations (Goffman, 1974; Miller, 2013): for example, in some contexts, the fear of ridicule can incite people to adopt a certain dress code or use a certain register of language. Hence, this emotion, which children acquire quite late in their development, acts as an internalized social control (Chekroun & Nugier, 2011; Parrott & Harré, 1996; Semin & Papadopoulou, 1990). Just as physical pain warns the body of a threat to its wellbeing, the aversive dimension of embarrassment minimizes divergence from norms and preserves an individual's "social integrity". By maintaining a positive image in the minds of others, it avoids social disapproval and rejection (Harris, 2006; Leary et al., 1996).

Although embarrassment operates internally, it is nevertheless exteriorized and visible when embarrassing missteps (tripping in public, laughing at an inappropriate moment) and gaffes (disparage someone who was thought to be out of earshot) occur.

The emotions people express in everyday life do not always correspond to the emotions they feel: display rules, which are highly dependent on social or cultural norms, act as filters that encourage people to accentuate, minimize, or mask their true emotional state. Moreover, people sometimes feign an emotional state (Ekman & Friesen, 1982) by, for example, smiling falsely in order to be appreciated by others or by crying "crocodile tears" as a way of gaining sympathy (e.g., Ten Brinke, McDonald, Porter, & O'Connor, 2012). Because expressions of emotion can be distorted, the resulting communication can be of two types. Communication is *emotional* when it reflects the raw, spontaneous, and authentic expression of an individual overtaken by their emotions, but it is *emotive* when emotions are intentionally feigned or distorted in order to project a positive self-image (Caffi & Janney, 1994; Plantin, 2003; Shariff & Tracy, 2011). Such strategic use of emotions can be achieved only via the verbal and nonverbal modes of expression that individuals can, to a greater or lesser extent, control.

Blushing is the nonverbal hallmark of embarrassment (Buss, 1980). This physiological reaction, often accompanied by an intense sensation of heat (Edelmann, 1987; Dijk, de Jong & Peters, 2009; Dijk, Koenig, Ketelaar, & de Jong, 2011; Kim, Cho, & Lee, 2012; Leary &

Meadows, 1991; Shearn, Bergman, Hill, Abel, & Hinds, 1992) is provoked by the discrepancy between desired self-image and projected self-image (Harris, 1990). Although it is almost impossible to control blushing, whether to avoid it or feign it, its occurrence depends on contextual factors (e.g., it is much more frequent in the United Kingdom than in Germany or southern Europe; Edelman, Asendorpf, Contarello, Zammuner, Georgas, & Villanueva, 1989; see also Edelman & Iwawaki, 1987; Edelman & Neto, 1989). Blushing serves no biological purpose and only affects the most visible parts of the body (face, neck, ears), which suggests it has social a communication role (Darwin, 1872). Other quintessential but more controllable nonverbal manifestations of embarrassment include tipping one's head down and to the left, having a downward and wandering gaze, and giving a forced, non-Duchenne smile (i.e., a smile involving only the *Zygomatic Major* muscle, as opposed to a true Duchenne smile, which uses the *Orbicularis Oculi* and *Zygomatic Major* muscles) accompanied with pinched lips, a short laugh, and self-centered gestures such as touching one's face or twiddling one's fingers (Goffman, 1974; Harris, 2006; Keltner, 1995; Keltner & Anderson, 2000; Keltner & Buswell, 1997).

Verbal expressions of embarrassment may take two forms. First, embarrassment may inhibit or perturb speech through stammering, pronunciation mistakes, hesitations, or interruptions (Edelman & Hampson, 1979, 1981a; Edelman & Iwawaki, 1987; Goffman, 1974). Second, it may lead to attempts to explain the embarrassing situation in either an appeasing or an aggravating way. Appeasing explanations, which may involve expressing regret or making excuses, are intended to defuse potential conflicts and recreate a state of balance in the interaction (Cupach & Metts, 1994; Gonzales, Manning, Haugen, & Wetter, 1990; Meyer & Rothenberg, 2004). Expressing *regret* involves recognizing a transgression and admitting responsibility without evoking attenuating circumstances (Banerjee, Bennett, & Luke, 2010; Darby & Schlenker, 1982; Ohbuchi, Kameda, & Agarie, 1989; Ohbuchi & Sato, 1994; Schönbach, 1990), whereas *excuse* making is a way of recognizing the transgression while denying responsibility by attributing the cause to an external source (Schönbach, 1990; Scott & Lyman, 1968; Snyder & Higgins, 1988). Conversely, aggravating explanations exacerbate the situation. *Justification* (McLaughlin, Cody, & Rosenstein, 1983; Schönbach, 1990; Scott & Lyman, 1968) occurs when the embarrassed individual admits responsibility

for the embarrassing incident but denies the unpleasantness caused,<sup>1</sup> whereas *refusal* involves an individual denying any responsibility for the incident (Schönbach, 1990).

Thus, embarrassment can be displayed through a wide palette of verbal and nonverbal expressions. With the exception of blushing, which is a form of emotional communication, all of these expressions can be controlled and, to a greater or lesser extent, manipulated as emotive communication tools (Caffi & Janney, 1994; Plantin, 2003; Shariff & Tracy, 2011). And it is because displays of embarrassment can be manipulated that others are able to use them to form impressions and infer personality traits that are seen as indicators of a person's social value (Beauvois, 1984; Beauvois & Dubois, 2000). Some of these traits (e.g., sincerity, pleasantness) pertain to social *desirability*, focus on relational aspects, and can be likened to an "amity rating", whereas others (e.g., intelligence, reliability) relate to social *utility*, focus on economic aspects, and indicate "market value" (Cambon, 2006; Dubois & Beauvois, 2011).

### **The beneficial effects of displays of embarrassment in everyday situations**

Displays of embarrassment appear to help maintain *pacific and harmonious social interactions*, and to do this in two ways. On the one hand, they indicate whether or not an individual adheres to social norms<sup>2</sup> because they signal awareness of the norm transgressed, an incident's unusual and/or unintentional character (Edelmann, 1982), and an individual's fear of evaluation and social ostracism (Castelfranchi & Poggi, 1990). Hence, like a ritualized emotionality (Parrott & Harré, 1996), displaying one's embarrassment is a (the?) socially prescribed behavior in many typically embarrassing situations (Miller, 1996). On the other hand, expressing embarrassment may defuse potential aggressiveness from one's interlocutor and appease them (Harris, 2006; Keltner, 1995; Keltner & Buswell, 1997). For example, punishments suggested for children who had misbehaved were less severe when they explicitly showed embarrassment than when they did not express any emotion (Castelfranchi & Poggi, 1990). Thus, nonverbal expressions of embarrassment can act in a similar way to the verbal appeasement strategies described above (McLaughlin et al., 1983).

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<sup>1</sup> Justification may also attempt to legitimize a behavior with respect to applicable norms or circumstances in order to minimize an incident's importance or to maintain one's credibility by claiming that one usually acts differently.

<sup>2</sup> The tendency to express embarrassment correlates positively with adhesion to social norms and negatively with antisocial behaviors (Keltner & Buswell, 1997).

What is more, displays of embarrassment can have a positive effect on *self-presentation* and impression making. People who display embarrassment are perceived as more likeable (Semin & Manstead, 1982), especially if they do so by blushing (Dijk et al., 2009) or laughing (Edelmann & Hampson, 1981b). More precisely, individuals who show embarrassment tend to be attributed socially valued personality traits, such as modesty (Goffman, 1974), or traits associated with prosociality, such as amiability (Feinberg, Willer, & Keltner, 2012; Keltner, Young, & Buswell, 1997). In addition, Feinberg and colleagues (2012) found that, compared with proud targets, embarrassed targets were perceived as more generous, cooperative, virtuous, and trustworthy, even when expressions of embarrassment were operationalized in different ways.<sup>3</sup>

If displays of embarrassment generally have positive effects, by placating interactions and by transmitting a positive self-image, is this also the case when the embarrassed person is in a high-stakes situation?

### **What effect does displaying embarrassment have in exceptional situations such as job interviews?**

A recent, scenario-based study found that an applicant in a job interview who displayed embarrassment after transgressing a norm (their cell phone ringing unexpectedly) was not evaluated more favorably than an applicant who remained impassive (Maire & Agnoletti, 2018). This contrast in results compared with everyday situations may be due to the stakes associated with job interviews. In such ritualized, high-stakes situations, individuals might be expected to make greater use of emotive communication tools, notably by employing verbal expressions strategically in order to turn the embarrassment into a resource. The tactics used may be *defensive* (justification, expressing regret) and aimed at protecting or repairing one's self-image, or *assertive* (self-promotion, ingratiation, e.g., Gilmore, Stevens, Harrell-Cook, & Ferris, 1999) and designed to present or promote a favorable image of the self.

Overall, compared with defensive tactics, assertive tactics (self-promotion, ingratiation) give rise to more favorable interviewer evaluations (Ellis, West, Ryan, & DeShon, 2002; Higgins, Judge, & Ferris, 2003; Levashina, Hartwell, Morgeson, & Campion, 2014) and have a more positive impact on hiring decisions (Gilmore & Ferris, 1989). Taken

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<sup>3</sup> Participants watched videos showing targets relating an embarrassing incident in their lives (Studies 1a, 1b and 2), looked at photographs of targets showing embarrassment, pride, or no emotion (Studies 3 and 4), or were required to interact with a manifestly embarrassed or proud stooge target (Study 5). Participants were then asked to evaluate the targets' prosociality.



separately, results pertaining to the effects of self-promotion and ingratiation are inconsistent. Self-promotion has a more positive impact than ingratiation (Gilmore & Ferris, 1989; Kacmar, Delery, & Ferris, 1992), but ingratiation has been found to correlate more strongly with overall interviewer evaluations (Ellis et al., 2002), to increase an applicant's attractiveness (Kacmar & Carlson, 1999), or, on the contrary, to be unrelated to these evaluations (Kristof-Brown, Barrick, & Franke, 2002; Stevens & Kristof, 1995). According to other scholars, it is combining both types of tactic that leads to the best recruiter evaluations (Proost, Schreurs, De Witte, & Derous, 2010).

The use of defensive tactics (justification, expressing regret) in response to an embarrassing incident has been little studied because such tactics are used less frequently in job interviews (Tsai, Huang, Wu, & Lo, 2010). Peeters and Lievens (2006) reported a positive effect of using defensive tactics on recruiter evaluations. However, as Tsai and colleagues noted, defensive tactics have always been studied globally, so it is not known which tactic or tactics have the greatest effect on interviewer evaluations, nor in which domains they are most effective (knowledge, behavior, etc.). By measuring their effect on recruiter evaluations in scenarios involving integrity and skills, these authors showed that excuses, justification, and regret produce the same effect with respect to skills (i.e., social utility), but expressing regret is more effective with respect to integrity (i.e., social desirability). Going beyond the classically reported overall superiority of assertive tactics over defensive tactics (Ellis et al., 2002; Gilmore & Ferris, 1989; Higgins et al., 2003), we wanted to compare the impact on inferences about an applicant's social value of using each assertive (self-promotion, ingratiation) or defensive (justification, regret) tactic with the impact of not using any tactic.

Our aim was to shine further light on the effects different ways of expressing embarrassment have on others. To this end, we conducted two scenario-based studies involving transgressions of social norms. In Study 1 we explored the effects of nonverbal displays of embarrassment in an everyday situation by comparing participants' perceptions of individuals whose posture and facial expression indicated either embarrassment, happiness, sadness, or no emotion. Because the situation described had no particular importance, evaluations were likely to relate mostly to social desirability. Study 2 examined the impact of verbal expressions of embarrassment in a high-stakes situation (a job interview), by asking professional recruiters to evaluate applicants who used one of four different tactics (justification, regret, self-promotion, ingratiation) in response to an embarrassing incident. In this type of high-stakes and highly evaluative situation, social value is mostly assessed in terms of social utility.

## **Study 1: Effect of displaying embarrassment on the impression given to others in everyday situations**

### **Objectives and hypotheses**

Study 1 compared others' perceptions of a target who displays embarrassment following a social transgression with their perceptions of targets whose expressions convey either a basic emotion (with opposite valences: sadness vs. happiness) or no emotion (neutral state). Our aim was to answer three questions about the effect of showing embarrassment: 1) Does a target who shows embarrassment give a better (Semin & Manstead, 1982) or poorer (Maire & Agnoletti, 2018) impression than a target who conveys one of the other three emotions we tested? 2) What personality traits are attributed to a target as a function of the emotion conveyed (Feinberg et al., 2012; Keltner et al., 1997, 2000; Maire & Agnoletti, 2018)? 3) What inferences are made about a target's behavioral intentions (or "action tendencies", Frijda, 1986) in terms of appeasing or aggravating the situation (Keltner & Busswell, 1997; McLaughlin et al., 1983)? In order to address these questions, we formulated three hypotheses concerning perceptions of targets with respect to their nonverbal expressions of embarrassment following a transgression. H1: A target who conveys embarrassment is perceived more positively than a target who conveys sadness or no emotion. H2: A target who conveys embarrassment will be attributed more socially valued personality traits (prosociality, propensity to communicate, adherence to social norms) than a target who conveys happiness, sadness, or no emotion. H3: Inferences about a target's desire to appease the situation will be greater for those who convey embarrassment than for those who convey happiness, sadness, or no emotion.

The methodology we used to test these three hypotheses combined scenarios describing embarrassing incidents with photographs of people who were obviously embarrassed, sad, happy, or showing neutral emotions.

### **Method**

#### **Participants**

Participants were 27 human and social sciences undergraduate students at the University of Lorraine (18 women and 9 men, aged between 19 and 31 years,  $M_{age} = 23.2$  years,  $SD = 4.3$ ), none of whom were remunerated for taking part in the study.

## Material

We contextualized the expression of emotions by combining the classic scenarios method with photographs of people showing emotions. Drawing on embarrassing incidents used in previous studies (Eller, Koschate, & Gilson, 2011; Feinberg et al., 2012), we created four scenarios depicting an individual committing a gaffe, which we then subjected to a pretest in which 19 participants evaluated the embarrassing nature of the incidents on a 7-point scale ( $M= 6.52$ ,  $ET= 0.91$ )<sup>4</sup>. Each scenario was associated with a photograph of an individual, whose posture and facial expression indicated one of four emotional states: embarrassment, sadness, happiness, neutral. These photographs, which showed the entire upper body (face, torso, arms), were taken from the *University of California Davis Set of Emotion Expressions* (Tracy, Robins, & Schriber, 2009) and depicted people of different sex and ethnicity. We partly counterbalanced the emotion expressed, person depicted, and scenarios in order to produce eight different booklets. The scenarios and examples of the photographs used, together with their original versions in French, can be consulted as *Supplementary Content at Science Direct*.

## Dependent variables

Participants used 7-point scales to evaluate the targets depicted in each scenario-photograph pair on three dimensions: *general impression*, *personality traits*, *action tendencies*. We inferred personality traits from evaluations of the target's prosociality (asocial-social, unpleasant-pleasant, manipulative-honest, individualistic-altruistic, unappealing-appealing, indifferent-considerate), propensity to communicate (communicative-secretive, open to dialogue-stubborn, taciturn-talkative, outgoing-withdrawn, extraverted-introverted, expressive-reserved), and adhesion to social norms (respectful-disrespectful, cautious-rash, polite-impolite, obedient-rebellious, conformist-maverick, well-mannered-rude). We also included other distractor adjectives that did not, in this everyday context, refer to any particular dimension (realistic-unrealistic, optimistic-pessimistic, intelligent-stupid, mature-immature, naive-crafty, lazy-hard-working). These 24 pairs of adjectives were chosen in the light of work carried out by Feinberg and colleagues (2012), Maire and Agnoletti (2018), and Semin (1982). Our measure of the targets' inferred *action tendencies*

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<sup>4</sup> The scale was from 1 ("not at all embarrassing") to 7 ("extremely embarrassing"). The mean we obtained showed that the situations were perceived to be embarrassing.

(appeasement or aggravation) immediately after the social transgression included six items taken from the studies cited above, which established the most common reactions in embarrassing situations (Cupach & Metts, 1994; Miller, 1996). Three of these items focused on appeasement (apologizing, remediation, using humor to play down the situation) and three focused on aggravation (leaving without saying anything, ignoring the embarrassing event, justifying oneself). Participants evaluated the probability the targets would produce each behavior on a scale from 1 (“not at all probable”) to 7 (“very probable”). We then calculated a global action tendency score for each target by subtracting the appeasement score from the aggravation score. Thus, a positive global score indicated a generally appeasing action tendency and a negative score indicated a generally aggravating action tendency.

## Procedure

Each participant received a booklet containing four illustrated scenarios, each followed by the questions and 7-point scales measuring our dependent variables (impression, personality traits, action tendencies). We asked participants to reply as honestly and as spontaneously as possible. Participants completed the questionnaires in three group sessions, each lasting less than 20 minutes, at the end of which we collected the booklets and thanked the participants.

## Results

We conducted repeated measures analyses of variance (ANOVA) in order to separately test the main effects of each emotion displayed on each of our five dependent variables. We then carried out planned comparisons (contrasts) in order to more specifically compare the effects of expressing embarrassment with each of the other three emotions (sadness, happiness, neutral). The results are shown in Table 1.

	Embarrassment	Sadness	Happiness	Neutral state
<b>General impression</b>	5.59 (1.22)	3.44 (1.41)	6.15 (0.77)	4.44 (1.26)
<b>Personality traits :</b>				
- <b>Prosocial nature</b>	4.22 (0.82)	3.30 (0.68)	4.84 (0.51)	3.37 (0.75)
- <b>Adhesion to social norms</b>	4.07 (1.04)	3.16 (0.89)	4.08 (0.82)	3.89 (0.83)
- <b>Propensity to communicate</b>	3.67 (1.03)	3.47 (1.15)	4.88 (0.89)	3.10 (0.96)
<b>Action tendencies (appeasement/aggravation)</b>	6.90 (4.72)	-2.26 (6.25)	5.03 (3.56)	0.22 (6.50)

Table 1: Means and standard deviations of general impression, personality traits and action tendencies' scores attributed to characters as a function of their emotional expression (embarrassment, sadness, happiness, neutral state) (Study 1).

Note: General impression scores and personality traits scores are on 7-point scales. Action tendencies scores were computed by subtracting the appeasement score from the aggravation score. Standard deviations are in brackets.

### General impression

Results are shown in Figure 1. Emotion expressed had a significant effect on general impression of the target:  $F(3, 78) = 30.57, p < .001, \eta^2 = 0.18$ . Expressing embarrassment gave a more favorable impression ( $M = 5.59$ ) than expressing no emotion ( $M = 4.44$ ) or expressing sadness ( $M = 3.44$ ), but the most favorable impression ( $M = 6.15$ ) was given by expressing happiness, an emotion with a positive valence. Three planned comparisons of the impression given by the embarrassed targets with the impression given by the targets expressing sadness, happiness, or no emotion showed that expressing embarrassment produced a significantly different impression to the other three expressions [embarrassment vs. sadness:  $F(1, 26) = 51.09, p < .0001, \eta^2 = 0.66$ ; embarrassment vs. happiness:  $F(1, 26) = 5.91, p < .05, \eta^2 = 0.19$ ; embarrassment vs. no emotion:  $F(1, 26) = 12.96, p < .01, \eta^2 = 0.33$ ]. These results support H1.

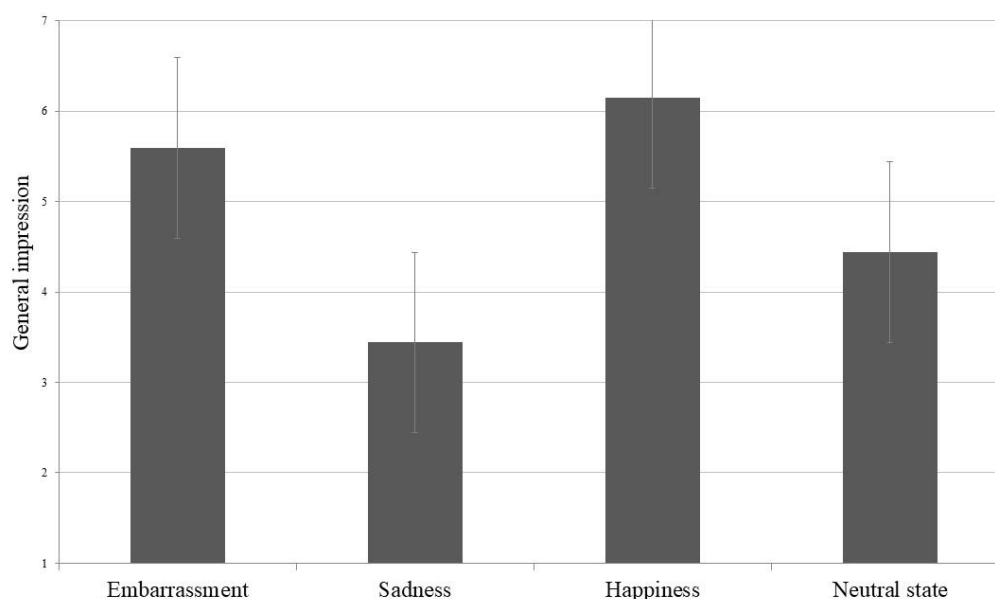


Figure 1: General impression (scores on a 7-point scale) that participants had from individuals displaying embarrassment, happiness, sadness or a neutral state (Study 1).

### Personality traits

Results are shown in Figure 2. The ANOVA showed a significant effect of emotion expressed on the three categories of personality traits tested, but the results only partly supported H2.

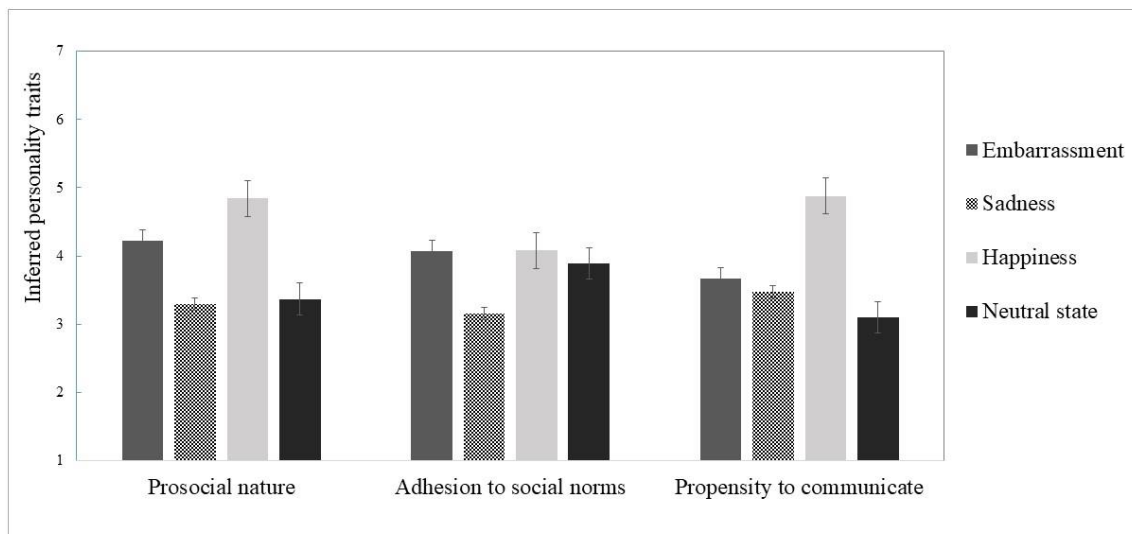


Figure 2: Personality traits inferred (prosocial nature, adhesion to social norms, and propensity to communicate scores on 7-point scales) from individuals expressing embarrassment, happiness, sadness or a neutral state (Study 1).

Inferences concerning a target's *prosociality* varied according to the emotion expressed:  $F(3, 78) = 24.92, p < .001, \eta^2 = 0.16$  (see Figure 2). Subsequent planned comparisons showed that the embarrassed targets were perceived to be significantly more prosocial ( $M = 4.22$ ) than the targets who expressed sadness ( $M = 3.30$ ) [ $F(1, 26) = 14.43, p < .001, \eta^2 = 0.36$ ] or no emotion ( $M = 3.37$ ) [ $F(1, 26) = 12.77, p < .01, \eta^2 = 0.33$ ], but less prosocial than the targets who expressed happiness ( $M = 4.84$ ) [ $F(1, 26) = 6.96, p < .05, \eta^2 = 0.21$ ].

An ANOVA comparing the four experimental conditions showed that inferences about a target's *adhesion to social norms* differed significantly according to the emotion expressed:  $F(3, 78) = 6.05, p < .001, \eta^2 = 0.06$  (see Figure 2). Nevertheless, the three planned comparisons we carried out showed that expressing embarrassment differed only from expressing sadness: targets who expressed embarrassment were perceived as adhering more strongly to social norms ( $M = 4.07$ ) compared with targets who expressed sadness ( $M = 3.16$ ) [ $F(1, 26) = 7.51, p < .05, \eta^2 = 0.22$ ], but were not evaluated differently from targets who expressed happiness ( $M = 4.08$ ) [ $F(1, 26) = .004, p > .05, ns$ ] or no emotion ( $M = 3.89$ ) [ $F(1, 26) = 0.55, p > .05, ns$ ].

Finally, inferences about a target's *propensity to communicate* varied significantly according to the emotion expressed:  $F(3, 78) = 15.23, p < .001, \eta^2 = 0.12$  (see Figure 2).

Three planned comparisons between the embarrassment condition and the other conditions showed that targets who expressed embarrassment were perceived as less eager to communicate ( $M = 3.67$ ) than targets who expressed happiness ( $M = 4.88$ ) [ $F(1, 26) = 31.82$ ,  $p < .0001$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.55$ ], and just as eager to communicate as targets who expressed sadness ( $M = 3.47$ ) [ $F(1, 26) = 0.34$ ,  $p > .05$ , *ns*] or no emotion ( $M = 2.97$ ) [ $F(1, 26) = 3.10$ ,  $p > .05$ , *ns*].

### Action tendencies (appeasement vs. aggravation).

Results are shown in Figure 3. The effect of emotion expressed on a target's inferred action tendencies was statistically significant:  $F(3, 78) = 19.99$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.15$ . Planned comparisons showed that perceptions that a target's action tendencies were oriented more towards appeasement were tendentially greater when the target expressed embarrassment ( $M = 6.90$ ), than when the target expressed happiness ( $M = 5.03$ ) [ $F(1, 26) = 3.34$ ,  $p = .08$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.12$ ], whereas the actions of a target who expressed sadness were perceived as tending towards aggravation ( $M = -2.26$ ) [ $F(1, 26) = 51.98$ ,  $p < .0001$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.67$ ]. Expressing no emotion did not suggest any distinct tendency ( $M = 0.22$ ) [ $F(1, 26) = 18.73$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.42$ ]. These results support H3.

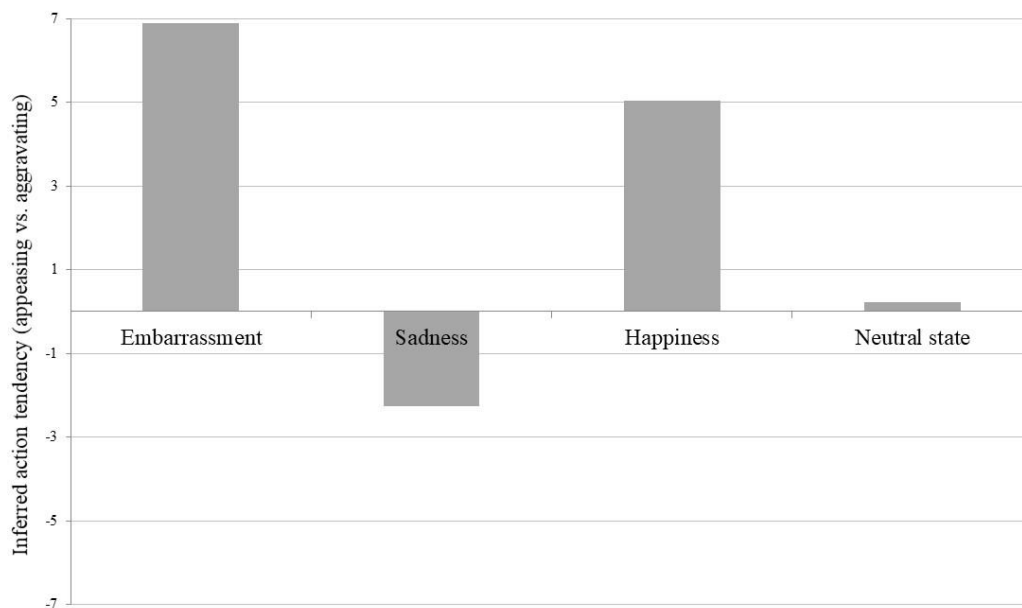


Figure 3: Inferred action tendency (obtained by subtracting the appeasement score from the aggravation score) as a function of emotion displaying by the individual (embarrassment, sadness, happiness, neutral state) (Study 1). Note: A positive global score indicated a generally appeasing action tendency and a negative score indicated a generally aggravating action tendency.

## Discussion

Study 1 used illustrated scenarios to examine whether expressions of embarrassment affect people's perceptions (general impression, personality traits, appeasing vs. aggravating action tendencies) of a person who has committed a faux pas. In line with Feinberg and colleagues (2012) and Semin and Manstead (1982), results showed that observers formed a more favorable impression of people whose facial and postural expressions conveyed embarrassment, rather than sadness or no emotion. On what is this favorable impression based? Although our participants associated expressing embarrassment, rather than sadness or no emotion, with greater prosociality, they did not associate expressing embarrassment with a greater propensity to communicate or stronger adhesion to social norms. This is contrary to our hypotheses. What is more, the targets who were perceived most favorably and who were attributed the highest levels of prosociality, adhesion to social norms, and propensity to communicate were those who expressed happiness, an emotion with a positive valence. Hence, the positive impression produced by expressing embarrassment does not appear to be due specifically to inferences of global and stable traits (prosociality, adhesion to social norms, propensity to communicate). Rather, expressing embarrassment appears to signal a desire for appeasement, and this effect was stronger for embarrassment than for the other three emotions, including happiness. Hence, the positive effects of expressing embarrassment are more likely to find their explanation in its association with appeasing *action tendencies* (within a specific social situation) than in any association with *personality traits* (stable and global). This result also highlights both the situated nature of this social emotion and its probable sensitivity to the context in which it occurs.

Because Study 1 involved only a small number of participants, great caution should be taken in generalizing its results. Nevertheless, they suggest that, despite the aversive nature of embarrassment, displaying embarrassment can be used to one's social advantage in interactions and in presenting oneself. Moreover, expressions of embarrassment do not occur only in transgressive situations, they are deployed in a wide variety of contexts in which people want to make a positive impression, such as when flirting and teasing (Keltner, Young, Heerey, Oemig, & Monarch, 1998). This raises questions about the deliberate use of expressions of embarrassment. Does expressing embarrassment always reflect an individual's true emotional state (emotional communication), or can it be used as a form of emotive communication by feigning an emotion in order to project a better image to others, especially in high-stakes situations? Study 2 addressed this issue.



## **Study 2: Expressing embarrassment, an impression management tool in high-stakes situations?**

### **Objective and hypotheses**

Our second study was designed to test the possible strategic use of expressing embarrassment to manage impressions during an exceptional situation *whose very aim is to make a good impression*: the job interview. We investigated the effect of different tactics frequently used in embarrassing situations (justification, expressing regret) or job interviews (self-promotion, ingratiation) in a context combining these two characteristics, that is, when an embarrassing incident occurs during a job interview. In such situations, do the different verbal tactics embarrassed people deploy improve the image they project? If so, does this improved image impact recruiters' attitudes and their final decisions? We tested four hypotheses relating to the effects of different verbal tactics.

Using self-promotion to manage impressions during job interviews is a common, even expected, tactic (Levashina et al., 2014) that has positive effects on interviewer evaluations (Gilmore & Ferris, 1989; Kacmar et al., 1992). In line with these findings, we hypothesized that reacting to an embarrassing incident by using self-promotion tactics, rather than no tactics (i.e., a neutral expression), will lead to a more favorable evaluation of the applicant's personality traits, a more facilitating verbal and nonverbal attitude from the recruiter, and a higher probability of getting the job (H1).

Similarly, we expected the use of defensive tactics during a job interview to improve evaluations, especially those relating to the applicant's integrity (Levashina et al., 2014; Tsai et al. 2011). Furthermore, because showing regret for an embarrassing incident caused by a gaffe is considered socially appropriate, or even normative (Goffman, 1956; Parrott & Harré, 1996), we expected expressing regret, rather than using no tactics, to lead to more favorable evaluations of an applicant's personality traits, a more facilitating verbal and nonverbal attitude from the recruiter, and a higher probability of getting the job (H2).

Although Ellis and colleagues (2002) reported a correlation between ingratiation and interviewer evaluations, other researchers (Gilmore & Ferris, 1989; Kacmar & Carlson, 1995; Kacmar et al., 1992) have found this effect to be debatable or even negative. Indeed, ingratiation could be considered inappropriate to job interviews, which are intrinsically asymmetrical situations with predetermined roles, because it could be seen as an attempt to

neutralize or redefine these roles. Consequently, we hypothesized that using ingratiation, rather than using no tactics, will lead to less favorable evaluations of an applicant's personality traits, a more inhibiting verbal and nonverbal attitude from the recruiter, and a lower probability of getting the job (H3).

Moreover, although justification may be used as a response to past behaviors (Levashina et al., 2014), it denies the unpleasantness caused and is therefore an aggravating tactic that does not remediate the interaction (Gonzales, Haugen, & Manning, 1994; McLaughlin et al., 1983; Schönbach, 1990; Scott & Lyman, 1968). Hence, we expected using justification, rather than using no tactics, to lead to less favorable evaluations of an applicant's personality traits, a more inhibiting verbal and nonverbal attitude from the recruiter, and a lower probability of obtaining the job (H4).

## Method

### Participants

Participants were 100 professional recruiters (42 women and 58 men,  $M = 39.9$  years,  $SD = 9.5$  years) with a mean experience of 8.34 years ( $SD = 5.5$ ) in recruitment.

### Material

Each of the questionnaires we drew up included five scenarios depicting a job interview between the manager of a chain of furniture shops and an applicant for a salesperson's position. These questions and their original versions in French can be consulted as *Supplementary Content* at *Science Direct*. Each scenario started with a description of the applicant before the interview and during the interview up until the embarrassing incident (the applicant's cell phone rings). This initial phase of the interview was the same for all five scenarios. The continuation of each scenario differed in terms of the applicant's reaction to this embarrassing event and the way they tried to manage their self-image. In the first scenario, the applicant remained calm, turned off their telephone and continued their presentation (neutral condition: "no tactic"). In the next two scenarios, the applicant used the embarrassing event to deploy assertive tactics aimed at projecting a favorable self-image, either via self-promotion ("self-promotion" condition) or by ingratiation ("ingratiation" condition). These assertive impression-management tactics enabled the applicant to show they were in control of the situation and did not let it distract them from their presentation. In the remaining two scenarios, the applicant used defensive tactics, by either

apologizing/expressing regret (“regret” condition) or suggesting that the incident could have happened to anyone (“justification” condition).

### **Dependent variables**

We asked the participants to evaluate three dimensions from a recruiter’s perspective. The first dimension was the applicant’s personality with respect to five traits, each assessed on a 7-point scale: mature-immature, intelligent-unintelligent, sincere-insincere, stable-unstable, reliable-unreliable (Maire & Agnoletti, 2018; Manstead & Semin, 1981; Semin, 1982). The second dimension concerned the verbal and nonverbal attitudes the recruiter would have adopted, which could be either facilitating (encourage the applicant to continue their presentation, smile at the applicant), neutral (say nothing, show no reaction), or inhibitive (ask the applicant why they had not turned off their telephone before the interview, show irritation). Finally, the third dimension was the probability they would hire the applicant, expressed on a 5-point scale from 1 (“highly improbable”) to 5 (“highly probable”).

### **Procedure**

Participants were contacted by telephone and told the objective of the study. Those who agreed to take part were sent a standard email explaining how to complete the questionnaire and containing a link to an online version of one of the five scenarios, chosen randomly. Participants began by reading an instruction guaranteeing the anonymity of responses and presenting the task they would be carrying out. Next, they read the proposed scenario, evaluated the applicant on the five personality traits, and indicated the likelihood they would hire the applicant. The applicant was presented as being well-qualified to do the job. Finally, participants provided sociodemographic information (sex, age, experience/lack of experience in recruitment, experience/lack of experience in recruitment relating to sales).

## **Results**

### **Evaluation of the applicant’s personality**

The results obtained for our five dependent variables are shown in Figure 4.

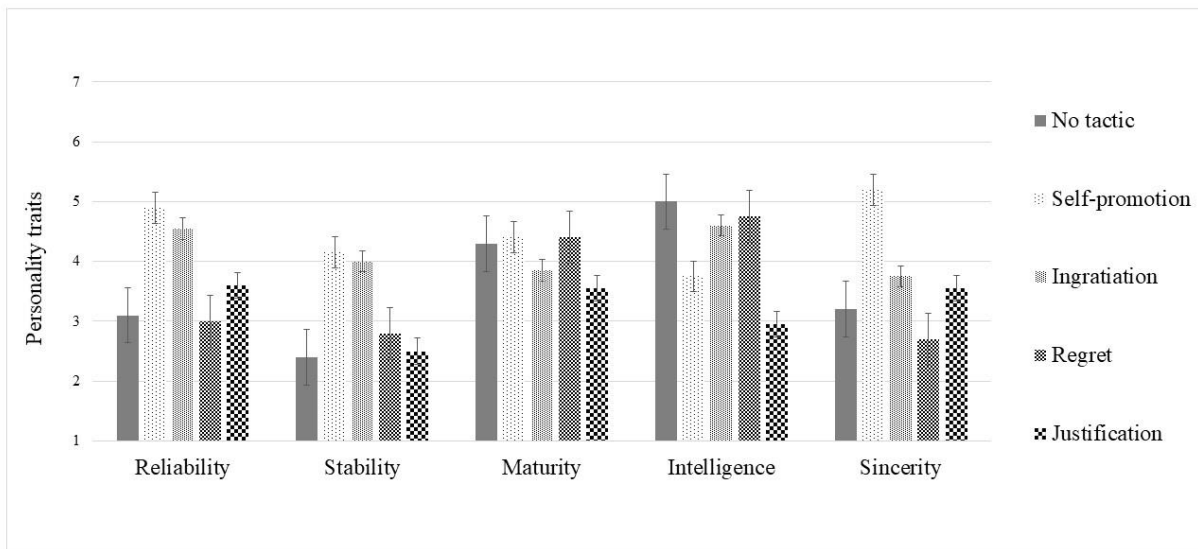


Figure 4: Evaluation of the applicant's personality (reliability, stability, maturity, intelligence, sincerity) as a function of the verbal tactic (none, self-promotion, ingratiation, regret, justification) (Study 2).

We conducted an omnibus ANOVA test with tactic used (no tactic, self-promotion, ingratiation, regret, justification) as the between-participant factor. We then performed four planned comparisons between no tactic and each of the other tactics for the dependent variables for which we had obtained a significant main effect.

The omnibus ANOVA test showed a significant effect of tactic on all the personality traits evaluated ( $p_s < .001$ ,  $\eta^2_s > 0.04$ ), except for "maturity" [ $F(4, 99) = 0.96$ ,  $ns$ ]. Consequently, we performed planned comparisons (i.e., contrasts) for the "reliability", "stability", "intelligence", and "sincerity" traits in order to determine differences in their evaluations according to the tactic used. Applicants who used self-promotion were perceived as more stable [ $F(1, 95) = 19.99$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.17$ ], more sincere [ $F(1, 95) = 15.62$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.14$ ], and more reliable [ $F(1, 95) = 13.78$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.13$ ], but less intelligent [ $F(1, 95) = 5.82$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.06$ ] than applicants who used no tactic. Applicants who used ingratiation were perceived as more reliable [ $F(1, 95) = 248.92$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.73$ ] and more stable [ $F(1, 95) = 16.71$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.15$ ] than applicants who used no tactic ( $ns$  for the "intelligence" and "sincerity" traits). Applicants who expressed regret were viewed as more stable [ $F(1, 95) = 176.49$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.65$ ] but less sincere [ $F(1, 95) = 135.92$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.58$ ] than applicants who used no tactic ( $ns$  for the "reliability" and "intelligence" traits). Finally, applicants who used justification were judged to be more reliable [ $F(1, 95) = 109.94$ ,

$p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.54$ ] but less intelligent [ $F(1, 95) = 15.64$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.14$ ] than those who used no tactic (*ns* for the “stability” and “sincerity” traits).

### Verbal and nonverbal attitude adopted

Results are shown in Tables 2 and 3.

Recruiter's nonverbal attitude	Applicant's tactic				
	None	Self-promotion	Ingratiation	Regret	Justification
<b>Inhibitive</b>	10% (2/20)	35% (7/20)	25% (5/20)	5% (1/20)	10% (2/20)
<b>Neutral</b>	65% (13/20)	35% (7/20)	55% (11/20)	50% (10/20)	55% (11/20)
<b>Facilitating</b>	25% (5/20)	30% (6/20)	20% (4/20)	45% (9/20)	35% (7/20)

Table 2: Distribution of the recruiter's nonverbal attitude which could be either inhibitive attitude (show irritation), neutral (show no reaction), or facilitating (smile at the applicant) as a function of the applicant's tactic (none, self-promotion, ingratiation, regret, justification) (Study 2).

We carried out a Chi-square test on the two independent variables. The recruiters were significantly more likely to adopt a neutral nonverbal attitude than a facilitating or inhibiting attitude in the “no tactic” [ $\chi^2(2, 60) = 14.55$ ,  $p = .0006$ ,  $V = .49$ ], “ingratiation” [ $\chi^2(2, 60) = 6.45$ ,  $p = .03$ ,  $V = .32$ ], “regret” [ $\chi^2(2, 60) = 10.95$ ,  $p = .01$ ,  $V = .39$ ], and “justification” [ $\chi^2(2, 60) = 9.15$ ,  $p = .01$ ,  $V = .39$ ] conditions. There was no significant link between the recruiters' nonverbal attitude and the “self-promotion” condition [ $\chi^2(2, 60) = 0.15$ , *ns*].

Recruiter's verbal attitude	Applicant's tactic				
	None	Self-promotion	Ingratiation	Regret	Justification
<b>Inhibitive</b>	15% (3/20)	35% (7/20)	25% (5/20)	5% (1/20)	10% (2/20)
<b>Neutral</b>	35% (7/20)	35% (7/20)	55% (11/20)	50% (10/20)	55% (11/20)
<b>Facilitating</b>	50% (10/20)	30% (6/20)	20% (4/20)	45% (9/20)	35% (7/20)

Table 3: Distribution of the recruiter's verbal attitude which could be either inhibitive attitude (ask the applicant why they had not turned off their telephone before the interview), neutral (say nothing), or facilitating (encourage the applicant to continue their presentation) as a function of the applicant's tactic (none, self-promotion, ingratiation, regret, justification) (Study 2).

We carried out a Chi-square test on the independent variables. The recruiters were significantly more likely to adopt a neutral attitude than a facilitating or inhibiting attitude in the “ingratiation” [ $\chi^2(2, 60) = 6.45$ ,  $p = .03$ ,  $V = .32$ ], “regret” [ $\chi^2(2, 60) = 10.95$ ,  $p = .004$ ,  $V = .42$ ], and “justification” [ $\chi^2(2, 60) = 9.15$ ,  $p = .01$ ,  $V = .39$ ] conditions. There was no significant link between the recruiters' verbal attitude and the “no tactic” [ $\chi^2(2, 60) = 5.55$ , *ns*] and “self-promotion” [ $\chi^2(2, 60) = 0.15$ , *ns*] conditions.

### Final recruitment decision

We performed an omnibus ANOVA test with tactic used (no tactic, self-promotion, ingratiation, regret, justification) as the between-participant factor. We then carried out four planned comparisons to compare “no tactic” (neutral condition) with each of the other four tactics used. This test revealed a significant effect of tactic on recruitment judgments, that is, on recruiters’ decisions about whether or not to hire the applicant:  $F(4, 99) = 4.03, p < .01, \eta^2 = 0.04$ . The only differences revealed by the planned comparisons between no tactic ( $M_{neutral} = 3.55/7$ ) and each of the tactics ( $M_{self-promotion} = 2.75/7$ ;  $M_{ingratiation} = 2.75/7$ ;  $M_{regret} = 3.3/7$ ;  $M_{justification} = 3.55/7$ ) were between assertive tactics and no tactic, with applicants who used assertive tactics being penalized compared with the no-tactic applicants (*ns* for the defensive tactics - regret and justification). The finding that applicants were more likely to be recruited if they used no tactic than if they used self-promotion [ $F(1, 95) = 308.57, p < .001, \eta^2 = 0.76$ ] or ingratiation [ $F(1, 95) = 7.84, p < .01, \eta^2 = 0.08$ ] was contrary to our hypotheses H1 and H3.

### Discussion

Study 2 examined the possible instrumentalization of verbal expressions of embarrassment following an embarrassing incident during a job interview, that is, in a ritualized, high-stakes situation in which the protagonists’ roles as evaluator and evaluated are pre-established. Our results show that assertive tactics (self-promotion, ingratiation) appear to be the most effective in this situation, where an applicant’s primary objective is to make a good impression. Compared with no tactic, assertive tactics resulted in an applicant being perceived as more reliable, more stable, and (only for self-promotion) more sincere, and increased the probability of the applicant being hired. This result supports H1 for the effect of self-promotion but contradicts H3 for the effect of ingratiation. The consequences of using defensive tactics were less clear cut, as these tactics correlated with the recruiter adopting neutral verbal and nonverbal attitudes, rather than facilitating or inhibiting attitudes, and were not associated with a greater probability of being hired. Compared with no tactic, expressing regret led to an applicant being perceived as more stable, but less sincere, thereby partly supporting H2. In addition, justification led to an applicant being perceived as more reliable but less intelligent, thereby partly supporting H4.

## General discussion and conclusion

The objective of our first study was to identify the impressions, personality traits, and action tendencies participants infer when evaluating a person showing embarrassment following a social transgression, compared with a person showing other emotional states (happiness, sadness, neutral). Study 2 assessed whether the virtues of showing embarrassment could be used strategically as an emotive communication tool aimed at projecting a positive self-image in a job interview, that is, in an exceptional situation whose objective is precisely to convey a positive image.

Although the generalizability of Study 1's findings is limited by the small sample size, our results support and clarify the results of previous studies that have reported beneficial effects of nonverbal expressions of embarrassment on social perceptions (Feinberg et al., 2012; Keltner et al., 1997, 2000; Semin & Manstead, 1982). In everyday situations, expressing embarrassment leads observers to forge a positive impression of the embarrassed person, to perceive him or her as having high prosociality, as adhering to social norms, and, especially, as wanting to redress the situation. These favorable effects seem to have a greater impact on the interactional level, due to the message of appeasement embarrassment transmits, than they do on the individual level of self-presentation and associated personality traits. In the case of personality traits, the most favorable inferences were, in fact, triggered by the expression of happiness, a positive emotion. Although the experience of embarrassment is aversive on the individual level, it is useful from a collective point of view (Apsler, 1975; Cann & Goodman Blackwelder, 1984; Harris, 2006; Miller, 2013) and beneficial for social interactions. More widely, this result echoes a study by Schug, Matsumoto, Horita, Yamagishi, and Bonnet (2010) in which an expression of emotion was seen as a signal of cooperation, whether the emotion was positive or negative. However, Study 2 showed that strategic use of verbal expressions of embarrassment in the exceptional situation of a job interview has a limited effect. In line with research on incident-free job interview situations (Gilmore & Ferris, 1989; Kacmar et al., 1992), only assertive tactics (self-promotion, ingratiation) appear to lead to better evaluations. In other words, embarrassment and any associated defensive tactics (justification, expressing regret) appear to be of little use as strategic emotive communication tools. Hence, although expressing emotions can have powerful virtues, even in the case of negative emotions (Feinberg et al., 2012; Schug et al., 2010), these virtues can be strongly moderated by a situation's characteristics, such as its evaluative nature, the stakes associated with it, or the local norms that come into play. In the

case of a job interview, expressing emotions may go against a local norm of non-expressiveness, as suggested by our surprising finding that applicants who used self-promotion and justification were perceived as *less* intelligent than those who used no tactic. Conversely, recruiters may see an absence of emotion as a sign of good self-control, solid inhibitory abilities, and awareness and/or adhesion to this local norm of non-expressiveness, and therefore assess the applicant more favorably.

These two results, which would at first sight appear contradictory, are nevertheless reconcilable. Indeed, the fact that expressing embarrassment is not used as an emotive communication tactic (Study 2) helps explain why expressions of embarrassment are so effective in making a good impression and appeasing a situation (Study 1). Like blushing, which is seen as a sign of true embarrassment because it cannot be feigned, other expressions of embarrassment are also seen as sincere because they are not used as strategic communication tools. In fact, one reason why expressions of embarrassment have such powerful social virtues and are socially valued may be this perception that they are authentic, that is in accord with the “true self” (i.e., one’s physiological states, emotions, and *effective* beliefs) (Jongman-Sereno & Leary, 2018). Unlike smiling and crying, which are often feigned or exaggerated (e.g., Ten Brinke et al., 2012), embarrassment does not appear to be considered an emotive communication tool and is therefore not used as such or perceived as a potential manipulator. But why is embarrassment not instrumentalized? One explanation may be people’s reluctance to show embarrassment because they see it as a negative emotion that is not socially valued. Indeed, embarrassment may be interpreted as a sign of submission (Keltner & Buswell, 1997; Keltner et al., 1997), a temporary loss of self-esteem (Modigliani, 1968, 1971), or a lack of self-control (Goffman, 1974; Miller, 1996). In situations such as job interviews, where expressing emotions, whatever their valence, is not valued, expressing embarrassment may be seen as a failure to control particularly prejudicial emotions. Moreover, not expressing emotion, seems to be the norm in this type of situation not only for applicants, but also for evaluators, who, in most of our conditions (except self-promotion) preferred to adopt a neutral attitude, rather than an inhibitive or facilitating attitude.

These initial results were obtained on the basis of social situations where the presence or absence of stakes may have oriented the mechanisms at work. On the one hand, in everyday situations, gaffes and faux pas are nearly always followed by expressions of embarrassment and thereby almost automatically confer a likeable aura on the person who is embarrassed. Conversely, the effect of expressing embarrassment in a job interview is much more uncertain, and this uncertainty is likely to make applicants cautious about expressing



emotions. On the other hand, the mechanisms that come into play may differ according to the stakes involved in the situation: situations with no particular stakes often involve individuals who have come together by chance and are unlikely to meet again, whereas the people involved in a job interview may end up working together in the future. Thus, further research including methodological changes aimed at addressing the limitations of our studies is needed in order to determine the solidity of our results. To this end, we would suggest three modifications for future methodologies. First, our studies focused uniquely on embarrassing situations in which the social transgression (gaffe, faux pas) was the fault of the person evaluated. In this type of situation, expressions of embarrassment are probably remedial responses to the transgression, that is, socially prescribed behaviors relating to a ritualized emotionality (Parrott & Harré, 1996). Nevertheless, embarrassment can arise in many other types of situation, for example, by overly complimenting someone (Goffman, 1974; Miller, 1996), feeling embarrassed for others (Asendorpf, 1984; Cupach & Metts, 1994; Hawk, Fischer, & Van Kleef, 2011; Melchers, Markett, Montag, Trautner, Weber, Lachmann, Buss, Heinen, & Reuter, 2015; Miller 1987; Müller-Pinzler, Rademacher, Paulus, & Krach, 2015; Parrott & Harré, 1996; Thompson, 2014), teasing, flirting (Hall, 2011; Keltner et al., 1998), and committing slips of the tongue. In such contexts, which do not necessarily call for a remediating reaction, expressions of embarrassment may produce very different effects. Second, all the emotive communication variables we examined in Study 2 were verbal behaviors. Taking into account nonverbal aspects of managing an embarrassing situation in a job interview would be a promising avenue for further studies because nonverbal impression-management tactics affect evaluations during job interviews almost as much as the verbal tactic of self-promotion (Barrick, Shaffer, & DeGrassi, 2009; Levashina et al., 2014). One way of doing this would be to use video recordings. This type of approach would address another of our work's limitations, that is, the more or less ecological dimension of the scenarios method, which is an indirect data-collection method. For example, Study 2's recruiter-participants might have been more affected by the applicant's embarrassment if they had been put in a role-playing situation. Thirdly, because people evaluate others' social utility and social desirability in different ways (Cambon, 2006), the nature of the situations we examined (everyday vs. exceptional) dictated the type of personality scales we used. For example, whether an applicant in a job interview expresses regret or justification is unlikely to affect the recruiter's evaluation of the applicant's skills (i.e., social utility), but expressing regret, rather than justification, is likely to result in a more favorable judgment of the applicant's integrity (i.e., social desirability) (Tsai et al., 2010). This suggests that future

studies should systematically differentiate between the two dimensions of social value (utility vs. desirability), especially given the effect of a situation's stakes on the relative importance individuals ascribe to each dimension. In fact, in situations such as job interviews, whose outcomes have long-term and binding consequences, it is not enough to "merely" evaluate skills; it is also essential to assess traits relating to social utility, as these traits weigh heavily on judgments. This is not the case when there are no stakes involved, in which circumstances, evaluations can concentrate on traits or tendencies relating to social desirability.

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## Appendix: Scenarios

### Study 1:

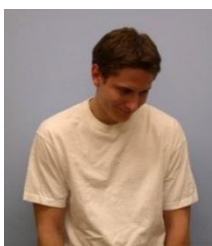
The following instructions were provided: *“The four scenarios you will read describe some situations where an individual (Mrs L., Mrs. F., Mr. N. or Mr G.) makes a gaffe. A photograph of this person just after the incident is shown. Using the information given by the situation and the photograph, evaluate his/her personality and his/her future behaviour. Answer as quickly and spontaneously as possible.”*

Here are the scenarios:

1. *“Mrs L./Mr N. is entering in a café. While she/he is going to sit down, she/he hits a table and spills a glass on a customer’s knees. The photograph shows Mrs L./Mr N. just after this incident.”*
2. *“During a meeting, Mrs L./Mr N. is called to speak to the assembly. While she/he is walking towards the stage, she/he stumbles and falls on the ground. The photograph shows Mrs L./Mr N. just after this incident.”*
3. *“Near the coffee machine of a company, Mrs F./Mr G. is talking with another person and loudly making fun of a colleague. She/he suddenly realizes that this colleague was just behind them and heard everything. The photograph shows Mrs F./Mr G. just after this incident”.*
4. *Mrs F./Mr G. is walking down the street. She/He thinks she/he recognizes an acquaintance and starts smiling and to merrily greeting. As she/he gets closer, she/he realizes that she/he was wrong. The photograph shows Mrs F./Mr G. just after this incident”.*

The photographs following each scenario came from *University of California Davis Set of Emotion Expressions* (Tracy et al., 2009). They are available at this address: <http://ubc-emotionlab.ca/research-tools/nucdsee/>. Here are some examples:

Embarrassment:



Happiness:



Sadness:



Neutral state:



### Study 2:

The scenarios included a basic narrative which was the same for all the participants: *“Mr. B is a job applicant for a salesperson’s position in a big company of furniture stores. He went to the job interview with appropriate clothes. He was eager and a bit stressed. He comes to the secretariat and politely presents his convocation. Waiting to be called, he reads his Curriculum Vitae and focuses on the interview. A few minutes after, he is invited to enter the director’s office. Mr B. greets the director and waits to be allowed to sit down. Then he begins his presentation by highlighting the main points of his CV and his professional background. He explains his motivation and why he applied for this position. The director was carefully listening to him, when suddenly the Mr B.’s mobile phone rings.”*

The continuation of the scenario depends on the experimental condition:

1. *“No tactic” condition (or “neutral condition”): “Mr B. remains impassive, switches discreetly off his mobile phone and continues his presentation.”*
2. *“Self-promotion” condition: “Mr B. switches off his mobile phone and says: ‘You see, Mr Director, as I am very attentive person, I am frequently solicited to provide advice, and that is a great asset for the position that you offer.’”*
3. *“Ingratiation” condition: “Mr B. switches off his mobile phone and says: ‘As a director of a company as prestigious as yours, you must also be constantly solicited by your several collaborators. I guess they can’t do with your advice and you probably used to hear your mobile phone ringing at inappropriate times.’”*



4. “Regret” condition: “*Mr B. switches off his mobile phone and says: ‘I’m very sorry... I apologize. It’s my fault, I should have ensured that my phone was turned off. I sincerely regret this omission.’*”

5. “Justification” condition: “*Mr B. switches off his mobile phone and says: ‘What is happening is something that every person focused on a job interview may undergo: to forget to switch his/her phone off.’*”

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