



Validation of the TOSCA to measure shame and guilt

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Received 2 November 2001; received in revised form 2 May 2002; accepted 14 June 2002

Abstract

A college student sample (190 females, 148 males) was administered the Test of Self-Conscious Affect (TOSCA), which yields scales for shame and guilt. Subjects were also measured on perceived parenting, personality dimensions, religiosity, and psychological adjustment. There was some evidence that parental overprotection was associated with shame in males and guilt in females, while religiosity was largely not predictive of shame or guilt. Personality measures indicative of external locus of control and poor self-regulation were significantly correlated with shame for both males and females, with smaller effects in the opposite direction for guilt. For both genders, shame was highly predictive of poorer psychological adjustment, as measured by self-esteem, perceived stress, and psychiatric symptomatology, while guilt was uncorrelated with adjustment. These results support the validity of the TOSCA and suggest that shame is a significant risk factor for poor psychological adjustment.

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Keywords: Shame; Guilt; Parenting style; Personality; Religiosity; Psychological adjustment

1. Introduction

Shame and guilt are emotional experiences endemic to the human condition. Most individuals will inevitably experience shame and guilt in the course of their lives. Since both of these emotions may result from moral transgressions or various shortcomings, the distinction between shame and guilt tends to be blurred. No specific event or transgression will trigger shame or guilt for every person. Therefore, very few situations exist that we can label as “shame-inducing” or “guilt-inducing” (Tangney, 1992). The notion that shame is a public emotion, while guilt is a private emotion, also lacks support (Piers & Singer, 1971; Tangney, Miller, Flicker, & Barlow,

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1996). Thus, the difference between the effects of shame and guilt seems to depend on how individuals interpret certain events, which is a subjective quality, rather than the objective nature of the transgression or situation.

1.1. Shame and guilt and their relationships to psychopathology and other variables

The apposite literature suggests that shame and guilt, although they are both negative affects, are distinct emotions, and the distinction emanates from the difference in subjective interpretation (Lewis, 1971, 1987; Lindsay-Hartz, 1984; Piers & Singer, 1971; Tangney, 1995; Woien, 1999). Lewis's (1971, 1987) distinction proposes that, although shame and guilt can occur simultaneously, there are conceptual differences between the two emotions. According to Lewis, part of the distinction between shame and guilt comes from the role the self plays in the attribution of the experience. Shame is conceptualized as a more global emotion than guilt, since the focus, in a shame experience, is with the self. Even if the person acts wrongly, the bad action quickly translates into a judgment regarding the entire self. Consequently, a person attaches a negative evaluation to the self due to the transgression, such as "I am a bad person." By attaching a negative evaluation to the self, which makes the emotion of shame more painful than the emotion of guilt, the person feels diminished and worthless. He/she often feels exposed, which triggers the desire to hide. Furthermore, Goss, Gilbert, and Allan's (1994) study supports the theoretical conceptualization of shame as involving negative self-evaluations and beliefs about how others see the self. Thus, shame may affect mood and even personal identity.

On the other hand, when a person experiences guilt, the negative evaluation attaches to a specific action instead of the self, and so a distinction between the self and the action is clear. Moreover, the focus of guilt is narrower than the focus of shame. When experiencing guilt, a person may think, "I performed a bad action." Hence, some sense of remorse and regret over the misdeed, which may prompt reparative actions, accompanies guilt (Lindsay-Hartz, 1984). Reparative actions that often go hand and hand with guilt may be partially motivated by the ability to take the perspective of the others, otherwise known as empathy. Studies have shown that guilt is positively correlated with empathy, while shame is not (Tangney, 1991; Nagoshi, 1980). Furthermore, both of these subjective attribution styles are rather enduring. A shame-prone individual, regardless of the circumstances, has the propensity to make internal, global and stable attributions. Conversely, a guilt-prone individual usually makes internal, specific and unstable attributions when transgressions occur (Tangney, Wagner, & Gramzow, 1992).

The different methods employed to alleviate shame and guilt illuminate the distinction between these emotions as well. Niedenthal, Tangney, and Gavanski (1994) found that, when participants experience shame, they were more likely to try to assuage shame by counterfactual thinking that changed the qualities of the self. Conversely, when participants experienced guilt, they were more likely to engage in counterfactual thinking that altered their actions. These results demonstrate that, since shame involves the idea of a defective self, in order to assuage shame, a type of self-transformation may need to occur. In order to alleviate guilt, a change in behavior may need to occur, which may be accompanied with reparative actions to the injured parties. Nevertheless, since shame and guilt are conceptually distinct emotions and have dissimilar methods of mitigation, different variables should correlate with shame than with guilt.

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