

“What I did” versus “what I might have done”: Effect of factual versus counterfactual thinking on blame, guilt, and shame in prisoners [☆]

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Abstract

The present study tested the prediction that counterfactual thinking would have a stronger amplificatory effect on guilt than on shame and that the effect would be mediated by self-blame. Ninety sentenced prisoners were instructed to think either counterfactually or factually about the role they played in the events leading to their capture, conviction, and sentencing prior to reporting on their level of self-blame, guilt, and shame. Compared to factual-focused prisoners, counterfactual-focused prisoners reported feeling more blameworthy and guiltier but not more shameful. The effect of thought focus on guilt was fully mediated by blame. The findings support an emotion-specific account of the emotional consequences of counterfactual thinking that implicate attributional judgment as an important mediating process.

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People often think counterfactually about alternatives to reality (for overviews, see Mandel, Hilton, & Catellani, *in press*; Roese & Olson, 1995), especially those that conjure up ways in which surprising or negative events might have turned out better (e.g., Sanna & Turley, 1996). These “reality-improving” *upward* counterfactuals (Markman, Gavanski, Sherman, & McMullen, 1993) are believed to serve a function in planning

(Mandel, 2003c; Roese, 1997) by allowing individuals to identify behaviors that may have impeded their performance or brought them misfortune in the past (Roese, 1994). Perhaps unsurprisingly, given this adaptive function, upward counterfactual thinking can influence a wide range of attributional judgments such as causality (e.g., Wells & Gavanski, 1989), preventability (e.g., Mandel & Lehman, 1996), and blame (e.g., Branscombe, Owen, Garstka, & Coleman, 1996), as well as emotional responses such as regret (e.g., Zeelenberg et al., 1998), dissatisfaction (e.g., Galinsky, Seiden, Kim, & Medvec, 2002), guilt, and shame (e.g., Niedenthal, Tangney, & Gavanski, 1994).

Most research on the emotional consequences of counterfactual thinking has taken a “valence-based” approach. This is exemplified by Kahneman and Miller’s (1986) emotional amplification hypothesis, which states that affective responses are contrasted away from the

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direction of the counterfactual evoked—namely, that upward counterfactuals amplify negative affect, whereas downward counterfactuals amplify positive affect. Although there is support for the idea that upward counterfactuals can amplify negative affect (Roese, 1997), valence-based accounts do not explain how counterfactual thinking may differentially influence specific emotions. Thus, there is a need for “emotion-specific” research (Lerner & Keltner, 2000), which examines the importance of construal processes in understanding the determinants and consequences of different emotions that share the same valence. Following such an approach, Zeelenberg and colleagues (for a review, see Zeelenberg & van Dijk, *in press*) have shown that although upward counterfactual thinking can amplify regret and disappointment, regret tends to follow from thinking about how one could have behaved differently, whereas disappointment tends to follow from thinking about how the outcome might have been better given that the actor behaved in the same manner. Underscoring the importance of self-other construal, Mandel (2003a) found that although *self-focused* emotional intensity (*viz.*, regret, shame, and guilt) was directly related to upward counterfactual availability, *other-focused* emotional intensity (*viz.*, distrust and anger) was not reliably related to counterfactual availability.

The present research builds on emotion-specific research by examining the differential effect of upward counterfactual thinking on guilt and shame. Both guilt and shame are associated with judgments of wrongdoing, and thus are important to understand because of their implications for moral and ethical behavior. Moreover, given their connection to perceived wrongdoing, it is of interest to examine how these emotions differentially relate to blame assignment. Guilt and shame belong to the family of negative “self-conscious” emotions and tend to be aligned with internal (self) rather than external (other/environment) attributions (Frijda, Kuipers, & ter Schure, 1989). In other respects, however, guilt and shame are believed to differ in their appraisal structure. Niedenthal et al. (1994) proposed that guilt is amplified by behavioral-self attributions (*i.e.*, something about “what I’ve done”), whereas shame is amplified by characterological-self attributions (*i.e.*, something about “who I am”). They further predicted that behavior-mutating counterfactuals are likely to amplify guilt, whereas character-mutating counterfactuals are likely to amplify shame.

Evidence for this “differential-focus” hypothesis has been mixed. Niedenthal et al. (1994) asked participants to imagine being in a situation that evoked comparable levels of guilt and shame and, then, to undo the outcome either by completing a behavior stem (“if only I had”) or a character stem (“if only I were”). Supporting their hypothesis, character-mutating participants reported feeling more shameful than behavior-mutating

participants. However, contrary to their hypothesis, mean guilt did not significantly differ between the two conditions. Furthermore, Tangney, Miller, Flicker, and Barlow (1996) found that participants’ responses to whether they blamed their “actions and behavior” versus their “personality and self” did not differ across shame and guilt experiences. Finally, Smith, Webster, Parrott, and Eyre (2002, Experiment 3) found that coders were no more likely to judge literary passages referring to shame as conveying a desire by protagonists to change aspects of their character than passages referring to guilt.

Whereas Niedenthal et al. (1994) proposed that counterfactual thinking influences both guilt and shame but in a differential manner depending on counterfactual content, we predicted that such thinking would have an effect on guilt but not on shame. The bases for our prediction are twofold: first, we hypothesized that the effect of upward counterfactual thinking on emotion is mediated by blame assignment. Consistent with this prediction, Zeelenberg, van der Pligt, and de Vries (2000) found that the magnitude of the actor effect (*i.e.*, the tendency, usually attributed to the mediating role of counterfactual thinking, for action to elicit more intense emotion than inaction) was predicted by the degree to which active versus passive actors were assigned responsibility for outcomes. In line with past research (*e.g.*, Branscombe et al., 1996; McCrae, 1992; Miller & Gunasegaram, 1990), we predicted that upward counterfactual thinking will influence blame assignment, and that variation in the severity of blame would, in turn, mediate the effect of counterfactual thinking on guilt.

Our second hypothesis was that blame would be more strongly related to guilt than shame. Although blame, guilt, and shame can each reflect a feeling or judgment of having done wrong, guilt is more likely than shame to incorporate judgments of wrongdoing in a reflective manner, which we argue would coincide with blame acceptance. Consider the definitions provided in the *New Oxford Dictionary*: guilt is defined as “a feeling of having committed wrong or having failed in an obligation” (2001, p. 817), whereas shame is defined as “a painful feeling of humiliation or distress caused by the consciousness of wrong or foolish behaviour” (p. 1708). In support of this distinction, Smith et al. (2002, Experiment 3) found that coders were twice as likely to infer attributions of self-blame from literary passages referring to guilt than from passages referring to shame. In a subsequent retrospective study, they found that guilt, but not shame, was directly related to a measure of blame and remorse. Thus, we predicted that blame and guilt would be directly related. In line with other studies (*e.g.*, Leith & Baumeister, 1998; Tangney, Wagner, Fletcher, & Gramzow, 1992), we predicted that the “painful feelings” of being caught in the spotlight associated with shame would result in shame being directly related to psychological distress, and more strongly so than guilt.

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