THE EFFECTS OF PUBLIC AND PRIVATE FAILURE ON SELF-EVALUATION

by

Ezra Stotland

To be presented at the meetings of the
American Psychological Association
Chicago, Illinois
September, 1956

Research Center for Group Dynamics
University of Michigan
Ann Arbor, Michigan
The question asked in this study is whether a person evaluates himself differently when a failure by him is known by another person, than when his failure is not known by another. Further, the question is asked: does the degree of expertness of the observer determine a person's evaluation of himself?

To answer these questions, a laboratory experiment was conducted. The subjects were 128 male undergraduates of the University of Michigan. As each arrived in the laboratory at his appointed time, the experimenter escorted him directly to a private cubicle. He remained in this cubicle throughout the experiment and therefore did not see any other subjects. The experimenter first gave him a questionnaire designed to measure several personality attributes. In addition, the questionnaire obtained a measure of the subject's confidence in psychology, its tests and its practitioners. The experimenter left the subject alone while he filled out the questionnaire. Next, the experimenter told the subject he was to perform two tasks prior to his participating later in the so-called "real" part of the experiment (about which he was told nothing and which did not actually occur). The subject was told that performing these tasks was solely for the purpose of helping him when he participated in the later or "real" parts of the experiment. These instructions were given in order to motivate the subject to perform his tasks and, at the same time, to make it seem plausible if no one checked his performance on the task.

1 Work on this project was financed by a grant-in-aid M-701 (C) from the National Institute of Mental Health of the Institute of Health, Public Health Service, Alvin Zander, principal investigator.
The first task was presented as a test of visual-motor coordination, which was described to the subjects as the ability to imagine the arrangements of shapes and forms and to manipulate these shapes as they were imagined. The test consisted of a jigsaw puzzle with no picture on it. The criterion of success given the subjects was total completion of the puzzle. However, such completion was impossible, so that all of the subjects failed and knew that they had done so. The criterion for the degree of failure was said by the experimenter to be the extent to which the subjects approximated the correct way of putting the pieces together. Since there was not such a way, the subjects had no objective cues as to the extent of their failure.

Before the experimenter left the cubicle to allow the subject to work on the puzzle, he left a questionnaire to be filled out when the test was finished. The subject was told that the experimenter was not interested in his answers, and that working on the questionnaire was solely for the subject's benefit. Thus the answers to questionnaires were not perceived as communications to the experimenter. The experimenter introduced himself in half the cases as an expert in such tests. This was called the expert condition. The experimenter introduced himself to the other half of the subjects as a substitute who knew nothing about the test. This is the so-called non-expert condition.

The subject had ten minutes to work on the task. At the end of this time in half the cases, the experimenter called time, entered the subject's cubicle and said in an impersonal, but not hostile way, "I see you have not put the pieces together in time. This will have to be called a failure." It should be emphasized that the experimenter
did not tell the subject how much he failed. The experimenter then instructed the subject to go on with the questionnaire and left the room. This was called the public condition.

In the other half of the cases, the experimenter did not enter the cubicle at all. At the end of the working time, he stood outside the closed door and told the subjects to stop work, put the puzzle back into its envelope, and go on to the questionnaire. In this way the subject was assured that there was no possible record of his performance. This was the so-called private condition.

Thus there were four conditions: two conditions of expertness and non-expertness, and two conditions of public and private: 1) The public-expert condition, in which the experimenter introduced himself as an expert and told the subject that he knew the subject failed. 2) The public non-expert condition, in which the experimenter introduced himself as a substitute and non-expert, and told the subject that he knew that the subject had failed. 3) The private expert condition, in which the experimenter introduced himself as an expert but did not enter the subject's cubicle to tell him he knew of the subject's failure. 4) The private non-expert condition, in which the experimenter introduced himself as a non-expert, but did not tell the subject that he knew of the subject's failure.

The questionnaire, which the subject filled out after working on the puzzle, first asked him to rate his performance on either of two 11-point scales, one indicating success, the other failure. Since all the subjects failed, they all provided data concerning their evaluation of their degree of failure. Next the subjects rated their own visual motor coordination on an 11-point scale. Thus, a measure was obtained of the subjects' evaluation of themselves on the general skill presumably tested by the performance on the puzzle.
The subject next rated himself, on 11-point scales, on a series of 13 traits. The traits were presented to the subjects in the order of relevance or similarity to the task and to visual motor coordination. The traits rated first were those which were most similar to visual motor coordination; those rated last were least relevant to the experimental task. The order of similarity was determined from a separate study on a sample comparable to the one used in the present study.

The results are as follows: First, it was found that a person whose failure is public lowers his evaluations of his performance more than does one whose failure is private. To obtain this result, the responses of subjects in both the public expert and public non-expert conditions were combined in order to give one mean for the two public conditions. The replies of subjects in the two private conditions were similarly combined. The difference between these means was significant by a t test at the .001 level.

A second finding is that the subjects in the public-non-expert condition rated themselves lower than did subjects in the private-non-expert condition. This difference was significant by a t test at .001. Thus, it seems that subjects evaluate their failure as being greater when they fail in public than when they fail in private, but this is especially true when their audience is a non-expert.

A third finding is that the subjects rate their general skill in visual motor coordination lower if an expert experimenter knows about their failures than if an expert does not know about them. The subjects in the public-expert condition rated their visual motor coordination lower than in the private-expert condition. This difference was significant by a t test at .06. Here, it made no difference if a non-expert knew or did not know
about the subjects' performances on the tests.

A fourth, more tentative finding is that the subjects have lower evaluations of other traits similar to the puzzle in the public condition than in the private conditions. For this result, the Ss in expert and non-expert conditions were again combined to give a single mean for the public condition and another mean for the private conditions. The difference between these means was significant at .10 level by a t test.

A consistent trend in the findings is that the subjects in the public conditions rate themselves lower than they do in the private conditions, both on their performance and on the more general traits related to their performance.

In addition to these results, a further analysis was done by dividing the subjects into two groups of persons with high and with low confidence in psychology. You will recall that a measure of confidence in psychology was obtained from the pre-experimental questionnaire. The subjects who had high confidence in psychology made lower evaluations of their performances, and of their general traits related to their performances, in the public conditions than in the private conditions, paralleling the results reported for the total sample. The subjects who had low confidence in psychology, however, did not show any of these differences among the conditions. They rated their performances, and other attributes of themselves, the same in both the public and private conditions. Thus, it is concluded, observation of a person's failure by an observer does not lower the person's evaluation of himself unless the observer is recognized as someone who is competent to make evaluations in the content area of the failure.
The theoretical implications of the results were interpreted to be as follows: An individual will feel pressure to have his evaluations of himself conform to the opinions attributed to the people around him, especially when he had failed and thus the evaluation of others is most important to him. When the subject perceived that the experimenter knew of his failure, he felt pressure to conform to the experimenter's reactions to his failure. The ambiguity of the degree of his failure also facilitated his conformity to the experimenter's beliefs. When the subject perceived that the experimenter did not know of his failure, he felt less pressure to conform to the experimenter's behavior. To what behavior of the experimenter did the subject conform? The answer is: to the behavior of making an objective evaluation of the failure and other relevant traits of the subject. The subject therefore felt pressure to make objective and accurate evaluations of his performance and of the traits related to his performance. These objective evaluations, however, of an experience of failure tend to work counter to a person's tendency to evaluate himself as high as possible. Thus, conformity to objective evaluation made by the experimenter leads to lower evaluations than when the subject is freed from this pressure to raise his self evaluations as much as he can. Accordingly, the results show that, in the public condition when the subject feels pressures to conform to the experimenter's objective evaluations, he evaluated himself lower than in the private conditions when no such conformity pressure was brought to bear on him.

The results also show that pressure to conform to the opinions attributed to the experimenter was felt only if the experimenter represented a reference group for the subject. The subjects who had high
confidence in psychology can be assumed to have psychologists as a reference group. For these subjects, the perception that a member of this reference group knew of their failure put more pressures on them to be objective than if the member of the reference group did not. On the other hand, the subjects who had low confidence in psychology, and for whom psychologists did not constitute a reference group, did not feel any more pressure to conform to the behavior of a representative of this group when the representative saw their failure than when he did not see it.