

TRIGGERS OF MOST EMBARRASSING MOMENT RECOLLECTIONS IN A COLLEGE SAMPLE

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Sabini, Siepmann, Stein, and Meyerowitz (2000) identified three types of situations which trigger embarrassment and created a subscale of each subtype of trigger. The three subtypes include faux pas (making a social mistake), center of attention, and sticky situations (threatening another's social identity). Faux pas scenarios were rated as more embarrassing than the other subtypes. Consistent with this finding, we predicted faux pas would be the most prevalent most-embarrassing moment recalled in our free response study.

Two hundred and twenty-six college students (72% women) from a small liberal arts college were asked to write down their most embarrassing moment. Two independent judges categorized these situations into faux pas, center of attention, or sticky situation (98.23% initial agreement, discussion led to complete consensus of ratings). Faux pas was the most common trigger of embarrassment in our sample (70.35%), followed by center of attention (25.67%), and then sticky situations (3.98%), $\chi^2(2) = 155.32, p < .001, \phi = .83$.

It is important to understand the prevalence and impact of these different types of triggers of embarrassment to identify potential social anxieties, interpersonal problems, and personality differences. The center of attention embarrassment trigger has been related to communication anxiety, and faux pas and sticky situations have been linked to anxious attachment (Withers & Vernon, 2006). Further personality and individual differences may be explored in the future.

Keywords: embarrassment, social mistake, faux pas, embarrassing situation.

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