Review

A Psychological Perspective on Vicarious Embarrassment and Shame in the Context of Cringe Humor

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Abstract: Cringe humor combines the seemingly opposite emotional experiences of amusement and embarrassment due to others' transgressions of norms. Psychological theories and empirical studies on these emotional reactions in response to others' transgressions of social norms have mostly focused on embarrassment and shame. Here, we build on this literature, aiming to present a novel perspective on cringe humor. To do so, we introduce the psychological literature on embarrassment and shame, as well as the processes involved that allow humans to also experience these emotions on behalf of others, and draw theoretical links to cringe comedy. We then systematically disentangle contexts in which audiences experience vicarious embarrassment, and structure our argument based on the ongoing processes and consequences of the observed transgressions of norms based on the constituting dimensions of *awareness* and *intentionality* of the normative transgression by the social target. We describe how the behavioral expressions of the target along with the social distance and the current motivations of the audience shape the emotional experience and negotiation of social norms, specifically in response to intentional normative transgressions. While this perspective makes it evident that cringe humor is closely linked to the debate around social normative standards between the actor/actress and the audience, we conclude that the different manifestations and specific situational characteristics have fundamentally different consequences for the affirmation or renegotiation of social normative standards.

Keywords: cringe humor; vicarious embarrassment; vicarious shame; social emotions; social norms; norm violations

1. Introduction

"I did think of adopting for a while. A little third world child. (...) I wouldn't be adding to the population problem. I'd be alleviating an existing problem. A young kid born, through no fault of his own, into abject poverty, he would have died, I can literally save his life, and give him a great upbringing. Right?" (Ricky Gervais, in *Humanity*).

With such jokes, Gervais has been making large audiences laugh for years, irrespective of their putative racist and classist connotations—or perhaps because of them? Is it a joke that punches up or down (a topic brought up by Ricky Gervais later in the same show)? Who is the target of the joke: the "third-world child", or potential adopters? What is the subject of the joke: adoption, or saviorism? What does this joke say about Gervais' own attitudes and values, and are they shared by the audience?

Cringe comedy is a multifaceted, complicated phenomenon. It is described as a genre of comedy that dwells on exactly these boundaries of currently negotiated social norms and political correctness. It builds on charismatic, likable provocateurs who use norm-violating cringe humor and the resulting awkwardness as a kind of "release valve" to intervene into more or less stable systems of social norms (Kotsko 2010). Thereby, cringe humor combines two seemingly opposing emotional reactions: the pleasant experience of amusement and laughter, and the unpleasant experience of embarrassment or shame due to others' normative transgressions. Laughing at cringe comedy feels "wrong yet

okay", and it has been argued that it is precisely this combination of a violation—that is, a threat to an observer's wellbeing or normative belief system—and the simultaneous perception that this violation is benign, that is at the core of humorous experiences (benign-violation hypothesis; McGraw and Warren 2010; Warren and Mcgraw 2015). Although one can also cringe in disgust or feel uncomfortable because of the stable physical features of others, using actions to embarrass an audience is a central element of cringe humor. Understanding why we cringe because of others' behaviors, when we do it, and what circumstances influence our judgments and actions as an audience can offer insight into the societal consequences of cringe humor. Based on a psychological research perspective, we elaborate how these emotional reactions have been studied, when they occur, and how they shape the interplay of audience and actor/actress, how they are tied to understanding others' thoughts, actions, and emotions, and how they can be used to provoke discussions of current social norms.

2. Cringe, Embarrassment, and Shame

Humans have been described as an "ultra-social species" (Tomasello 2014). As such, we have evolved skills that allow us to predict others' behaviors and represent internal states that are usually not accessible from mere observation (Herrmann et al. 2007; Kampis and Southgate 2020). We can share others' emotions, reason about what might be going on in their minds, and reflect on our own behavior and its appropriateness within ever-changing social contexts. However, the awareness of social rules and our social capabilities have unique consequences: humans are susceptible to the feelings of embarrassment and shame. Although these two emotions have similarities, and are often used interchangeably in everyday life, their psychological dissociation carries valuable insight for the understanding of cringe humor.

In psychological research, shame and embarrassment are described as "social" (Hareli and Parkinson 2008), "moral" (Tangney et al. 2007), or "self-conscious emotions" (Tracy and Robins 2004), which are differentiated from so-called "basic" emotions, such as joy, anger, or sadness (Izard 1971; Ekman 1992). In contrast to basic emotions, social emotions require the ability to evaluate one's own behavior within social contexts and, thus, are cognitively more complex, and serve the specific goal of regulating interpersonal behavior (Tracy et al. 2007; Hareli and Parkinson 2008).

Although shame and embarrassment have large semantic overlap in several languages (Lutz 1982; Shaver et al. 1987), psychological research has been able to uncover some notable differences between these emotional concepts. In order to explore these differences, Tangney et al. (1996) asked participants to describe biographical events when they felt shame or embarrassment. Their analyses showed that whether an event is associated with shame or embarrassment depends on several factors: while both emotions are experienced after personally relevant failures or transgressions, embarrassment occurs in situations that involve rather trivial social transgressions (Buss 1980; Tangney et al. 1996). For example, situations that typically elicit embarrassment include physical unskillfulness, mental blackouts, or failing to maintain an appropriate level of privacy in front of others (Keltner and Anderson 2000). These types of norm violation have no serious moral consequences, and often elicit laughter (Tangney et al. 1996), potentially because they are perceived as relatively benign (McGraw and Warren 2010).

In contrast, shame is an aversive experience that involves feelings of humiliation, inferiority, and worthlessness, and the transgression is interpreted as a reflection of a "bad self" rather than a trivial incident (Tangney et al. 1992; Tangney et al. 1996). More importantly, embarrassment arises only during events that involve some form of publicity, the presence of others or, simply speaking, an audience. In contrast to shame, which is also experienced when contemplating one's flaws in private, embarrassment is rarely experienced alone (Tangney et al. 1996; Müller-Pinzler et al. 2015). In these rare cases, the experience is shaped by worries about what an imaginary audience might think if they knew about the mishap (Miller 1996; Tangney et al. 1996). Additionally, compared

to shame, embarrassment is also more likely to occur in front of larger audiences, often consisting of acquaintances and strangers rather than close people (Tangney et al. 1996).

Being socially integrated and positively valued by one's peers is considered key to human survival (Macdonald and Leary 2005; Eisenberger 2012), and social exclusion and isolation are associated with negative emotional consequences and health outcomes (Holt-Lunstad et al. 2015; Cacioppo and Cacioppo 2018). Embarrassment and shame are thought to serve as an "emotional moral barometer" that provides feedback on one's social and moral acceptability, with the goal of preventing social exclusion (Tangney et al. 2007). While shame often arises when reflecting about one's past behavior, embarrassment is described as a more immediate reaction to a sudden threat of unwanted negative evaluation by others (Mosher and White 1981; Miller 2007). As such, embarrassment is sometimes ascribed a function comparable to that of physical pain: just as physical pain signals injuries of the body that need to be taken care of (Eccleston and Crombez 1999), embarrassment is thought to signal threats to a person's social image in the form of potential disapproval, rejection, or devaluation (Miller 2007). For this reason, embarrassment was also described as a form of social pain (Eisenberger et al. 2003; Krach et al. 2011; Kross et al. 2011). The "acute state of startled, flustered abashment and chagrin" (Miller 1996), comparable to what can be experienced during cringe humor, has been associated with immediate physiological responses, such as increased heart rate, blood pressure, and change in skin conductance, as well as pupil dilation, blushing, and an increase in neural activation in brain regions associated with high arousal (Mulkens et al. 1999; Shearn et al. 1999; Drummond et al. 2003; Kreibig 2010; Müller-Pinzler et al. 2015).

When watching a TV series or stand-up comedy capitalizing on cringe humor, we often experience this immediate affective and physiological response in our own bodies. Importantly, we experience this discomfort not because of our own mishaps, but vicariously due to the misbehavior of the protagonist (i.e., the target) (Krach et al. 2011). It is important to note that observing others' social transgressions can also trigger vicarious feelings of shame if specific conditions are met. From a theoretical perspective, vicarious shame arises whenever the target's behavior threatens the observer's self-concept, irrespective of the observer's own behavior (Welten et al. 2012). This presupposes a salient relationship between target and observer—for example a shared social identity such as family, nationality, or party membership (Lickel et al. 2005; Welten et al. 2012). Vicarious shame, like first-person shame, is tied to behavior that has serious moral implications for the social group as a whole and undermines their shared identity. For example, in one study, U.S. citizens were confronted with a news article describing problems in postwar Iraq caused by American occupation, such as poor planning leading to water shortages and breakdown of public order, and Iraqi citizens' negative evaluations of Americans. Participants who perceived these conditions as a threat to their national image were likely to report shame, while there was no correlation between perceived image threat and anger or guilt (Iyer et al. 2007). Compared to vicarious shame, vicarious embarrassment does not require any kind of relationship between the observer and the target, although it can be modulated by social closeness (Müller-Pinzler et al. 2016), and is more likely to be experienced after less serious, often humorous incidents. Taken together, cringe humor can elicit vicarious embarrassment and shame, depending on the relationship between the observer and the target. Understanding the causes and consequences of these two emotional experiences helps to explain how cringe humor contributes to discussions of current norms and values.

3. Intentionality and Awareness: Underlying Dimensions of Situations Inducing Vicarious Embarrassment and Shame

To understand the cognitive mechanisms behind vicarious emotions in observers, psychological research has used different approaches to induce these experiences. Classic experimental studies examined vicarious embarrassment reactions—for example, by instructing study participants to watch a close friend or a stranger singing the Star-Spangled Banner while standing on a table (Shearn et al. 1999). By exposing the target to the public's

focus while performing a normative violation, it was shown that close friends of the target were more likely to blush than observers who did not have a close relationship with the target (Colvin et al. 1997; Thomas and Fletcher 1997; Shearn et al. 1999). Blushing in this scenario was attributed to empathy—that is, the process of directly sharing another person's affective state (de Vignemont and Singer 2006), which is facilitated through social closeness (Colvin et al. 1997; Thomas and Fletcher 1997; Shearn et al. 1999). It is suggested that the observer's empathy for the target is triggered by recourse to his or her own past experiences with similar situations (Crozier 1998). Miller (1987) further hypothesized that "the maintenance of face in social interactions seems to be such a central concern and such a precarious undertaking that envisioning oneself in the place of an embarrassed other may cause one to suffer empathic embarrassment" (Miller 1987, p. 9). In the above situation, observers may directly share the protagonist's embarrassment, expressing this through behaviors such as blushing, hiding their face, or averting their gaze, and thereby simulating the threat that this would pose to their own social reputation if they were in the protagonist's place. Thus, vicarious embarrassment signals that another's social reputation is at stake, and that social support might be necessary.

However, while the depicted scenario stimulated empirical research on vicarious embarrassment, it is rather uncommon, and might not be generalizable to everyday life, or to the various ways in which vicarious embarrassment and shame can be understood in the context of cringe humor. In fact, observers report embarrassment and shame in diverse situations with distinguishable psychological structures, and it may be worthwhile to conceptualize the nature of these situations more deeply. More often than not, social targets would not intentionally embarrass themselves by singing the Star-Spangled Banner while standing on a table if they were not encouraged to perform for the purpose of a study. More commonly, vicarious embarrassment occurs in response to targets who accidentally violate social etiquette or a societal norm.

This opens up our first conceptual distinction: the idea of intentionality. Drawing on research on the first-person experience of embarrassment (Miller and Tangney 1994; Tangney et al. 1996; Müller-Pinzler et al. 2015), the attributed intentional or unintentional character of a transgression influences what observers think about the target. Accidental mishaps do not necessarily reflect the personal character or flawed aspects of the self, as the behavior may well be caused by peculiarities of the specific situation. In contrast, assuming that an actor has intentionally violated a social norm allows observers to draw conclusions about the nature of the target's character, since the target has control over their actions and can be held responsible accordingly. Another conceptual distinction is the social target's awareness of the ongoing mishap or normative violation. In contrast to first-hand embarrassment, which essentially requires awareness about the transgression, observers can also experience vicarious embarrassment when the social target has no insight about the faux pas (Krach et al. 2011; Paulus et al. 2015). These attributions of "intentionality" and "awareness" result in unique situational configurations that are differently applied in cringe comedy. We will first show how these dimensions help to structure the situations used in cringe humor, and then elaborate their consequences.

3.1. Non-Intentional Transgression and Aware Target ("Tripping on Stage")

Accidental mishaps, portrayed by inept protagonists who are fully aware of what is happening, have been central to slapstick since the very beginning of comedy films in the early 1920s. Although the scripted scenarios presented in films are anything but unintentional, studies have shown that viewers perceive films as illusions of a fictional world in which they are physically present as witnesses, which creates a sense of reality and triggers emotions similar to real-world situations (Tan 1995; Zillmann 2006). Thus, being confronted with seemingly accidental mishaps in films is likely to induce the same emotional responses as witnessing real accidental mishaps, despite the knowledge that the scenes are staged. A famous example is Charlie Chaplin's "*Behind the Screen*" (1916) and its pie-throwing scene, which was adopted by many other comedians afterwards to

illustrate accidental pratfalls (which then, however, often end up in chaotic pie fights). This kind of awkward and clumsy behavior as a trigger for vicarious embarrassment still makes up a large part of the scenes in contemporary comedies. A more recent example of such "everyday awkwardness" (Kotsko 2010) is illustrated by *Curb Your Enthusiasm* (season 2, episode "Shaq"), in which Larry David sits with his legs outstretched in the first row of an NBA basketball game and makes Lakers' star player Shaquille O'Neal accidentally trip. In contrast to experiencing embarrassment because of one's own mishap, here the observer cognitively switches perspectives to other actors in the scene. In addition to realizing that a publicly witnessed mishap, such as making the Lakers' star player trip, has social consequences (with the appreciation and understanding of social etiquettes taken for granted), observers recognize that the unfortunate protagonist shares this point of view (i.e., likewise appreciating and conforming to the situational social etiquette), feels embarrassed, and would have prevented the predicament if possible. Although the emotional experience after such minor incidents is typically vicarious embarrassment, these situations can also elicit vicarious shame. If the audience identifies with the target in some way, the target's awkward behavior could be perceived as a stereotypical example of the group by which the audience feels represented. In this case, the target's behavior could be threatening to the audience's social image and trigger vicarious shame.

3.2. Non-Intentional Transgression and Unaware Target ("Spinach in the Teeth")

Interestingly, observers can also experience embarrassment or shame on behalf of a protagonist who is oblivious to their faux pas (Krach et al. 2011; Paulus et al. 2015; Mayer et al. 2020). This includes moments in which the target accidentally violates a norm without noticing it, while the audience is fully aware of the incident. Classic examples include an open fly, a piece of spinach stuck in one's teeth, or leaving the bathroom with toilet paper clinging to one's shoes. Such situations have a long tradition in slapstick comedy, but have also appeared in films since the 1920s. A prominent, more contemporary example is the infamous hair gel mix-up scene in "*There's Something about Mary*" (1998), and the moment when Cameron Diaz asks Ben Stiller "What is that?". Again, it is assumed that moviegoers and the protagonists (in this case, Cameron Diaz and Ben Stiller) share the same normative frame of reference and agree that the incident would be considered inappropriate if the mishap were pointed out to them. Importantly, however, since the protagonists are completely unaware of what is going on in this scene, the scene can continue to play out, with the audience forced to watch and sympathize with them as they continue on their way to the revelation of the mishap. While observers cannot empathically share the targets' emotional experience in this specific moment (because neither Diaz nor Stiller have insight into the predicament), they might anticipate the moment when the target learns about it, or imagine themselves in the target's place, which leads to the experience of embarrassment. In real-world scenarios, this enables observers to intervene and help the target by pointing out the mishap. Aside from these two possible scenarios of accidental, everyday awkwardness (Kotsko 2010), situations in which a protagonist willingly violates a social norm may also trigger strong vicarious reactions.

3.3. Intentional Transgression and Aware Target ("Ableist Joke")

First, there are situations that cause vicarious reactions in observers in which the protagonist is perceived to purposely transgress a social rule or moral standard while holding knowledge about the underlying norm (e.g., using inappropriate language; making sexist/racist/ableist jokes). Examples from comedy shows that capitalize on such norm-transgressing "radical awkwardness" (Kotsko 2010) include, among many others, *The Office* and *Curb Your Enthusiasm.* In *Curb Your Enthusiasm* (season 7, episode 5: "Denise Handicapped"), Larry David starts flirting with Denise, who is sitting behind a table in a café. Once he realizes that Denise is handicapped and sits in a wheelchair, he begins to overtly show his rejection. In contrast to the above situations of accidental, everyday awkwardness, here the normative frame of reference is intentionally disobeyed by the pro-

tagonist, creating a conflict between the audience's expectations and the target's behavior. What makes this scene cringeworthy is the fact that Larry David is supposedly aware of the obvious disrespect and violation of convention, but still chooses to behave this way. This mismatch between the target's and observers' appreciation for, but not knowledge of, current societal norms has a twofold consequence: Witnessing the scene may first make observers aware of possible implicit ableist attitudes of their own. Realizing potential discrepancies between the "actual self" and an "ideal or ought self" (Higgins et al. 1987) can then be resolved by the "valve of cringe" (Kotsko 2010), thereby reassuring oneself that one "would not have behaved similarly".

However, these reflections may also cause vicarious feelings of shame if the observed behavior is seen as similar to one's own past attitudes or behaviors. Typically, the emotional response to these kinds of situations elicits the desire to withdraw from the situation, the target, or the shared social identity (Lickel et al. 2005; Schmader and Lickel 2006). This type of behavior thus differs from the behavior that observers often exhibit in response to accidental norm transgressions, which is to offer support and encouragement to the unfortunate target (Miller 2007). If laughter occurs, this suggests that the audience is only weakly committed to the norm that has been transgressed, or perceives the situation as psychologically distant (McGraw and Warren 2010). This might be particularly difficult for observers who are victims of the presented transgressions (e.g., ableist jokes) on a daily basis.

3.4. Intentional Transgression and Unaware Target ("Self-Aggrandizement")

Finally, vicarious reactions such as embarrassment can be experienced in situations in which protagonists intentionally show unconventional behaviors to be viewed in a positive light, but do not understand that the normative frame of reference is not shared with observers. As with the spinach-in-the-teeth example, the protagonist is unaware of the inappropriateness of the situation. Here, however, the situation is induced intentionally. These situations often involve protagonists who brag about own successes, status symbols, and physical capabilities, or are overly vain, while being completely oblivious to the fact that the audience perceives the behavior as inappropriate in that context. Such scenarios have been capitalized on more recently in comedy, and make up a significant number of scenes in series like the Danish *Klovn* (in Germany: Jerks), *The Office* (in Germany: Stromberg) and, again, *Curb Your Enthusiasm*. One, now classic, exemplary situation is the "The David Brent Dance" (*The Office*, series 1, episode 5: "Charity"), in which David (performed by Ricky Gervais) shows his dancing skills in front of his office staff. In this situation, David Brent seems to think that his performance is well received by his staff, which is not the case. Unlike the "ableist joke" example above, such transgressions are not used to provoke the audience or to make jokes at the expense of others, but rather reflect the actor's genuine misjudgment of the audience's expectations or the demands of a particular situation. Again, these situations have a high potential to induce vicarious shame rather than embarrassment if the target reminds the observer of their own past inadequacies, or if there is a salient relationship (shared social identity) between the target and the observer.

3.5. The Egocentricity of the Audience

In all configurations of awareness and intentionality, vicarious embarrassment results from the uniquely human ability to understand another's intentions, thoughts, and emotions. However, these situations also illustrate that the process of simulating another's experience is egocentrically anchored. This means that observers represent others' inner states based on their own knowledge and judgment of the situation, with the resulting emotional state not necessarily corresponding to the emotional state of the target (Marcus et al. 1996). For example, in situations where the target is unaware of the ongoing faux pas, observers feel embarrassed despite the fact that the target does not notice that their social image is being threatened. This egocentric bias in perspective-taking is a

well-known process in the psychological literature, with numerous studies showing that judgments of others' inner states are heavily influenced by one's own perspective, unless there is a specific motivation to make more accurate judgments (Epley and Caruso 2008; Silani et al. 2013).

The egocentricity is explained by the processes of anchoring and adjustment (Epley et al. 2004). The former is thought of as an initial model of the other's perspective, which is built close to one's own perspective; the latter is an effortful, motivated process of updating this model to account for differences between one's own perspective and the other's perspective (Epley et al. 2004). This adjustment process is often stopped prematurely, which leads to an egocentrically biased representation of others' states (Epley et al. 2004; Epley and Caruso 2008). In the discussed examples of vicarious emotions, there are two main sources that can lead to egocentrically biased judgments of the situation and, consequently, to different emotional states in targets and observers: First, observers and targets may experience different emotions in the situation because of the different states of knowledge about the ongoing transgression, while both sides generally agree on the current normative framework, as in the "spinach-in-the-teeth" example. In these situations, it seems a small step to adjust the initial model, as people are usually able to infer the absence of embarrassment in the social target. However, if not motivated to make accurate judgments of the target's state, observers still feel embarrassment on the other's behalf (Krach et al. 2011). Second, observers and targets may experience different emotions in the situation because of the different states of knowledge and appreciation of prevailing social norms. This is particularly the case for the "ableist joke" or "self-aggrandizement" situations. The process of adjustment here might be more challenging than in the first example, as it requires the ability to represent a normative framework that is different from one's own in order to understand the target's intentions and behavior. For this reason, it has been argued that affective responses while observing such kinds of normative transgressions are more demanding with respect to perspective-taking (Paulus et al. 2013).

Notably, egocentricity is not necessarily maladaptive in social contexts. Depending on the specific situation, egocentric representations of the target's social integrity threat can both negatively and positively influence an observer's behavior towards the target. For example, during situations in which the target accidentally commits a faux pas without noticing it, the observer's egocentrically biased vicarious embarrassment experience can motivate them to offer help and restore the target's reputation. When the target intentionally violates a norm, the egocentrically biased experience can lead observers to reflect on deviating perspectives of prevailing social norms, or to gain an embodied understanding of how it would feel to act in such a way, without being at risk of endangering their own social integrity in front of others who share their normative standards. This, however, might also trigger a desire to distance themselves from the target (Schmader and Lickel 2006).

4. Modulations of Vicarious Emotional Responses

As outlined above, vicarious embarrassment and shame can be experienced across a range of situations that vary in the intentionality of the transgression and the awareness of the target (Krach et al. 2011). The intensity of the experienced emotion is thereby influenced by various situational and intrapersonal factors. We have already briefly touched on one important factor—namely, social closeness. In everyday life, the effect of social closeness can be easily observed when parents cringe only if their own children, but not others' children, act out in public. In our study, we found that if the target was in control of their actions and intentionally violated normative standards, closely related observers reported stronger vicarious embarrassment than if there was no direct personal link to the target (Müller-Pinzler et al. 2016). A rationale for this effect has been brought up by previous work on close relationships (Colvin et al. 1997; Thomas and Fletcher 1997; Davis 2018), showing that friendship facilitates empathic processes which, in turn, may account for an increase in vicarious embarrassment (Shearn et al. 1999). Another explanation is that the

observer might be particularly concerned about their own social image in the context of an associated embarrassing friend (Fortune and Newby-Clark 2008). The psychological literature on social identity and group processes has recently characterized comparable effects; there, wrongdoings or inadequate behaviors (e.g., racist attitudes or behaviors) of in-group members pose a threat to one's own social integrity, and trigger other social emotions such as vicarious shame or guilt, even in situations where the observer is neither involved in nor responsible for the target's normative transgressions (Lickel et al. 2005; Chekroun and Nugier 2011; Lickel et al. 2011). The increased concerns about one's own social image, and the degree of overlap between cognitive representations of the self and others (Aron et al. 1991), are thought to enhance self-related thoughts when observing a close other.

The effects of social closeness might be related to a more general effect of psychological distance. Events or objects are perceived as psychologically distant to the extent that they are temporally (now vs. then), spatially (here vs. there), socially (self vs. other), and hypothetically (real vs. imagined) distant (Liberman and Trope 2008). The perceived psychological distance is not only tied to objective measures of distance, but can also be experimentally manipulated in observers—for example, by explicitly instructing them to take a target's perspective. In one study, the instruction to imagine oneself in the target's situation increased ratings of vicarious embarrassment (Stocks et al. 2011). In a similar study, we showed that taking the target's perspective increased the activation of brain regions associated with sharing the other's negative emotions when the target was aware of their faux pas (Mayer et al. 2020). Thus, decreasing psychological distance through motivated perspective-taking may lead to higher levels of vicarious embarrassment in observers—at least in situations where the target also experiences embarrassment.

In turn, when psychological distance is increased, observers are more likely to find the situation amusing (Warren and Mcgraw 2015). For example, two studies showed that participants who were primed with spatial distance cues reported greater levels of amusement after reading about a normative violation than participants who were primed with closeness cues (Williams and Bargh 2008; McGraw and Warren 2010). Studies have shown that the amusement experienced by observers of normative transgressions typically does not replace negative emotions such as embarrassment and disgust, but rather complements them (McGraw and Warren 2010).

However, in a neuroimaging study, we found that observers who were asked to rate their level of amusement during incidents of normative violations showed less activation of brain regions associated with sharing others' negative emotions than observers who rated their level of vicarious embarrassment (Paulus et al. 2018). This suggests that feelings of amusement may not completely cancel out the vicarious embarrassment response to others' inadequacies, but might be able to dampen it.

In conclusion, the emotional experience when witnessing normative transgressions is shaped by the relationship between the target and the observer, but can also be modulated by shaping cognitive processes within the observer. Ultimately, whether a transgression induces laughter or pure embarrassment in observers seems to depend on how benign the transgression is perceived to be, which is closely linked to the perceived psychological distance of the transgression (McGraw and Warren 2010).

5. Modulations of Observers' Judgments and Behavior towards the Target

Characteristics of the situation influence not only the intensity of the vicarious emotional experience, but also observers' judgments of the target, and their subsequent behavior towards them. A central factor is how the target behaves immediately after the public transgression—that is, to what extent they overtly display signs of embarrassment, or other self-conscious emotions, such as guilt and shame. Typically, a person who feels embarrassed exhibits a distinct pattern of nonverbal behavior that conveys the experienced discomfort to others (Keltner and Buswell 1997). These behaviors include gaze aversion, nervous smiles and smile controls, downward and sideways head movements, face touch-

ing, and laughter (Marcus et al. 1996; Keltner and Buswell 1997; Harris 2001). Although embarrassment is not associated with a distinct facial expression (Widen et al. 2011), observers are usually highly adept at identifying these behaviors as signals of embarrassment (Marcus et al. 1996; Marcus 1999), especially when the behavior is accompanied by a blush (Keltner 1995).

Obvious signs of embarrassment after a transgression generally leave a good impression on the observing audience (Semin and Manstead 1982; Miller 2007). It has been shown that embarrassment in others is interpreted as evidence that the target realizes and regrets their transgression which, in turn, signals prosociality (Bless 2002; Feinberg et al. 2012). Even blushing alone leads to favorable judgments of a target: people who blush after a transgression are rated as more sympathetic, trustworthy, and likely to be genuinely sorry than people who do not blush (De Jong 1999; Dijk et al. 2009, 2011; De Jong and Dijk 2013; Thorstenson et al. 2020). Observers are then more willing to forgive the transgression and affiliate with the target (Feinberg et al. 2012). Mostly, the mortified protagonist is comforted and encouraged, which reassures them that they are still appreciated by the audience (Miller 2007). This is sometimes accompanied by laughter and smiles, signaling that the transgression is deemed as harmless and laughable (Miller 2007). Displays of embarrassment are therefore considered to be a form of nonverbal apology (Castelfranchi and Poggi 1990; De Jong and Dijk 2013) that regulate interpersonal behavior by appeasing observers of normative transgressions (Keltner and Anderson 2000). For this reason, participants who are embarrassed in laboratory tasks typically wish to signal their embarrassment to observers (Leary et al. 1996). Similar results have been reported for other self-conscious emotions after normative transgressions: people expressing guilt or shame were judged more positively in terms of their social attunement and moral motivation than those who did not express these emotions (Stearns and Parrott 2012).

Conversely, if signs of embarrassment are not adequately shown, observers obtain a more negative impression of the target. Showing embarrassment that is extreme and disproportionate to the transgression (e.g., leaving the room and exclaiming "Oh, my god! I can't continue!" after a minor incident during one's project presentation) is rather negatively valued, and observers are less likely to help the social target after the predicament (Levin and Arluke 1982). Similarly, not showing signs of embarrassment at all after a normative transgression also leads to unfavorable judgments by the audience. For example, in one study, targets who showed only minimal signs of embarrassment after a transgression were rated as more antisocial (i.e., selfish, manipulative, and likely to cheat) and less prosocial (i.e., generous, trustworthy, and cooperative) than targets who displayed clear signs of embarrassment (Feinberg et al. 2012).

In sum, displaying context-appropriate negative self-conscious emotions is generally desirable, as targets who express these emotions are seen as more prosocial and receive more support from the audience than those who do not.

6. The Role of Painful Laughter in Renegotiating Current Social Norms

As outlined above, cringe humor is a complex phenomenon that makes use of various situations to induce vicarious embarrassment, and possibly laughter, in the audience. Vicarious emotional experiences such as embarrassment, shame, or amusement are thereby closely tied to current social norms, values, etiquettes, and expectations. Cringe humor thus inevitably brings social norms into focus, and potentially provokes processes of reevaluation or affirmation. We speculate that whether cringe humor is used to affirm norms and values or aims to renegotiate them depends on the specific situations and configurations that we have discussed so far. Embarrassment and shame have been described as emotions that, like other social or moral emotions, may reinforce adherence to existing social rules (Tangney et al. 2007). However, situations eliciting vicarious feelings of embarrassment or shame can have opposing effects, depending on the intentionality of the transgression and the correspondence of social norms held by observers and the target.

Situations in which accidental mishaps are met with vicarious embarrassment or shame usually entail that the target and observers have a shared understanding of social norms. Consequently, aware targets will experience embarrassment after realizing their failure, and will communicate their embarrassment to the audience. Through the mechanism of empathy, observers are then able to experience the target's emotions in their own bodies (Krach et al. 2011). Even when the target is unaware of the faux pas, observers assume that the target would show signs of embarrassment if they were pointed to the failure. Since the target shows or is expected to show signs of embarrassment that are deemed appropriate by the audience, they are viewed as more prosocial, and are usually greeted with support and understanding (Miller 2007; Feinberg et al. 2012). These kinds of situations thus promote contact and closeness between the unfortunate target and observers.

In this context, laughter has been suggested to function as a sign of reassurance that the violation was not as grave, and that the audience continues to hold the target in high esteem (Miller 2007). Consistent with the benign-violation hypothesis of humor, a laughing audience indicates that there is either an alternative norm that suggests that the shown behavior is acceptable, that the audience is only weakly committed to the norm anyway, or that the transgression is perceived as socially, temporally, spatially, or hypothetically distant (McGraw and Warren 2010). Consequently, if observers can laugh at these scenarios, this indicates that the transgression is perceived as benign, even if the initial reaction is an unpleasant cringe. By creating a sense of community and inclusivity, these situations may be a starting point for discussions of whether the current norms are always worth adhering to. Pre-recorded laughter might enhance this effect by resolving ambiguity (Martin and Gray 1996). This is especially the case when the laughter is assumed to be authentic, and to originate from others who share the same values, since laughter of similar others is thought to function as "social proof" of the humorous and, thus, benign nature of the transgression (Lawson et al. 1998; Platow et al. 2005).

These processes are less likely to occur during situations in which a target intentionally transgresses a particular social norm. Unlike the examples discussed above, the audience and the target do not always agree on current norms and values when a target intentionally violates a norm. Consequently, targets who willingly violate a norm are unlikely to be embarrassed about their actions. The vicarious emotional response arises in observers because the behavior that they witnessed violates their standards—not those held by the target. Since the target does not display signs of embarrassment or shame, the audience is more likely to judge them as antisocial or less likeable in general (Feinberg et al. 2012). Typically, observers of intentional normative transgressions then have a desire to distance themselves from the situation instead of supporting the target (Lickel et al. 2005; Schmader and Lickel 2006). It should be noted that this only relates to situations in which a target breaks with highly valued and irrefutable social norms held by the observer. Since the audience does not perceive violations of these norms as benign, these situations are rarely amusing, and mainly involve negative emotional consequences such as anger, vicarious embarrassment, and vicarious shame. In this case, intentional normative transgressions increase the distance between the target and the observers, which might affirm values rather than help to renegotiate them.

However, intentional normative transgressions—sometimes in the form of disparagement humor (Zillmann 1983)—are an often-used element in cringe comedy, which means that they still carry the potential to make an audience laugh. The main premise for this is that there is an overlap of norms held by the actor and the audience. Here, depending on the target of the joke, the observation of intentional normative transgressions can have different consequences. On the one hand, the comedian's normative transgression could imply an explicit disregard for certain current normative conventions. For example, if a comedian actively transgresses currently negotiated conventions of political correctness, it could be interpreted as a sign of accommodation to an audience that sees itself as an outsider to this conventional system. Here, both the comedian and the observers would be assumed to know about the social convention that is violated, but share the rejection

of this convention. Because of the weak commitment to the transgressed norm on both sides, these situations are likely to elicit positive emotional expressions, such as joy or laughter about the breach of etiquette or the racism of a joke. This would be an example of a "punching down" kind of cringe humor, in which the target of the joke is the incriminated person (e.g., a person affected by racism). Earlier psychological research has shown that this kind of humor communicates tacit approval and tolerance of the transgression, and that individuals with high levels of prejudice against the disparaged group are more likely to maintain or even consolidate their attitudes (Ford 2000; Ford and Ferguson 2004). For audiences who do not share the same values as the humorist, disparagement humor represents a serious transgression of a highly valued norm, and does not lead to laughter. However, in some circumstances, disparagement humor can evoke amusement in audiences that do not agree with the stereotypical depiction of minority groups: identity and group-membership have been suggested to play a significant role in perceptions of disparagement humor (Thai et al. 2019). Thai et al. (2019), for example, showed that disparagement humor was deemed more acceptable if the comedian was perceived as a member of the marginalized group being disparaged. This is consistent with the intergroup sensitivity effect (Hornsey et al. 2002), which predicts that humor containing a self-deprecating component—in the sense that the comedian makes fun of themselves or the group attributed to them (Gruner 1997)—is responded to more favorably if the comedian and the target of the joke are perceived as members of similar groups (e.g., based on sexual orientation, skin color, sex/gender, bodily appearance). Despite more positive responses to self-disparaging humor, it remains an open question whether this kind of humor helps to break down stereotypes about minority groups or, rather, reinforces them (Borgella et al. 2020).

Intentional transgressions of a social convention or norm are not only used in disparagement humor, but can also be inserted as a caricature or ironic critique of those who do not adhere to certain norms. This would be an example of a "punching up" or subversive kind of cringe humor, in which the target would not be the incriminated person, but rather the incriminator (i.e., a racist person or "white savior" as depicted in the citation at the very beginning). This strategy of cringe comedy makes use of replaying and imitating the transgressive behaviors of a perpetrator, with the knowledge being shared between the comedian and the audience that both would reject such behaviors and align in their evaluation of the norm (i.e., not being racist). Here, the audience would not laugh at the breach of etiquette, but would approve of the comedian's intervention.

Overall, laughter in response to cringe humor presupposes a shared understanding and appreciation of social norms between the audience and the target. Sometimes new information on the humorist's behavior outside of a humor-related context can cause the audience to suddenly perceive differences between their own values and those of the humorist. For example, in 2017, comedian Louis C.K. was accused of sexual misconduct, and after he admitted that the allegations were true, he was not only faced with drastic consequences for his career, but also reevaluations of his stage persona (Piper 2020). In the light of this new information, one might argue that his tendentious jokes—often centered around his own sexual preferences—were no longer perceived as benign transgressions. Potentially, this novel evidence of diverging values triggered anger or disgust in his viewers, which might explain why he lost a large part of his audience.

7. Conclusions

Taken together, understanding vicarious embarrassment and shame, and the various situations that elicit these unpleasant feelings, offers new perspectives on cringe humor. Vicarious embarrassment and shame result from the awareness of societal rules, and the uniquely human capability to understand others' emotional states. They can be experienced across a range of situations that vary in the target's awareness of the faux pas and the intentionality of the shown behavior. The experienced intensity of the vicarious emotion is thereby modulated by social closeness, the observers' motives, and the psychological

distance from the observed transgression. Whether targets themselves show signs of regret influences judgments and subsequent interactions between the target and the audience. Generally, when the transgression is seen as benign, the embarrassment felt in response to another's normative violation can be accompanied by laughter. We argue that depending on these situational and intrapersonal factors, normative violations have different consequences for the observing audiences. How they are used in cringe humor therefore differently affects debates on current social norms. While accidental normative transgressions mostly evoke favorable judgments of the unfortunate protagonist, foster inclusivity, and act as a starting point for critical discussions of prevailing norms, intentional norm transgressions can have the opposite effect if the audience and the target have diverging opinions on current norms. However, intentional normative violations can also evoke laughter if both sides agree on which norms should be adhered to.

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