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Shame, guilt, symptoms of depression, and reported history of psychological maltreatment

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Abstract

Objective: The purpose of the present study was to provide preliminary data extending earlier research on shame and guilt, examining their relationships both to symptoms of depression and to psychological maltreatment. Symptoms of depression were expected to correlate positively with shame, but not with guilt. Psychological maltreatment was also expected to correlate positively with shame. The relationship between psychological maltreatment and guilt was examined on an exploratory basis.

Method: Two hundred and eighty participants from a public community college and a private university completed scales assessing shame, guilt, depression, and history of childhood psychological maltreatment. Pearson correlations were conducted with all data.

Results: Results indicated that symptoms of depression were positively correlated with both shame and guilt. Partial correlations were then conducted in which the linear effects of shame were removed from guilt. In this latter analysis, guilt was no longer positively correlated with symptoms of depression. Psychological maltreatment was also positively correlated with depression and with shame, but not with guilt.

Conclusions: These results highlight the significance of psychological maltreatment in the relationship to the self-conscious emotions of guilt and shame. As in earlier studies, shame has been consistently correlated to poor psychological functioning, while guilt appears to be relatively unrelated to pathological functioning.

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Introduction

Tangney and Dearing (2002), in their text *Shame and Guilt*, commented that the family was the “first place to look” (p. 146) for the origin of individual differences in the tendency to experience the moral, self-conscious emotions of shame and guilt. The family, given its powerful role in the development of the child, may be a prime vehicle for the transmission of both verbal and nonverbal messages about the nature of good and bad, and about the origins of wrongdoing. Indeed, theorists have postulated that maladaptive patterns of interaction in the parent-child relationship may be the source of shame-based psychopathology in adult life (Kaufman, 1989; Loader, 1998; Nathanson, 1987). Despite these assumptions, research examining the self-conscious emotions of shame and guilt in the context of the dysfunctional family has only recently begun.

Perhaps one reason for a delay in empirical investigation of these variables is the fact that the distinction between the terms shame and guilt in the social science literature has only been clarified in the past few decades. In common, everyday parlance, these two terms are often used interchangeably. This may not be surprising; some researchers have suggested that, in practical experience, the two emotions may be ‘fused’ in one response, though they represent qualitatively different affective states (Tangney, Wagner, & Gramzow, 1992).

Thus, for both theoretical and research clarity, shame has increasingly been delineated as that negative evaluation and affect directed toward the entirety of the self, often following a breach of social or moral conduct. In shame, individuals reject themselves, an appraisal which may be expressed in the statement, “I myself am bad” (Lewis, 1971; Tangney & Dearing, 2002). Research confirms that an acute sense of smallness, inadequacy, and worthlessness accompanies the negative self-appraisal of shame, as well as a desire to shrink away and remain unseen by others (Lewis, 1971; Loader, 1998; Tangney, 1990, 1995, 1996; Tangney & Dearing, 2002). Tangney and Dearing (2002) further comment that it is this unique phenomenological and affective component of shame which distinguishes it from the construct of low self-esteem, which may be based upon self-descriptions or self-ratings alone.

In contrast, in the experience of guilt, the individual is able to make a cognitive distinction between the self and behavior, and negative evaluation is restricted to the act of wrongdoing itself. Thus, when experiencing guilt, individuals reject not so much themselves, but instead their behaviors. This appraisal may be expressed in the statement, “My behavior is bad” (Lewis, 1971; Tangney & Dearing, 2002). While the self remains relatively unscathed in guilt, the experience is still an unpleasant one. It is the very tensions of remorse associated with guilt that may lead the guilt-prone individual to act in constructive ways toward recompense and reconciliation (Tangney, 1998). Thus, in contrast to early, psychoanalytic assumptions about the deleterious impact of guilt, this emotion has been demonstrated in recent years to facilitate prosocial, adaptive functioning (Baumeister, Stillwell, & Heatherton, 1994; Leith & Baumeister, 1998), particularly when compared to shame.

Researchers have also begun to consider those family environments that promote either the more constructive emotion of guilt, or the more destructive emotion of shame in children. Pulakos (1996) provided empirical support for the relationship between dysfunctional family environments and shame among family members. In her research, shame-proneness was negatively correlated with family cohesion and positively correlated with conflict; guilt, however, was not correlated in any way with these variables.

Preliminary studies have further indicated that dysfunctional parenting styles in the family may be involved in the assimilation of a shame-based sense of self. Shame-proneness in adults has been correlated positively with recall of criticism from parental figures in childhood (Gilbert, Allan, & Goss, 1996) and

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