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New Ideas in Psychology 23 (2005) 5–32

NEW IDEAS IN
PSYCHOLOGY

www.elsevier.com/locate/newideapsych

Shame and guilt: A hundred years of apples and oranges

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Available online 13 October 2005

Abstract

An original model of shame- and guilt-related emotions is proposed and the model's theoretical background discussed. Shame is conceptualized as an affect (i.e., basic emotion), elicited by personal devaluation and evolved by social selection. Guilt is conceptualized as a cognitively assessed condition. In response to awareness of one's own condition of guilt, one may feel a number of affects or no affect. The phrase *feeling guilty* is a non-specific reference to feeling as one typically feels when in the condition of guilt [Ortony, A. (1987). Is guilt an emotion? *Cognition and emotion*, 1, 283–298]. Thus, *shame* as a construct represents a single affect, while *feelings of guilt* represent multiple affective–cognitive hybrids, which may be associated with the *condition of guilt*. In terms of levels of categorization [Rosch, E. (1978). Principles of categorization. In E. Rosch & B. B. Lloyd (Eds.), *Cognition and categorization* (pp. 27–48). Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum], shame, as an affect, is a basic level category with subordinates such as embarrassment and humiliation; in contrast, the multiple feelings of guilt constitute multiple subordinate affective–cognitive hybrids—subordinate to a number of basic level affects. This model integrates a great deal of existing data, suggests a large number of hypotheses, and implies the need for a profile approach to the assessment of guilt. By conceptualizing shame as an affect, and making the distinction between guilt as a state and the multiple affective–cognitive hybrids of guilt, much of the confusion and imprecision in past theory and research may be clarified.

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Keywords: Shame; Guilt; Affect; Emotion

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doi:10.1016/j.newideapsych.2005.07.001

Yet although certain complex forms derived from shame can appear on the reflective plane, shame is not originally a phenomenon of reflection. ...it is in its primary structure shame before somebody. (Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*)

Shame and guilt are important, but poorly understood concepts. They are associated with a wide variety of phenomena including psychopathology, anger, empathy, self-esteem, ethics, and morality (see Tangney & Dearing, 2002 for a review). However, psychologists, sociologists, anthropologists, and philosophers make two primary errors with respect to shame and guilt. First, conceptions of shame are too complex; the simplicity of shame's antecedents and its basic nature are not often recognized. Second, conceptions of guilt are too simple; guilt is treated as a unitary emotion, rather than a socio-legal state, which elicits multiple affects (Ortony, 1987). Consequently, shame and guilt are erroneously viewed as belonging to the same category. These errors are reflected in disparate definitions of shame and guilt. Moreover, they account for the failure to identify the essential distinctions between them. As a result, empirical results have often been contradictory. Thus, there is a need for conceptual clarification, a theoretically based model that explains the similarities and differences between shame and guilt. Such a model, including formal testable definitions, will be proposed which may clarify incongruent findings in the existing literature and suggest future directions for research.

1. The model in brief

In the model being proposed, shame is conceptualized as an affect (i.e., basic emotion; Gilbert, 1997; Izard, 1971; Tomkins, 1963) evolved by social selection (Gilbert & McGuire, 1998; Parker, 1998) and elicited by perceived devaluation (Frijda, 1993; Gilbert, 1997). Guilt is viewed as a socio-legal condition (Ortony, 1987) with which any affect may be associated (the multiple affective–cognitive hybrids of guilt) through socialization and scripting (Tomkins, 1962, 1991). Following the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) and the taxonomy of Ortony, Clore, and Collins (1988), the crux of the model is a distinction between shame as an internal, mental, affective state and guilt as an external, objective description or condition (e.g., one can be guilty without emotion). Affects are psychological states. Guilt as an external condition is not a psychological state and therefore cannot be an affect. However, awareness (a cognition) of one's own condition of guilt may elicit a number of affective–cognitive hybrids. The phrase *feeling guilty* is a non-specific reference to feeling as one typically feels when in the condition of guilt (Ortony, 1987). One's *feeling of guilt* might be fear of consequences, remorse, or even joy. Thus, shame as a construct represents a single affect, while the *condition of guilt* elicits multiple affective–cognitive hybrids. For the sake of brevity I will refer to this as *the model* for the remainder of the paper. Each of the features of the model and defining terms will be explored and expanded in the following sections.

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