

Differentiating shame from guilt [☆]

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Received 4 September 2007
Available online 28 April 2008

Abstract

How does shame differ from guilt? Empirical psychology has recently offered distinct and seemingly incompatible answers to this question. This article brings together four prominent answers into a cohesive whole. These are that (a) shame differs from guilt in being a social emotion; (b) shame, in contrast to guilt, affects the whole self; (c) shame is linked with ideals, whereas guilt concerns prohibitions and (d) shame is oriented towards the self, guilt towards others. After presenting the relevant empirical evidence, we defend specific interpretations of each of these answers and argue that they are related to four different dimensions of the emotions. This not only allows us to overcome the conclusion that the above criteria are either unrelated or conflicting with one another, it also allows us to tell apart what is *constitutive* from what is *typical* of them.

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Keywords: Shame; Guilt; Self; Emotion; Philosophy; Norms; Values

1. Introduction

The study of shame and guilt has become a fundamental part of the psychology of what are called the self-conscious emotions.¹ One of the most debated questions within the literature is how shame differs from guilt. Distinct and original answers to this question have recently been defended. In what we hope is an interesting interaction between psychology and philosophy, the aim of this paper is to offer a systematic response to this question.

There are however two connected problems related to this enterprise. First, such an interaction may seem methodologically ill-founded. Philosophy tends to look for necessary and sufficient conditions for being a cer-

[☆] We are grateful to Otto Bruun, Tjeert Olthof, Kevin Mulligan, Raffaele Rodogno, Klaus Scherer and two anonymous referees for *Consciousness and Cognition* for their helpful comments on previous versions of this paper. This paper was presented at ESPP Belfast, SOPHA Aix-en-Provence, the Universities of Fribourg and Geneva and we thank the audiences at these venues for the stimulating discussions. This paper was written with the support of the Swiss National Centre for Competence in Research (NCCR) in Affective Sciences.

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¹ For a brief history of the psychological research on self-conscious emotions, see Fischer and Tangney (1995).

tain kind of entity. By contrast, psychology tends to establish correlations between different entities, thereby revealing what is often called *typicality effects*. Second, it is not easy to understand how the distinct and seemingly incompatible (e.g. Fontaine, Luyten, de Boeck, & Corveleyn, 2006; Olthof, Ferguson, Bloemers, & Deij, 2004) or disconnected answers proposed by psychologists—indeed often offered as statistically relevant correlations—can give rise to a unified theory.

By distinguishing various dimensions of the emotions, we believe that we can find an appealing way out of these problems. For two emotions may differ in that they (a) arise in distinct kinds of contexts; (b) take different kinds of *particular* objects; (c) have different *formal* objects; or (d) are characterized by different action-tendencies.² If it can be shown that the distinct answers offered by psychologists to differentiate shame from guilt speak to these different dimensions and do so in a way that allows us to tell apart what is *constitutive* from what is *typical* of them, a unified account might be in the offing.

Our attempt at showing that this is the case proceeds as follows. Section 2 presents some key findings in the empirical literature, which support four major criteria for distinguishing shame from guilt. Sections 3–6 defend specific interpretations of these criteria. Finally, Section 7 argues that the chosen interpretations are compatible with one another and develops a unified account of shame and guilt.

2. Empirical evidence

We succinctly introduce four groups of experiments and the four criteria they can give rise to. Some words of caution are in order. First, the criteria are phrased in a way which is more clear-cut than probably intended by most of their advocates and thus in need of thorough elaboration. This strategy is justified inasmuch as our aim is to tell apart which of these criteria, when properly interpreted, are apt to qualify as constitutive as opposed to statistically significant criteria. Second, the focus is on emotional episodes, i.e. short-lived mental states which wax, wane and then disappear, unless we specify otherwise. There is of course a very important debate on shame proneness and guilt proneness in the literature (see e.g. Ferguson, 2005; Tangney & Dearing, 2002), to which we will allude to when appropriate, but which we cannot engage in this article.

2.1. Social vs. personal

The first opposition one might use to distinguish shame from guilt is the best known and the least empirically tested. It is the idea that guilt is the emotion of internal sanction, shame the emotion of social sanction. This thesis can be formulated as follows:

Criterion (1): Shame is, as opposed to guilt, a social emotion.

Anthropologists Benedict (1947) and Mead (1937) have popularized the idea that these emotions function as different means by which behavior is sanctioned. Shame sanctions what is *socially* undesired, guilt what is perceived as flouting *private* norms. Since these seminal contributions, philosophers (e.g. Harré 1990; Williams, 1993; Wollheim, 1999) and psychologists (e.g. Ausubel, 1955; Crozier, 1998; Lewis, 1971) have, on linguistic or conceptual grounds as well as on the basis of phenomenological considerations and patients' narratives, insisted on the importance of other people's judgements and criticisms in shame, and consequently on the role of this emotion in social regulation and cohesion (Scheff, 1988). This allegedly contrasts with the personal nature of guilt.

This idea has been supported by large-scale cross-cultural studies conducted by Wallbott and Scherer (1995) in 37 countries. They asked subjects to rate remembered personal experiences of shame and guilt according to phenomenological, behavioral, and situational variables. Prominent among them was whether subjects ascribe the cause of their experiences to external or internal factors. Shame experiences were elicited significantly more often by other people or external sources than guilt experiences which were to a very large extent attributed to the self. A recent study conducted by Fontaine et al. (2006) in Peru and Belgium found

² This should not be understood as implying that these are the only distinctions worth making with respect to the emotions—we mention here only those we are going to make use of.

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