Gender, Age, and Romantic Relationship Status Differences in Embarrassment and Self-Attitudes of College Students

Lauren A. McDermott
Ginny M. Naples
Terry F. Pettijohn II
Mercyhurst College

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E-mail: terrypet@usa.com

Introduction

• College is a time of great change and exploration in a young adult’s life. Consequently, knowledge of differences in social/emotional states and self-attitudes in college students is important areas to investigate. Previous research has established gender differences in embarrassability (Miller, 1996), interaction anxiousness (Miller, 1995), and self- and body esteem (Kling, Hyde, Showers, & Buswell, 1999). We were interested in replicating these differences in a sample of college students as well as considering how respondent age and romantic relationship status may alter these differences.

Predictions

• Consistent with previous studies, we predicted females, compared to males, would report greater embarrassment, blushing propensity, interaction anxiousness, and lesser self- and body esteem. These predictions are consistent with previous research findings that women have greater social sensitivities and are more affected by social situations than men (Miller, 1995).

• We also predicted freshmen would report greater embarrassability, blushing propensity, interaction anxiousness, and lesser self- and body esteem compared to upperclassmen. Freshmen are entering a new social environment and may feel less certain about their social roles and more anxious about interpersonal interactions, which may lead to more negative evaluations and uncertainties of the self.

• Those involved in romantic relationships were predicted to report greater self- and body esteem compared to those not in romantic relationships. Being emotionally involved in a close relationship may buffer an individual from threats regarding self- and body esteem, and being involved in romantic relationships may increase personal acceptance and enhance self-esteem.

Method

• Participants

234 college students
71.8% female, average age 19.3 years
97% heterosexual, 55.1% dating
69.7% freshmen, 91.9% Caucasian

• Materials & Procedure

Participants completed a randomly ordered packet of questionnaires containing one general embarrassability questionnaire (Modigliani, 1966, 1968), one general blushing questionnaire (Leary, 1983), one interaction anxiousness questionnaire (Kass, 1953), one questionnaire on self-esteem (Rosenberg, 1968), one questionnaire on body esteem, and demographic questions relating to age, ethnicity, class rank, romantic relationship status, and sexual orientation.

Results

• For each dependent variable, we conducted a 2 (participant gender: male or female) x 2 (relationship status: in a relationship or not in a relationship) x 2 (class rank: freshman or upperclassmen) ANOVA.

  Compared to males, females reported significantly higher general embarrassment, blushing propensity, greater interaction anxiousness, lower self-esteem, and lower body-esteem scores. See Figure 1.

  Those in relationships reported greater self-esteem and greater body-esteem than those not in relationships. See Figure 2.

  Freshman reported higher embarrassability and blushing propensity than upperclassmen. See Figure 3.

  All other main effects and interaction effects were not significant.

  Correlations between variables were also calculated. See correlation matrix for results.

Figure 1. Mean Scale Ratings by Participant Sex

Note: General Embarrassability, Blushing, Interaction Anxiety, and Body esteem were scored on a 5-point Likert scale and Subjective measures on a 7-point Likert scale. All statistical analyses were conducted on an alpha level of .05. All participants received non-significant, p < .10.
Figure 2. Mean Scale Ratings by Class Rank

Figure 3. Mean Scale Ratings by Dating Relationship

Discussion

- Our predictions were generally supported, although only marginal differences were found with respect to relationship status and year in college variables. Relationships may protect self-attitudes and future studies should investigate which aspects of relationships enhance and detract from self-views.
- Knowledge of these results may help college students prepare for college and may help college personnel prepare for the emotional adjustments college students experience on campus.
- Faculty and students should be sensitive to the relationship between social interaction, embarrassability reactions, and self- and body esteem.

References