



# An exploration of shame, social rank and rumination in relation to depression

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## Abstract

This study explored the associations and interactions between social rank (submissive behaviour and social comparison), shame, rumination and depression. 125 undergraduate students completed a battery of self-report questionnaires measuring the research variables. It was found that social rank and shame are highly related and that both shame and social rank are significantly correlated with rumination. A moderator analysis suggested an effect of gender on the relationship between external shame and rumination. A mediational path analysis suggested that rumination partially mediated a link between shame and depression, but shame retained a unique contribution to depression after controlling for rumination.

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## 1. Introduction

Research on how individuals respond to depressed mood suggests that some people focus on their feelings more than others (Lyubomirsky, Tucker, Caldwell & Berg, 1999; Trask & Sigmon, 1999). Self-focused attention and repetitive thoughts associated with either worry (thoughts of future threats) or depression (thoughts of past losses) amplify or maintain distress, rather than initiate it (Segerstrom, Tsao, Alden, & Craske, 2000). Passive and repetitive thoughts (rumination) about one's symptoms, and the causes and consequences of those symptoms, interfere with adaptive problem-solving and enhance negative thinking (Davis & Nolen-Hoeksema, 2000; Nolen-Hoeksema, 1991; Nolen-Hoeksema & Davis, 1999; Nolen-Hoeksema, Grayson, & Larson, 1999). Lyubomirsky et al. (1999) found dysphoric ruminators to be more negative, self-critical and blame themselves more for their problems than non-dysphoric ruminators.

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Self-criticism and self-blame have also been linked with shame (Gilbert, 1998, 2002), feelings of inferiority (Allan & Gilbert, 1997; Gilbert & Allan, 1998; Swallow & Kuiper, 1988) and submissive behaviour (Gilbert, 2000). Shame can range from mild to intense and can involve feelings of powerlessness, (Gilbert, 1992) inferiority, helplessness, and self-consciousness, with a desire to hide self-deficiencies (Gilbert, Pehl, & Allan, 1994; Tangney, Miller, Flicker, & Barlow, 1996). Shame can be focused on the social and external environment (e.g. thinking that others look down on the self) and/or be internally focused on the self (negative self-devaluations; Gilbert, 1998, 2002). Shame can also be focused on different aspects of the self, for example, on the body, on behaviour or character (Andrews, Qian, & Valentine, 2002). It remains unclear, however, how shame and low rank may be linked to rumination. Shame has been considered a major cause of rumination, especially if people focus on damage done to self-esteem and their lack of control (Beck, Emery, & Greenberg, 1985). Shame affects the revelation of negative information about the self (MacDonald & Morley, 2001). Currently, however, there are few studies that have explored the linkage of shame rumination and social rank with depression. Despite the many observations of the linkage between shame and rumination (Gilbert, 1998; Tangney, 1995) this association has not been investigated.

There have been a number of studies looking at gender differences in depression, showing that women suffer depression approximately twice as commonly as men (Bebbington, 1996, 1998). There are a number of reasons for this, but one is that women may ruminate on their depression more than men do (Butler & Nolen-Hoeksema, 1994; Nolen-Hoeksema et al., 1999). The tendency to ruminate may be due to women searching for ways to control environmental stressors and their feeling states (Nolen-Hoeksema et al., 1999).

### *1.1. Aims*

This study therefore set out to explore how different types of shame may relate to social rank, rumination and depression. Individuals who feel themselves to be low rank, with a tendency to behave submissively, may be more self-focused to ensure monitoring of expressed behaviour. We sought to explore the potential effect of gender in the relationship between the social rank variables, shame and rumination. Moreover, we were also interested in exploring whether rumination mediates the impact of shame and rank on depression.

## **2. Method**

### *2.1. Participants*

One hundred and thirty undergraduate students were recruited from the University of Derby. Before any analysis was conducted the data was screened for normality of distribution and outliers. Five participants were coded as outliers and subsequently excluded as determined by boxplots, histograms and standardising the scores with a cut off point of  $\pm 3.00$  (Norman & Streiner, 2000). Thus, the final sample used was 125, 69 females, mean age 21.16 (S.D. = 5.01) and 56 males, mean age 23.59 (S.D. = 9.2).

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