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The First Step in Harnessing the Self Conscious Emotions: A Quantitative Exploration of Shame

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Abstract

A gap currently exists in the literature regarding a quantitative exploration of the self-conscious emotions (i.e., pride, embarrassment, shame, and guilt). In order to address this gap, the present study sought to explore the possibility of systematically inducing one specific self-conscious emotion (shame). Various methods were explored to determine the most effective way to induce a sense of shame in an educational context. Results revealed significant differences in state shame as measured by the Experiential Shame Scale. However, this difference was related to a student's proneness to shame, expectations of success, and perceptions of failure. Immediate implications for shame's impact in a variety of educational contexts are discussed.

Keywords: emotions, academic shame, learning, self-conscious emotions, state shame

Introduction

Can a self-conscious emotion like shame be systematically induced and studied empirically? The reason this paper focuses on shame is because of its devastating effects on ensuing motivation and related goal striving behavior (Turner, Husman, & Schallert, 2002). Given what we know about the detrimental effects of shame, it is surprising that we haven't recognized in modern pedagogy the experience of shame and how it prevents children from learning. One possible reason for the neglect of studying academic shame is that attempting to study it is a difficult undertaking. More specifically, Epstein states "Direct access to others' experience of shame is so difficult." According to Izard (1977), shame and guilt do not involve clearly definable, codable facial expressions. Additionally, Turner et al. (2002) has stated that "researching shame is difficult because individuals may deny or underreport their feelings of shame, tend to self-isolate when they feel shame, and may be unwilling or unable to express themselves when they feel shame." Furthermore, Lynde's (1958) early assertion is that one's difficulty in communicating shameful experiences is a distinctive characteristic of feeling shame. Babcock and Sabini (1990) demonstrated that people who experience shame are reluctant to discuss shame-related events with others.

Theoretical Framework

Shame and Learning

Although there are multiple ways to define shame, the consensus seems to focus around the idea that shame is an acutely painful affective state that involves a personal, negative evaluation stemming from perceived failure related to one's internal rules, ideals, goals, and standards (Turner, Husman, & Schallert, 2002).

Learning and failure go hand in hand. An important part of a child's education is learning how to cope effectively with failure. As expected, there are good ways and bad ways to deal with failure. A desirable approach when experiencing failure is to search for new information and strategies to get it right the second time around. The focus is on the challenge of the new task, not on themselves. Other children focus less on the task and more on the failure and its implications for their developing sense of self-worth. These are the learners that are more likely to experience a sense of shame. Research has shown that shame can seriously undermine children's ability to learn in a

challenging environment by lessening their chance of success in future endeavors (Tangney & Dearing, 2002). More specifically, research has shown that for some students a shameful experience causes a learner to: 1) feel that they cannot do more than they have already done 2) likelihood of becoming cognitively engaged in material becomes hindered 3) feelings about the end of year final exam are characterized by feelings of resignation and lack of motivation for studying and 4) attending class becomes a burden and obligation (Turner, Husman, & Schallert, 2002). Another way to think about shame is that it can place learners in a state of "cognitive shock" in which shame takes cognition hostage.

Based on the aforementioned research associated with the importance along with the difficulties with studying shame, this study sought to answer the following questions:
RQ1: Can the presence of shame be systematically induced and measured within an educational context?
RQ2: After experiencing perceived failure on an academic task, does a learner's proneness to shame impact their response to that failure?
RQ3: What role do subtle mechanisms like "expectations of success" and "perceptions of failure" have on the elicitation of shame?

Gaining an understanding of when and where learners experience academic shame has far reaching implications throughout education. By harnessing an understanding of academic shame, we begin to gain the ability to dampen the negative effects while simultaneously maximizing the lesser known advantages of this misunderstood self-conscious emotion.

Methods

Participants

Participants were 51 students enrolled in an Introduction to Psychology course at a southern liberal arts university. Participants received extra credit for their participation in the study.

Materials

Test of Self-Conscious Affect. The TOSCA-3 (Tangney & Dearing, 2002) was developed as a tool to measure guilt-proneness, shame-proneness, proneness to externalization, and proneness to unconcern. The TOSCA-3 consists of 15 scenario-based situations that test takers may encounter in their day to day lives. Following each scenario, test takers are asked to rate the likelihood of reacting to each of the options on a five point scale.

Experiential Shame Scale. According to Turner (2014), the Experiential Shame Scale (ESS) is "an opaque measure of physical, emotional, and social markers of shame experiences...developed to address the difficulties of assessing state shame." The ESS consists of eleven questions in which the test taker indicates the number that best describes how they feel right now when comparing two opposite word states. For example, "Physically, I feel [Very Warm 1--2--3--4--5--6--7 Very Cool]".

Procedure

Following the informed consent, participants completed the TOSCA. Instructions were then read to the participant which stated: *"During this portion of the study you will be asked to complete a series of problems. These are problems that, as a college student, should not be extremely challenging for you. In order to recreate a scenario that would match an actual testing environment, you will have 20 minutes to complete the test. After you submit the test, instructions will appear on the screen that will let you know the next steps that you will need to take in this study. Please let me know if you have any questions at this time. Thank you again for your participation!"* The tests (i.e. sample ACT or GRE practice problems) that the participants received were counterbalanced. Participants were then randomly assigned to one of three treatment groups.

In the first group called *Original*, participants completed the test straight through. A text then appeared on the screen that told the participant that they had received a 40% and that the average student up to that point had an average of 90%. Participants then had to verbally report their score of 40% to the experimenter. After reporting their score to the experimenter, the participant then completed the ESS. The second condition, called *ESS Middle*, was identical to the first except for the placement of the ESS. In the second condition, participants completed the ESS halfway through the test (GRE and ACT). The third condition, called *Contingency*, was identical to the first condition except participants were told during the instructions that how much extra credit they received for their participation was contingent on their performance on the test.

Results

A t test was conducted exploring any differences that might exist between those with "high" shame proneness versus those with "low" shame proneness. Those with scores of 50 and above were scored as "high" shame prone and those below 50 were coded as being "low" shame prone (based on TOSCA scores). Results revealed a significant difference between participants regarding high or low shame proneness. More specifically, those with "high" shame proneness scored significantly higher on the ESS (M=3.96) than those with "low" shame proneness (M=3.40), $t(49)$=-2.443, p=.018, d = .69.

A 2X3 ANOVA revealed a significant interaction between condition and shame proneness, $F(2,45)$=2.189, p=.029, partial η^2 = .15. Follow up tests revealed that for the participants that were in the "low" shame proneness category, it did not matter what condition they were in. In other words, their levels of shame were statistically consistent across all three manipulations. However, for those that were "high" shame prone, the *Original* condition

produced significantly higher ESS scores (*M*=4.55) compared to the *ESS Middle* (*M*=3.84), and the *Contingency* group (*M*=3.26). Additionally, participants that were "high" shame prone (*M*= 4.6) scored significantly higher on the ESS in the *Original* condition compared to participants in the *Original* condition that were "low" shame prone (*M*=3.28).
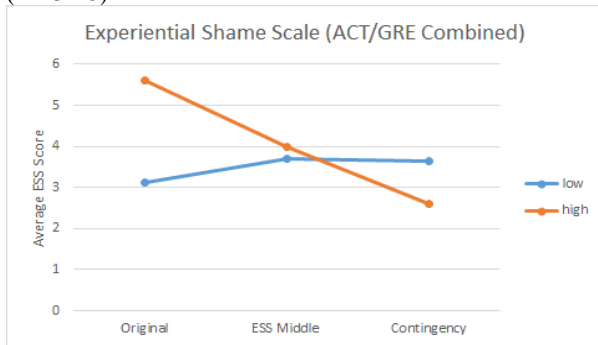

Figure 1. Average ESS score across both the GRE and ACT.

When looking at the participants that completed *only the ACT* during their shame induction intervention, we see a main effect for condition, $F(2,19)=4.168$, $p=.032$, partial $\eta^2 = .305$. Post-hoc analyses show that the participants in the *Original* condition (*M*=4.33) had significantly higher scores on the ESS compared to the participants in the *Contingency* condition (*M*=3.12), $p=.01$.

A significant interaction between condition and shame proneness was also revealed, $F(2,19)=10.249$, $p=.001$, partial $\eta^2 = .519$. When interpreting the significant interaction, what can be seen is that for participants that have low shame proneness, there was no statistical differences regarding ESS regardless of what condition they were in. However, when you look at the participants that were high shame prone, those in the *Original* condition (*M*=5.6) scored significantly higher than both the *ESS Middle* (*M*=4.0), $p=.005$ and the *Contingency* (*M*=2.61), $p=.000$. Additionally, participants in the *ESS Middle* (*M*=4.00) scored significantly higher on the ESS than the participants in the *Contingency* (*M*=2.61), $p=.007$. Lastly, those in the *Original* condition with high shame proneness scored significantly higher on the ESS (*M*=5.6) compared to the participants in the *Original* condition with low shame proneness (*M*=3.12), $p=.000$.

No significant main effects or interactions were discovered for students that were exposed to the various manipulations in the context of the *GRE practice problems*.
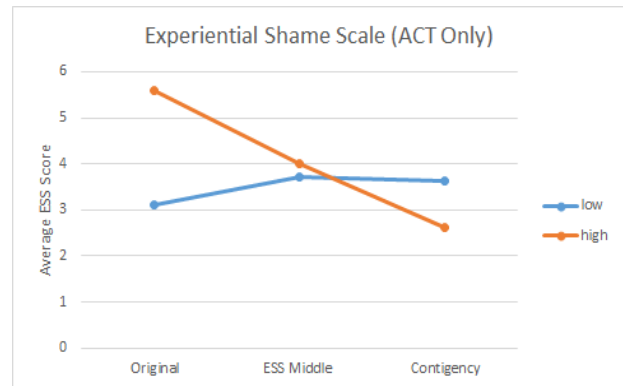

Figure 2. Average ESS score for ACT.

Scholarly Significance

Adding to the body of research on self-conscious emotions, results suggest systematically inducing a state of academic shame is possible. In the current study academic shame was experienced by students that 1) have high shame proneness (as measured by the TOSCA) 2) are completing a task in which there is expectation of success (i.e., ACT) and 3) experience a perception of failure (i.e., a failing score that is not congruent with their expectation).

In the current study, the experiment instructions stated "*These are problems that, as a college student, should not be extremely challenging for you.*" This easily overlooked, yet powerful statement may be one underlying mechanism that, in part, yielded the observed results. More specifically, those students that were placed in the ACT and were told that these problems "…should not be extremely challenging for you" were more likely to experience shame than learners that received the same statement but were assigned the GRE practice problems. It is the belief of the authors that the learners were able to justify their low performance on the GRE which therefore nullified any experiences of shame. In other words, there was little expectation of success. Based on these results, educators should remain neutral when discussing the ease or difficulty of any particular assignment or run the risk of inducing academic shame in a subset of students. This is especially true when students are working on a task in which they feel they are expected to know the information (high expectation of success).

Additionally, these results are consistent with other research that has shown that feelings of shame are strongly correlated with feelings of shock (Turner, 2014). Those that were assigned the ACT had an expected score of 62.65. When they received a score of 40% this was not congruent with their expectation which lead to shock and a perception of failure which in turn elicited shame. Conversely, those that completed the GRE had an average expected score of 52.52. When they received their score of 40%, this was not incongruent enough to illicit a state of shock and shame.

Future research will begin to explore what direct effect academic shame has on learning. For example, it is the viewpoint of some researchers that shame is detrimental

(Turner, 2008, 2014; Graham & Weiner, 2012; Weiner, 1985). However, some researchers postulate that shame may not be all bad, all the time (Probyn, 2005; Turner, Husman, & Schallert, 2002; author, submitted). If it is shown that academic shame has a negative impact on learning, the ultimate goal of the authors is to develop an empirically supported shame resiliency intervention that can be easily delivered by instructors and administrators.

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