



Shame and guilt: characterological vs. behavioral self-blame and their relationship to fear of intimacy

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Received 12 November 2001; received in revised form 25 June 2002; accepted 9 October 2002

Abstract

The present study investigated the distinct affective experiences of shame and guilt and their relationship to self-blame (characterological vs. behavioral), blame of others, self-derogation, and fear of intimacy. As predicted, shame-proneness was associated with fear of intimacy, suggesting that shame may be an important component in intimacy fears. Moreover, shame-proneness was positively correlated with behavioral, and characterological self-blame, blame of others and self-derogation. This may indicate that shame-prone individuals are more likely to engage in self-derogating thoughts, blame their behavior and their character, as well as others, perhaps making intimacy something to be feared. In contrast, guilt-proneness was not associated with intimacy fears or blaming others for one's actions. These findings highlight the effect that shame-proneness vs. guilt-proneness can have on one's sense of self, with debilitating interpersonal consequences such as fear of intimate connections.

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Keywords: Shame; Guilt; Blame; Intimacy

1. Introduction

The psychological implications of shame and guilt have been explored in both theoretical and empirical literatures, and important differences in the phenomenology of these two moral affects have emerged (see Tangney & Fischer, 1995). These two overlapping but distinct negative self-conscious affects have differential consequences in terms of pathology, adjustment, and interpersonal relatedness (Tangney, 1995). Theoretically, shame is seen as a global self-evaluative experience that involves the entire self-system, whereas guilt is seemingly more specific to offensive

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acts committed. Despite these differences, self-blame for transgressions may be an important aspect to both shame and guilt (Lewis, 1971).

Janoff-Bulman (1979) claimed that self-blame may be categorized into two separate attributional tendencies. *Characterological self-blame* involves blaming one's character in self-deprecating, maladaptive ways, because attention is focused on associating one's offensive behavior as an extension of one's self-concept. These "character flaws" are believed by the person to be relatively stable, global and unchangeable (Janoff-Bulman, 1979).

In contrast, *behavioral self-blame* differs from characterological self-blame in that it involves the belief that one's inappropriate behavior can be modified and the transgression corrected. As a result, behavioral self-blamers focus on the specific behavior (Janoff-Bulman, 1979), and attempt to rectify the situation when a personal failure occurs.

The research on self-blame is relevant because theoretically, the distinction between the two types of self-blaming behavior (i.e. blaming one's behavior vs. blaming one's character) can be useful in looking at shame and guilt. According to Tangney (1990), shame involves a global, negative self-evaluation associated with a sense of helplessness or passivity in correcting the perceived fault, which has to do with the entire self. In a recent study examining (Gilbert & Miles, 2000) the relationship between self-blame and perceptions of social rank, Gilbert and Miles (2000) found that self-blame was associated with social anxiety, depression and shame. This study indicates that shame is positively related to self-blame. Furthermore, the findings indicate that those who blame themselves also see themselves as down rank, which may indicate that those who blame themselves tend to perceive themselves negatively.

Shame elicits strong self-deprecating reactions of the entire self, with hostility initially directed toward the self (Lewis, 1971, 1985). However, because shame involves a real or imagined rejecting and disapproving other, hostility may be redirected toward the rejecting other in retaliation. Lewis (1971) regards this as a "defensive strategy" or an attempt to turn the tables and to right the self. In confirming Lewis' (1971) observations, Tangney (1990) reported a positive relationship between shame-proneness and a tendency to externalize blame.

Moreover, shame proneness has also been found to be associated with depression, self-derogation, shyness, interpersonal anxiety, perfectionism and a diffuse-oriented identity (Lutwak & Ferrari, 1997; Lutwak, Ferrari, & Cheek, 1998; Tangney & Fisher, 1995).

In contrast, guilt involves self-criticism for a specific act, instead of the entire self (Tangney, 1990), with the potential for rectifying the problem. Guilt has been viewed as an adaptive and constructive moral affect (Tangney, Wagner, & Gramzow, 1989), which often involves a negative evaluation of the self for some specific behavior (or lack of behavior) when an internalized standard is violated. Feelings of guilt are differentiated from shame in that they remain focused on a specific behavior and the harm it may cause others.

With hostility directed both internally and externally, self-blame for transgressions may be an important component of either or both shame and guilt processes (Lewis, 1971) and may have interpersonal consequences. Lutwak, Panish, Razinno, and Ferrari (2001) found that adolescent males and females prone to shame affects may be likely to suppress their anger, where as young adults prone to guilt experiences are likely to control their anger and be less likely to act-out aggressive/hostile feelings. This supports clinical research indicating that guilt is a "healthier" affect. Lutwak, Razzino, and Ferrari (1998) demonstrated that shame-proneness was significantly related to negative self-conceptions and may impact interpersonal functioning. Given the characteristic of shame-prone (but not guilt-prone) individuals to engage in high rates of self-attributions for

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