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How social connectedness affects guilt and shame: Mediation by hope and differentiation of self

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Abstract

We tested a mediation model of social connectedness and guilt and shame. Social connectedness was hypothesized to be related to greater hope and differentiation of self. Hope and differentiation of self, in turn, were expected to be related to less shame and more prosocial guilt. The results found that hope mediated the relationship between social connectedness and guilt, and differentiation of self mediated the relationship between social connectedness and shame. Alternative explanatory models were explored and taken into consideration in the interpretation of the results.

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1. Introduction

Why is it that some people are able to handle interpersonal conflicts constructively, as expressed by guilt, and not let these problems overwhelm them with feelings of shame? We examine three individual difference variables – social connectedness, hope, and differentiation of self – and their

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relationships with adaptive feelings of guilt and maladaptive feelings of shame. Using Kohut's (1977, 1984) theory of self psychology as a guiding framework, we draw upon theory and research in each area (Lee & Robbins, 1995, 1998; Skowron & Friedlander, 1998; Snyder et al., 1991) to suggest that social connectedness and feelings of guilt and shame are mediated by self-differentiation and hope. Specifically, people with a secure sense of connectedness in their lives are able to manage interpersonal conflict because they have a more differentiated sense of self and a greater sense of hope in life.

2. Social connectedness, hope, and differentiation of self

Kohut (1984) described the need for belonging, and its internalized representation of social connectedness, as a core interpersonal aspect of the self. Building upon this definition, Lee and Robbins (1995, 1998) defined *social connectedness* as an individual's sense of "enduring interpersonal closeness with the social world *in toto*" (Lee, Draper, & Lee, 2001). When developmental needs for belongingness are successfully negotiated in childhood and adolescence a person is likely to form an internalized sense of self as worthy and capable of forming and maintaining social connection (Kohut, 1984). Conversely, individuals whose developmental needs for belongingness are frustrated experience narcissistic wounds to the self that impede the formation of an internalized sense of social connectedness in adulthood. These socially disconnected people are prone to feel shameful, socially anxious and alienated from others. Unfortunately, socially disconnected people have difficulty resolving these problems because the conflicts overwhelm them emotionally and they feel powerless to resolve the interpersonal rifts in their lives. Empirical studies of social connectedness have found negative correlations with anxiety, interpersonal problems, loneliness, and psychological distress and positive correlations with self-esteem and social support (Lee et al., 2001; Lee & Robbins, 1998).

Kohut (1984) further stated that a sense of connectedness serves as the foundation for goal directed behavior. Highly socially connected people have a secure internalized base that allows them to believe they can achieve life goals. Theoretically then, social connectedness should facilitate hope, which is comprised of two main components: (a) *agency* thinking or the belief that one can reach desired goals, and (b) *pathways* thinking or the perceived capacity to generate workable routes to those goals (Snyder, Michael, & Cheavens, 1999). Snyder and colleagues theorized that social connectedness and hope should be positively related throughout human development (Snyder, Cheavens, & Simpson, 1997). However, this hypothesis has received limited empirical testing. Bolland, Lian, and Formicella (2005) found in a community sample that various types of social disruption and disconnectedness lead to increased hopelessness and despair. Narcissism was *not* correlated with hope in an unpublished study of college students (Snyder & Cheavens, 1997, as reported in; Snyder et al., 1997), yet these findings do not address the theorized *positive* relationship between social connectedness and hope.

Kohut (1977, 1984) also suggested that people high in social connectedness exhibit a greater capacity for relational independence, and described the socially connected self as "an independent center of initiative" (Kohut, 1977, p. 94). In other words, connected selves have the self-cohesion necessary for differentiation (Banai, Mikulincer, & Shaver, 2005). *Differentiation of self* is described by Bowen (1978) as a trait of mature relational selfhood. Individuals high in

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