

# THE EFFECTS OF SOCIAL RANK ON SHAME AND GUILT

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## ABSTRACT

The differentiation of shame and guilt is not widely discussed. The reason why some people feel shame while others feel guilt is also not universally understood. Various theories have examined cultural influences and how individuals attribute the outcome of various situations. This paper discusses past theories of the reasons behind shame and guilt and conducts a study that examines how social rank, or lack thereof, could affect a person's emotional response. It was predicted that when the participants, consisting of college undergraduates and residents of a private community, are primed towards feelings of superordination or equality, via vignettes, they would experience feelings of guilt, whereas those primed towards feelings of subordination would experience shame. Results indicated that there were no differences in feelings of shame and guilt, but the condition participants were placed into may have affected the intensity of these feelings. Furthermore, females were found to report higher levels of guilt than males across all conditions. Lastly, an order effect was found between which vignette appeared first to a participant, resulting in the analysis of only the first vignette a participant received. The results are discussed and it is indicated that the unequal distribution of age, gender and location, in addition to the dropout rate and low number of participants may have affected the lack of significant findings. Finally, it is recommended that a more thorough population and real-life situations be used in the future in order to yield more concrete results.

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## The Effects of Social Rank on Shame and Guilt

Imagine that someone broke something that was not theirs. He/she might try to make amends by apologizing or replacing the item and/or withdrawing and avoiding future contact with the victim—the person whose object was broken. When we are responsible for a negative outcome, guilt and/or shame tend to follow. These may lead to attempts to make amends or to withdraw from social involvement. Shame and guilt share many facets, and in everyday life, people may use these terms interchangeably. Some languages even share a term, suggesting that it is difficult to differentiate the two emotions. However, there are differences in their psychological effects that may result in different responses (e.g., making amends versus withdrawing from the situation). Additionally, different correlations that were found, relating to shame and guilt, imply that there may also be meaningful differences in the experience of these emotions. For instance, shame is highly correlated with other negative emotions, such as depression and anxiety, whereas guilt is not (e.g. Gilbert, 2000; Kim, Thibodeau, & Jorgensen, 2011; Luby et al., 2009). Symptoms of clinical depression and psychological maltreatment are also highly correlated with shame, but not guilt (Webb, Heisler, Call, Chickering, & Colburn, 2007). Although almost everyone can seem to recall such experiences, the factors that cause them are little understood.

Shame and guilt are both “social emotions” in that they are not meaningful experiences except in the presence (or implied presence) of others (Manstead, 2010); that is, without a sense of social inappropriateness these emotions may not exist. When individuals have done something inappropriate, individuals may report both shame and guilt, but when they are asked about specific characteristics of their experiences, the emotions are

differentiated (Gilbert, 2000), even in cultures where only one word exists for the two states (Breugelmans & Poortinga, 2006). Shame seems to involve feeling weak and powerless, hiding one's self, and trying to forget what happened. In contrast, guilt seems to involve wanting to apologize, changing future behavior, and explaining what happened to others. In this paper, I review social psychological perspectives on shame and guilt and the situational factors that elicit them. Then I develop an evolutionary hypothesis about the role of social rank on these emotions and describe a study that tests it.

Embarrassment is commonly confused with shame since embarrassment is also only experienced in public situations (Tangney, Miller, Flicker, & Barlow, 1996). As with shame, those who feel embarrassed may attribute their actions as a reflection of who they are, as opposed to just the experience itself (Manstead, 2010). Embarrassment is different, however, because it is only experienced to acknowledge a specific violation of the norm and appears to diminish once the witness recognizes the expression of embarrassment (Leary, Landel, & Patton, 1996). In other words, embarrassment is expressed when a violation of the norm reflects upon an individual's knowledge about what is socially acceptable, and is alleviated once one acknowledges their awareness of the violation. Because it is more transitory and may not motivate extended reflection or reparation (outside of the immediate situation), embarrassment will not be a focus in the current paper.

### **Attributions, Shame, and Guilt**

The experience of shame is associated with a belief that the negative outcome reflects upon one's self or identity. Guilt, on the other hand, is associated with a belief that the negative outcome is a result of a significant act and does not indicate any flaw in character



(Ferguson, Stegge, & Damhuis, 1991). In other words, shame reflects an internal attribution that the negative outcome is a result of who one is as a whole, whereas guilt reflects an unstable and possibly external attribution (e.g. “It’s something that happened”). Thus, guilt implies that the outcome is not likely to happen again and shame suggests a fear that it will be ongoing.

Consistent with the attributional differences between shame and guilt, they also seem to motivate different behaviors. Shame is associated with prevention of confrontation, such as avoiding eye contact, while guilt is associated with reparation, such as trying to make amends for the negative impact of one’s behavior (Ferguson et al., 1991). This means that if one experiences shame after a negative outcome, they are more likely to try to escape from the situation, while those who experience guilt would be more likely to try to confront the situation. Because shame reflects a global negative attribution, the only way to avoid reoccurrence is to withdraw; but whereas guilt reflects a specific unstable attribution, one might expect that one could immediately enact behavior to correct the situation and avoid reoccurrence, thus eliminating the attribution all together.

Sheikh and Janoff-Bulman (2010) proposed that shame and guilt are also linked to proscriptive versus prescriptive views of morality. Specifically, they propose that shame reflects a proscriptive morality and guilt reflects a prescriptive morality. That is to say, people who feel shame would concentrate on what they should not do (prevention) whereas people who feel guilt would concentrate on what they should do (reparation). By priming individuals to be mindful of prescriptive or proscriptive morality, their reactions to a negative outcome reflected a tendency towards shame or guilt, respectively.

## **Cultural Influences on Shame and Guilt**

In a cross-cultural study, Thonney, Kanachi, Sasaki, and Hatayama (2006) gave a specific set of scenarios of negative events to participants both in Japan and North America and found that guilt was reported more frequently than shame, regardless of cultural background. But given the attributional differences described above, one might expect that shame would be experienced more by those in individualistic cultures where behavior is often attributed to the “self.” However, Fessler (2004) found that, compared with those in individualistic cultures, those in a collectivistic culture in general experienced shame more often than guilt, whereas those in individualistic cultures experienced relatively more guilt. Perhaps this is because of widespread reliance of self-serving biases such that people in individualistic cultures attribute negative outcomes to external rather than internal factors (Al-Zahrani & Kaplowitz, 1993). Relevant to the current study, Fessler (2004) further observed that people in collectivistic cultures explained their shame through feelings of subordination. This unexpected observation may also account for age differences in shame vs. guilt experiences.

Within many, if not most, cultures, different characteristics and behaviors are deemed appropriate for people of different ages. Preadolescents, for example, are commonly given less responsibility and choice in their life and are forgiven more readily for misconduct and mistakes than older individuals. A negative action may be attributed to youthful naiveté early in life but to stable characteristics of older adults (Cox, 2011). Because of this, it has been proposed that the expression of shame and guilt may fluctuate across the lifespan. Specifically, since more emphasis is put on a person’s actions, rather than characteristics,

when they are younger, it might be expected that younger people would experience more guilt and older people more shame. However, although the frequency of expression of shame and guilt does in fact vary by age, the findings contrast with these expectations with shame being more pronounced in early adolescence and late adulthood (beyond age 50), while the expression of guilt rises consistently from adolescence onwards (Orth, Robins, & Soto, 2010). On the one hand, like the collectivistic-individualistic difference above, this pattern may reflect a greater tendency to use the self-serving bias as an individual ages. However, on the other hand, it is also possible that this pattern is linked to feelings of subordination that vary across the lifespan.

Since shame is found to be higher in adolescence and subside in adulthood, these age differences may be a result of age differences in subordination in individualistic cultures. In all cultures, children and adolescents tend to be subordinate to their parents and others with perceived authority. But as they age, adolescents gain more freedom from their parents and take on adult responsibilities, thus resulting in a greater feeling of equality. Fessler (2004) found that in eastern civilizations, such as Bengkulu, expressions of shame were more commonly expressed among younger individuals interacting with older individuals as contrasted with older individuals interacting among themselves. Feelings of shame may begin increasing after age 50 again because as we age, we become frailer and depend on others for support, reverting back to the need for group help and feeling subordinate at least in individualistic cultures (Orth, Robins, & Soto, 2010). This implies that it is not the culture itself, but rather the feeling of rank or status that predicts the experience of shame or

guilt. Older adults in collectivistic cultures may not experience this increase (or at least not to the same degree) if age brings social respect and status rather than a focus on frailty.

### **Evolution, Social Rank, and Feelings of Shame and Guilt**

Gilbert (2000) proposed an evolutionary model of shame and guilt based on “social rank” theory (Price & Sloman, 1987). This theory asserts that humans have an innate need to be perceived as holding high rank or status within a group. When one’s actions cause a negative outcome, shame may be experienced to signify one’s submission to others so as to prevent any further damage to one’s social standing. This is hypothesized to motivate withdrawal from the situation or other submissive behaviors (e.g. acknowledging someone else’s superiority). Guilt may be experienced to signal one’s awareness of a mistake and motivate proactive tactics in order to help repair any loss in attractiveness.

It is widely believed that apes, as our closest genetic relative, could provide insight into the role of social rank in early humans. In many nonhuman primates, for instance, these patterns of submissive behavior are seen, where nonhuman primates back down if they cause any disruption with the alpha male. Since the alpha is commonly viewed as being more powerful than the other members of the group, it is more advantageous to back down in order to prevent any possibility of harm upon the self. Nonhuman primates are known to show submissive behavior, such as averting their gaze and shrinking their posture (characteristics of shame), in order to appease the alpha male and signal awareness to their subordinate position (Fessler, 2004). By showing their awareness to subordination, nonhuman primates hope to please the alpha male and alleviate any aggression he might hold. Evolutionarily speaking, our human ancestors formed small hunting and gathering groups which formed

ranks similar to other primates. The leader of the group was commonly viewed as being the most powerful, and thus members of the group below the leader would engage in submissive behavior in order to prevent harm upon themselves. Furthermore, by having a rank below others, feelings of subordination were expected.

Fessler (2004) found that shame is experienced in instances of subordination regardless of whether or not a negative outcome has occurred. In other words, just feeling lower than others in terms of rank would cause an individual to experience feelings of shame. Evolutionarily speaking, these findings would reflect the idea that shame evolved as a response from our ancestral tendency to form ranked groups. When individuals submit to others, there is a sense of inferiority to the person submitted to. Gilbert (2000) argues that while our ancestors and other nonhuman primates would engage in submissive behavior in order to prevent physical attack of the alpha male, the threat today stems from damage to an individual's self-image. Therefore, even though the threat has changed, the emotional response is the same.

Since feelings of shame are defined as a feeling as though one's self is responsible for a negative outcome, it can be argued that when an individual feels subordinate, the only attributions they can form about their current position are their own personal qualities, causing them to experience shame. This helps to explain previous studies that found that shame appears to be a reaction to a threat to the self, whereas guilt is a reaction to a threat to others (Gao, Wang, & Qian, 2010). Since a social rank forms set positions of status, an individual cannot blame their actions or others for their current standing, and can thus only

form internal attributions. However, if there is no feeling of social rank, an individual can attribute the negative outcome to external causes.

Gilbert (2000) proposed that a person experiences both shame and guilt in order to signal awareness to their negative outcome, but shame would help prevent further damage (via submission) and guilt would help to repair damage (via correction). In both cases, some damage has already been done, and thus an individual can either try to repair the damage or avoid causing any further damage. Gilbert briefly explained that shame was then a product of subordination, since submissive behaviors are used to signal awareness and prevent harm. Gilbert's research, along with other findings, help to predict that a feeling of subordination would cause a person to experience shame, but no one has examined how other variations in social rank might affect feelings of shame or guilt.

According to Gilbert's (2000) theory, one would experience shame when feeling subordinate in order to prevent further damage to the self-image after the initial blow. It is reasonable to argue that when a person is in a state of subordination, there is more risk in trying to fix a negative outcome and causing more damage. If an individual tries to resolve an issue and instead causes more harm, they would then risk the aggressiveness of the leader and potential harm to the self. The individual would also be failing to admit to subordination, and could thus appear as being in defiance of the social rank. Furthermore, when an individual is in a ranked society, they would risk falling lower in rank and appearing less attractive to others. It is more advantageous to back down from the situation with submissive behavior in order to prevent any more possibilities of damage.

If there is no perceived rank, an individual has less to lose and more to gain through trying to resolve the issue or make amends. Even if the individual fails to fix the situation, their attractiveness is only decreased temporarily, if at all, since everyone is perceived as being equal to one another and no one person is indefinitely put above or below anyone else. If an individual was to engage in subordination, they would, in a sense, be eliminating themselves from competition and putting themselves below everyone else, which causes them to appear less attractive. When there is no feeling of social rank, there is also no reason to engage in behaviors that signal subordination. Furthermore, if an individual succeeds at resolving an issue, their attractiveness is increased temporarily. Therefore, it is more advantageous to engage in proactive tactics in order to try to resolve the situation when there is no perceived rank.

It is predicted, then, that if a person were to feel as if they are subordinate, regardless of their cultural background, they would experience shame if responsible for a negative outcome, as past research would predict as well. Guilt, on the other hand, would be experienced if a person causes a negative outcome and feels equal to those around them. This could also be explained evolutionarily, since individuals in a group would compete against those equal to them in rank in order to impress a mate. Though groups tend to result in hierarchies, there are still individuals who feel equal to those with the same rank.

Past research has found that when a person perceives an onlooker as being critical, they predict experiencing more shame than if the onlooker was to be more familiar or on equal standings (Scarnier, Schmader, & Lickel, 2009). It can be argued that people who are critical are seen to have higher status, thus allowing them to be critical, so it can be proposed

that the participants in the study perceived the critical onlooker as being above them.

Although hierarchies and ranks are formed through an individual's willingness to "give in" to subordination (Bernstein, 1980), it has also been found that individuals can be involuntarily put into a state of subordination, which causes similar submissive behaviors and feelings of shame (Gilbert, Allan, & Trent, 1995). Therefore, individuals are more likely to display subordination towards those who give the impression of having a higher status.

Neglected in prior research is consideration of the experience of superordination.

Although subordination is found to be correlated with submissive behavior, little research looks at the other end of the scale. When put into a position of authority, one's actions affect the group as a whole as well as the leader's reputation. Since the expression of submissive behaviors and lack of action could be perceived as poor leadership skills, one would predict that if an individual in a superordinate position was to cause a negative outcome, they would then experience guilt in order to fix the situation as quickly as possible. Furthermore, since shame is predicted to signal subordination, it wouldn't make sense for someone in a role of authority to show submission. Since some group predicaments are better resolved through preventative tactics, though, it would be predicted that a person in a superordinate position would experience less guilt than a person in a situation with no social rank, where proactive tactics are always the better solution. Therefore, this study examines whether feelings of subordination, superordination, and equality affect the expression of shame and guilt.

### **Current Study**

The current study examined the relationship between the feeling of subordination, superordination, and equality and immediate responses of shame and/or guilt. Participants



were asked to imagine themselves in vignettes in order to prime feelings of subordination, superordination, or equality. Upon a negative outcome emerging in the vignette, participants rated how they felt in terms of shame and/or guilt. Participants were also measured on shame and guilt proneness and attributional style in order to explore any possible covariates. It was predicted that those primed for subordination would report more feelings of shame than participants thinking about equal-status or superordinate positions. Furthermore, it was predicted that those primed for equality would report more feelings of guilt than those primed with superordinate or subordinate positions. Lastly, it was predicted that those primed for superordinate positions would report more feelings of guilt than those primed for subordinate positions.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

Participants included 17 undergraduates from Indiana State University enrolled in psychology-related Summer I courses and 83 residents of Scientists' Cliffs in Port Republic, Maryland. This private community resides on the western shore of the Chesapeake Bay and consists mainly of retired scientists, ranging from Marine Biologists to Paleontologists. While most of the residents consist of widows or unmarried individuals, a lot of the married couples contain people from similar fields of science. Twenty-five residents of Scientists' Cliffs were removed from the study due to incomplete responses, bringing the total number of participants to 75. Participants consisted of 22 males (29.3%) and 53 females (70.7%) with an average age of 48.4, ranging from the ages of 18 to 83 (16 not reporting). Participants were 81.3% White, 10.7% Black, 2.7% Hispanic, 2.7% Native American, 1.3% Asian, and

1.3% Other. Fifty-two percent of the participants had graduated from college, while 37.3% were currently enrolled in an undergraduate program (10.7% not responding). Students from ISU who participated in the study were given class participation points/extra credit for completing the experiment.

## **Materials**

**Demographic Questionnaire.** A 4-item demographics questionnaire was given to participants, asking their age, gender, ethnicity, and year in school (See Appendix A).

**Shame and Guilt Trait Questionnaire.** The Guilt and Shame Proneness scale (GASP) was used to measure the participants' proneness to shame and guilt (Cohen, Wolf, Panter, & Insko, 2011). The GASP includes 16 common-day scenarios and reactions and then asks the participants to rate their likelihood of reacting in the same way to those situations on a 7-point scale, ranging from 1 (*Very Unlikely*) to 7 (*Very Likely*). Eight of the reactions reflect proneness towards shame and the other eight reactions reflect proneness towards guilt. Higher scores indicate a higher proneness towards feeling shame and/or guilt, respectively (See Appendix B). The scale showed adequate reliability in this sample ( $\alpha=.63$ ;  $M= 9.35$ ;  $SD= 1.97$ ).

**Attribution Measure.** An adaptation of the Relationship Attribution Measure (RAM; Fincham & Bradbury, 1992) was used to measure participants' proneness to maladaptive attributions to events. The RAM consists of four scenarios with a list of three statements each, consisting of three maladaptive casual attributions. The maladaptive casual attributions include locus of control, stability, and globility. Participants are asked to rate how much they agree to the given statement on a scale of 1 (*Disagree Strongly*) to 6 (*Agree*

*Strongly*). Higher scores indicate a proneness towards external, unstable, and global attributions, whereas lower scores indicate a proneness towards internal, stable, and specific attributions, respectively. Each scenario and statement has been modified to no longer contain a relationship aspect (i.e. “Your husband criticizes something you say” to “A person criticizes something you say”; See Appendix C). The scale showed adequate reliability in this sample ( $\alpha=.61$ ;  $M= 10.65$ ;  $SD= 2.29$ ).

**Shame and Guilt State and Vignettes Questionnaire.** The State Shame and Guilt Scale (SSGS) was used to measure the participants’ level of shame and guilt at the present moment (Marschall, Sanftner, & Tangney, 1994). The SSGS includes 5 statements of both shame (i.e. “I want to sink into the floor and disappear”) and guilt (i.e. “I feel like apologizing, confessing”) and asks participants to rate on a 5-point scale how much they are currently feeling at that exact moment, ranging from 1 (*Strongly Disagree*) to 5 (*Strongly Agree*). Higher scores indicate immediate feelings of shame and/or guilt, respectively, and lower scores indicate little to no immediate feelings of shame and/or guilt. These items were measured four times, after participants read each vignette associated with their assigned condition (see Appendix D). Items were randomized for each presentation. The scale showed adequate reliability in this sample ( $\alpha=.75$ ;  $M= 3.41$ ;  $SD= 1.87$ ).

**Vignettes.** Each questionnaire consists of 4 vignettes. Each vignette describes a different everyday setting in order to help create scenarios that are believable and easy to relate to. The first vignette involved an individual forgetting their portion of a presentation with another person. The second vignette involved an individual dropping a stack of plates at a restaurant in front of a person. The third vignette involved missing a shot at a tennis match

with a person. Finally, the last vignette involved being caught smoking in a bathroom by a person.

Each vignette was modified as little as possible in order to manipulate a participant's sense of subordinate, equal, or superordinate status. The modification was made by changing the status of the individual the participant was expected to imagine themselves as. For example, in the presentation vignette, the participants would be a student presenting with another student and (equal condition), a student presenting with a teacher (subordinate condition), or a teacher presenting with a student (superordinate condition). Order of vignettes was randomized for each participant. Participants were also asked how easily they could imagine themselves in each vignette. Participants were also asked to recall what the vignette was about in order to test whether the participants read the vignette (See Appendix D).

### **Procedure**

The students of Indiana State University and residents of Scientists' Cliffs were emailed a link to an online questionnaire and asked to participate. This questionnaire consisted first of an informed consent page, which participants must read before continuing on to the next page. Next, participants were asked to fill out the demographics questionnaire. Participants were then randomly assigned the four vignettes associated with their assigned condition. After each vignette, participants were asked to rank how easily they could imagine themselves in the vignette. Afterwards, participants were taken to a separate page and asked what the previous vignette was about in a multiple-choice format. Participants then completed the SSGS. After reading and rating all four of the vignettes, participants were

asked to fill out the modified RAM and GASP. The modified RAM always came before the GASP in order to separate the two guilt and shame measures. Afterwards, participants were debriefed and thanked for their participation.

## **Results**

It was predicted that participants who were given the subordinate vignettes would report experiencing more shame than those who were given the superordinate or equality vignettes. Furthermore, participants who were given the equality vignettes were predicted to report experiencing more guilt than those who were given the superordinate or subordinate vignettes. Lastly, those who were given the superordinate vignettes would report experiencing more guilt than those who read the subordinate vignettes, but less guilt than those who read the equality vignettes.

### **Preliminary Analysis**

Preliminary analyses testing for order effects, gender differences, and correlations between trait and state shame and guilt measures were performed to identify unexpected problems that might require modification of planned analyses.

Due to the small number of subjects, a full test of order effects comparing all sequences of vignette presentations could not be completed. However, a test for differences in responses to all vignettes based on the vignette presented first was performed. While this analysis achieved significance for shame,  $F(2,75) = 2.194, p=.024$ , and guilt,  $F(2,75) = 3.641, p<.001$ , no distinct patterns were apparent (See Appendix E). Since such effects could not be adequately controlled, tests of hypotheses utilized a between-subjects design that

compared responses to the first vignette only (thereby eliminating any confounding based on vignette sequence).

Preliminary analyses for sex differences revealed a significant sex difference in guilt, with females experiencing more guilt than males,  $F(1,75) = 9.48, p = .003$ , but none for shame,  $F(1,75) = 1.18, p = .281$  (See Table 1). Thus, sex was included as a covariate in our primary analysis.

Table 1

*Gender Means for Shame and Guilt*

	Gender	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Shame	Male	1.33	0.67	22
	Female	1.55	0.88	53
	Total	1.49	0.83	75
Guilt	Male	1.28	0.64	22
	Female	2.19	1.32	53
	Total	1.93	1.23	75

To test whether there was any correlation between state and trait of shame and guilt, the means of shame and guilt trait items from the GASP were calculated for each participant. The correlation between state shame and trait shame was positive,  $r = .26, p = .028$ , and the correlation between state guilt and trait guilt was also positive,  $r = .25, p = .033$ . Since both correlations were significant, trait shame and guilt scores were included as covariates in the final analyses. A strong positive association was also observed between trait shame and trait guilt scores,  $r = .64, p < .001$ .

### **Effectiveness of Manipulation**

To determine that participants were reading the various vignettes, participants were asked to recall what the vignette they had just received was about. Most participants were able to recall what the previous vignette was about, with 94.1% of the participants recalling the restaurant vignette correctly, 100% recalling the presentation vignette correctly, 100% recalling the tennis vignette correctly, and 95% recalling the bathroom vignette correctly. To determine the effectiveness of the manipulation in generating the intended emotional experiences, participants were asked to include how easily they could imagine themselves in each situation. It was found that overall, more than 75% of participants' ratings were at or above the midpoint (scores of 6, 7, 8, and 9 on a 9-point scale) of scales measuring their ease of imagining themselves in the various vignettes. By vignette, 82.4%, 75%, 81.8%, and 70% of participants' ratings were at or above the midpoint of the scale measuring their ease of imagining themselves in the restroom, presentation, tennis, and bathroom vignette, respectively.

### **Tests of Hypothesis**

To test the hypotheses of whether or not feelings of being equal, subordinate, or superordinate relative to others had an effect on feelings of shame and guilt, a 3 (condition) by 4 (vignette) by 2 (state shame and guilt) mixed-factor analysis of variance was conducted with gender and trait levels of shame and guilt as covariates. Trait levels of shame and guilt were not significant covariates in this analysis,  $F(1,57) = .018, p=.893$ , and  $F(1,57) = 2.92, p=.093$ , respectively. Furthermore, no effects of the vignettes or status-conditions for state shame and guilt reached significance,  $F(3,57) = 2.71, p=.054$ , and  $F(2,57) = .789, p=.459$ ,

respectively. The three-way interactions between shame and guilt state, vignette, and status-conditions were also not significant,  $F(6,57) = .445, p=.846$ . The interaction between the vignettes and status-condition was also not significant,  $F(6,57) = 7.846, p=.510$ . The only statistically significant results were for gender,  $F(1,57) = 5.34, p=.024$ , with females reporting more guilt than males, and general state shame and guilt,  $F(1,57) = 4.161, p=.046$ , with participants reporting more guilt than shame. When the partial eta squared was calculated, there were no strong effect sizes for shame and guilt state (.07), shame trait (<.01), guilt trait (.05), gender (.09), vignette (.13), status-condition (.03), the interaction between vignette and status-condition (.09), or the interaction between shame and guilt state, vignette, and status condition (.05).

Although there were no significant differences between the status conditions, for ease of review, the mean levels of shame and guilt collapsed across the vignettes are shown in Table 2. The collapsed means did appear to show that the superordinate group reported the least amount of shame and guilt than the other two conditions. Furthermore, the subordinate group reported the greatest feelings of guilt than the other two conditions.

Table 2

*Shame and Guilt Mean by Vignette and Condition*

	Condition	Shame Mean (SD)	Guilt Mean (SD)	N
Restaurant	Equal	1.65 (.94)	2.60 (1.47)	4
	Subordinate	1.37 (.65)	2.57 (1.16)	6
	Superordinate	1.34 (.91)	2.29 (1.03)	7
Presentation	Equal	2.65 (1.99)	2.45 (1.77)	4
	Subordinate	1.76 (.82)	2.09 (1.47)	9
	Superordinate	1.20 (.35)	1.87 (1.50)	3



Table 2, cont.

*Shame and Guilt Mean by Vignette and Condition, cont.*

	Condition	Shame Mean (SD)	Guilt Mean (SD)	N
Tennis	Equal	1.43 (.70)	1.50 (1.13)	8
	Subordinate	1.60 (.85)	2.10 (1.59)	8
	Superordinate	1.17 (.32)	1.43 (.74)	5
Bathroom	Equal	1.23 (.41)	1.54 (.74)	7
	Subordinate	1.80 (.93)	2.32 (1.71)	5
	Superordinate	1.08 (.21)	1.08 (.15)	8

### Discussion

The results of this study found no difference in levels of shame and guilt experienced whether participants committed a fault of someone in a subordinate, equal, or superordinate position relative to themselves. The only factors that affected the emotions experienced were participant gender. Below, I discuss the implications of these results for theoretical models that emphasize the importance of status in emotional response and implications for future research in this area. I also describe limitations of the study that might qualify generalization of these findings.

Individuals, regardless of sex, reported significantly higher levels of guilt than shame. Furthermore, females reported significantly higher levels of guilt across the scenarios than did males. These results may indicate that the scenarios given to the participants elicited a stronger emotional reaction of guilt, regardless of social rank they were placed into. Furthermore, this may indicate that an individual's natural response, regardless of the situation, is usually guilt. These results may also indicate that females are more prone to experience guilt in response to a negative outcome. This finding could be a result of women

wanting to overcome the differential (lower) status generally attributed to women, even in modern times (Suver, 2013). Therefore, regardless of what social rank a female is placed into, some may feel as though they are still seen as below others, and thus need to overcome these stereotypes by acting proactively, a characteristic of guilt. Some female participants might have also automatically assumed that the individual presented in the vignettes (with exception to the bathroom scenario) that witnessed the negative outcome was male. Similarly, male participants might have automatically assumed that the observers' genders were male as well. In a recent Gallup poll, it was found that individuals, both male and female, both prefer to have a male in charge, so this might lead them to automatically assume any unidentified gender of someone in charge, or holding some authority, as male (Newport, 2011).

There appears to also be a strong positive correlation between the trait levels of shame and guilt. In fact, the correlation between trait levels of shame and guilt was much larger than the correlation between state and trait levels of each emotion. This surprising result may seriously limit researchers' abilities to differentiate conditions that elicit the two emotions separately. While it may be that the confluence of these experiences is unique to U.S. culture, it is also possible that evolutionary history gave no basis for the separate experience of these emotions. It is interesting to note that although not significant, participants imagining themselves in a superordinate position reported the lowest levels of both shame and guilt in three of four scenarios while those presented in a subordinate position reported the highest levels of guilt overall.

In addition to the poor differentiation of these two negative emotions, there are other possible reasons for the lack of support for my hypotheses. For instance, it may be that the manipulations were ineffective at generating different “status” experiences. In a culture with an historic emphasis on “equality” over ascriptions of rank, manipulations of super- and subordination may not be wholly effective. While a majority of participants reported that they were able to imagine themselves in the specified situation, there was no assessment of whether the experience of sub- or superordination differed in vignettes, and that was the crux of my hypotheses.

It is also worth noting that 25% of participants failed to complete the survey. Although it is not believed that this was a reaction to the survey vignettes, withdrawal is a typical “shame” response, and it is possible that those leaving the study were those most prone to shame experiences, reducing the variation in the emotional experiences of those who remained. Unfortunately, most of the participants who dropped from the survey dropped out before being assigned to a condition or filling out the demographics questionnaire, making it impossible to explore this hypothesis.

The average age and gender of the participants was also not as variable as desired, with the majority of the participants being older women, which might have affected the results. It was found that females reported significantly more guilt than males. It is a common assumption that females are more likely to be open with their feelings, so the significant difference between males and females may have been an artifact of reliance on a self-report methodology. Furthermore, as mentioned earlier, feelings of shame have been found to be more pronounced in young adolescents and elderly individuals, who made up the majority of

participants (Orth, Robins, & Soto, 2010). Since men and women only differed in levels of guilt, there may be some underlying difference between shame and guilt for only one gender. For instance, females are commonly stereotyped with trying to use communication more to fix negative situations, while males are stereotyped with avoiding confrontation that portrays emotions, which is sometimes associated with signs of weakness. When comparing the means, it was found that the average scores of state shame and guilt for males were very similar (1.33 and 1.28, respectively), while the average scores of state shame and guilt for females varied more (1.55 and 2.19, respectively), so this might point towards females having more of a variety of emotional responses to various situations, while males respond similarly across many situations. While this study didn't delve too far into such a possibility, further experimentation may yield some results regarding gender and feelings of shame and guilt, regardless of social rank. Furthermore, experimenting with the gender of the individuals discussed in the vignettes might yield some results regarding gender and feelings of shame and guilt as well.

Though nonsignificant, the results seem to point towards social rank only affecting the intensity of feelings of shame and guilt rather than different levels of each independently of one another. Evolutionarily, perhaps there are advantages to feeling more shame and guilt when placed in a position of subordination. For instance, if an individual was responsible for a negative outcome in front of their superior, it might reflect badly if the individual does not immediately try to resolve the issue while also trying to show subordination. Furthermore, those in a position of superordination might not want to appear as showing any signs of shame or guilt, since both emotions might result in the individual coming across as

weakened. Again, with more testing, more participants, and more accurate measures, better conclusions could probably be made.

### **Limitations**

As mentioned earlier, there are many limitations to the study. First is the unequal distribution of age and gender across participants, which raises questions about the generalizability of the findings. Most of the participants were elderly women, with the second most common group adolescent women. The sample was lacking not only men, but also middle aged participants of both sexes. Prior research has suggested age-related differences in experiencing shame and guilt with similar trends observed in adolescence and older age (Orth, Robins, & Soto, 2010). Perhaps a clearer picture of differences would have emerged with more middle-aged participants in the study.

A second limitation of the study was the design of the survey itself, as well as the use of a survey to measure emotional responses of shame and guilt. The results indicated that while the participants were able to easily imagine themselves in the various vignettes, they didn't elicit a strong emotional reaction, regardless of stated status. For each vignette, the average measure of shame and guilt never went above a 2.5 on a scale of 5, indicating that the participants rated below "feeling this way somewhat" on average. The length of the survey and repeated use of the same questions and measures might have also caused participants to lose enthusiasm for answering questions honestly and resulted in hurried responses. This again might have reduced the variation associated with the experimental treatments (and perhaps contributed to the unexpected order effect, resulting in the loss of significant amounts of data). Although most of the participants dropped out of the survey before even

getting assigned to a condition, those who began the survey appeared to leave during the vignette portion of the questionnaire, where the repetitive questioning occurred. Another problem associated with the survey method was that the questions relating to shame and guilt might also have not been as easily differentiated from one another as desired, as indicated by the strong correlation between shame and guilt scores.

Although collecting data at two locations is an unusual strength of this survey, the selected locations might also have limited the findings. The majority of the participants came from a private community of mainly retired scientists who have been successful in their field. Their high level of education and status in American society may have further diminished their ability to immerse themselves in a lower status vignette, minimizing variation in emotional experience across conditions. While it is good to have a very specific sample of individuals to draw conclusions from, this also affects the ability to expand the findings of the study to other populations. Since the participants are such a specific type of individual, the results of the study might not accurately reflect how people as a whole would react emotionally to situations based upon their imagined status. Had there been greater diversity of participants in the study, the results may have better reflected the hypothesized patterns, or at least been more externally valid.

### **Conclusion**

To conclude, no significant differences in feelings of shame and guilt, for people at different social ranks, but given limitations in the sample and method, it is not clear whether this result reflects reality or is an artifact of study design. It is at least plausible, however, that there is little differentiation between these states, which challenges the evolutionary

model of their origins. For future research, it is suggested to include gender as a possible contributor to the expression of shame and/or guilt as well as to measure participants' emotional reactions to real life situations, as opposed to written vignettes.

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## Appendix A

## Demographics Questionnaire

1. What is your age? \_\_\_\_\_ years

Please circle your response to the following questions.

2. What is your race/ethnic background?

- a. White/Caucasian
- b. Hispanic/Latino(a)
- c. Asian/Asian American
- d. Black/African American
- e. Native American/American Indian
- f. Multiracial \_\_\_\_\_
- g. Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

3. What is your gender?

- a. Female
- b. Male

4. What is your year in school?

- a. First-year
- b. Sophomore
- c. Junior
- d. Senior

## Appendix B

### Shame and Guilt Trait Questionnaire

In the questionnaire you will read about situations that people are likely to encounter in day-to-day life, followed by common reactions to those situations. As you read each scenario, try to imagine yourself in that situation. Then indicate the likelihood that you would react in the way described.

1. After realizing you had received too much change at a store, you decide to keep it because the salesclerk doesn't notice. What is the likelihood that you would feel uncomfortable about keeping the money?

1            2            3            4            5            6            7

Very Unlikely

Very Likely

2. You are privately informed that you are the only one in your group that did not make the honor society because you skipped too many days of school. What is the likelihood that this would lead you to become more responsible about attending school?

1            2            3            4            5            6            7

Very Unlikely

Very Likely

3. You rip an article out of a journal in the library and take it with you. Your teacher discovers what you did and tells the librarian and your entire class. What is the likelihood that this would make you feel like a bad person?

1            2            3            4            5            6            7

Very Unlikely

Very Likely









## Appendix C

### Attribution Measure

This questionnaire describes several things that someone might do. Imagine someone performing each behavior and then read the statements that follow. Please circle the number that indicates how much you agree or disagree with each statement, using the rating scale below:

1	2	3	4	5	6
Disagree Strongly	Disagree	Disagree Somewhat	Agree Somewhat	Agree	Agree Strongly

#### Scenarios:

1. Someone criticizes something you say
2. Someone begins to spend less time with you
3. Someone does not pay attention to what you are saying
4. Someone is cool and distant

#### Statements:

1. The person's behavior was due to something about him/her
2. The reason the person criticized me is *not* likely to change
3. The reason the person criticized me is something that affects other areas of my life

## Appendix D

### Vignette and State Shame and Guilt Questionnaire

Read the following short descriptions of an event, imagining yourself as the specified person. Once you feel as though you have successfully imagined yourself in the event, answer the following questions as honestly as you can.

#### **Vignette One:**

Superordinate Group: “Imagine yourself as a professor who is practicing a presentation with a student to present in front of an audience later that day. During the practice, you forget your portion of the presentation and the practice is unable to be done.” Imagine yourself as the professor that forgot their portion of the presentation.

Subordinate Group: “Imagine yourself as a student who is practicing a presentation with a professor to present in front of an audience later that day. During the practice, you forget your portion of the presentation and the practice is unable to be done.” Imagine yourself as the student that forgot their portion of the presentation.

Equal Group: “Imagine yourself as a student who is practicing a presentation with another student to present in front of an audience later that day. During the practice, you forget your portion of the presentation and the practice is unable to be done.” Imagine yourself as the student that forgot their portion of the presentation.

#### **Vignette Two:**

Superordinate Group: “Imagine yourself as a manager in a restaurant before it opens and you are showing a trainee how to clean dishes. While cleaning the dishes, your hand slips

and you accidentally drop and break a stack of plates.” Imagine yourself as the worker who broke the plates.

Subordinate Group: “Imagine yourself as a trainee in a restaurant before it opens and a manager is showing you how to clean dishes. While cleaning the dishes, your hand slips and you accidentally drop and break a stack of plates.” Imagine yourself as the trainee who broke the plates.

Equal Group: “Imagine yourself as a worker in a restaurant before it opens who is learning how to cleaning dishes with another worker. While cleaning the dishes, your hand slips and you accidentally drop and break a stack of plates.” Imagine yourself as the worker who broke the plates.

**Vignette Three:**

Superordinate Group: “Imagine yourself as a star tennis player going one-on-one with a rookie player before the other players arrive. During the game, you miss a hit from the rookie player.” Imagine yourself as the star player that missed the throw.

Subordinate Group: “Imagine yourself as a rookie tennis player going one-on-one with a star player before the other players arrive. During the game, you miss a hit from the star player.” Imagine yourself as the rookie that missed the throw.

Equal Group: “Imagine yourself as a tennis player going one-on-one with another tennis player before the other players arrive. During the game, you miss a hit from the other player.” Imagine yourself as the player that missed the throw.

**Vignette Four:**

Superordinate Group: “Imagine yourself as a teacher smoking in a school bathroom.

During school hours, a student walks into a bathroom to find you smoking.” Imagine yourself as the teacher who was caught smoking in the school bathroom.

Subordinate Group: “Imagine yourself as a student smoking in a school bathroom.

During school hours, a teacher walks into a bathroom to find you smoking.” Imagine yourself as the student who was caught smoking in the school bathroom.

Equal Group: “Imagine yourself as a student smoking in a school bathroom. During school hours, a student walks into a bathroom to find you smoking.” Imagine yourself as the student who was caught smoking in the school bathroom.

**Reliability Measure One:** How easily can you imagine yourself in this situation?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Very Uneasily						Very Easily

**Reliability Measure Two:** What was the previous situation about?

1. Practicing for a presentation
2. Cleaning dishes at a restaurant
3. Playing tennis
4. Smoking in the bathroom

**SSGS Measure:** Please rate how you are feeling **right at this moment**:

	Not feeling this way at all	Feeling this way somewhat	Feeling this way very strongly
1. I want to sink into the floor and disappear.	1 -----	2 -----	3 ----- 4 ----- 5
2. I feel remorse, regret.	1 -----	2 -----	3 ----- 4 ----- 5
3. I feel small.	1 -----	2 -----	3 ----- 4 ----- 5
4. I feel tension about something I have done.	1 -----	2 -----	3 ----- 4 ----- 5
5. I feel like I am a bad person.	1 -----	2 -----	3 ----- 4 ----- 5
6. I can't stop thinking about something bad I've done.	1 -----	2 -----	3 ----- 4 ----- 5
7. I feel worthless, powerless.	1 -----	2 -----	3 ----- 4 ----- 5
8. I feel bad about something I've done.	1 -----	2 -----	3 ----- 4 ----- 5
9. I feel humiliated, disgraced.	1 -----	2 -----	3 ----- 4 ----- 5
10. I feel like apologizing, confessing.	1 -----	2 -----	3 ----- 4 ----- 5

## Appendix E

## Means of Ordinal Effects for Shame and Guilt

## Means of Ordinal Effects for Shame

Vignette	First	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Restaurant	Restaurant	1.4235	.79020	17
	Presentation	1.8156	.82819	16
	Tennis	1.6250	1.02884	22
	Bathroom	1.4400	1.00651	20
	Total	1.5707	.92627	75
Presentation	Restaurant	1.7882	.99366	17
	Presentation	1.8750	1.19304	16
	Tennis	1.7364	1.13202	22
	Bathroom	1.7300	1.10934	20
	Total	1.7760	1.08850	75
Tennis	Restaurant	1.4118	.88733	17
	Presentation	1.2500	.42895	16
	Tennis	1.4182	.67587	22
	Bathroom	1.3300	.76578	20
	Total	1.3573	.70158	75
Bathroom	Restaurant	2.2765	1.22960	17
	Presentation	1.6625	.94860	16
	Tennis	1.5545	1.05095	22
	Bathroom	1.3100	.58210	20
	Total	1.6760	1.01646	75

## Means of Ordinal Effects for Guilt

Vignette	First	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Restaurant	Restaurant	2.4588	1.11527	17
	Presentation	2.6250	1.40262	16
	Tennis	1.7818	1.25419	22
	Bathroom	1.8900	1.30501	20
	Total	2.1440	1.29638	75
Presentation	Restaurant	2.4588	1.13526	17
	Presentation	2.1375	1.45459	16
	Tennis	2.0409	1.46276	22
	Bathroom	1.9400	1.23305	20
	Total	2.1293	1.31989	75
Tennis	Restaurant	1.2706	.54745	17
	Presentation	1.3500	.44721	16
	Tennis	1.7000	1.22007	22
	Bathroom	1.1500	.38865	20
	Total	1.3813	.78374	75
Bathroom	Restaurant	3.0529	1.47738	17
	Presentation	2.1000	1.30639	16
	Tennis	1.7727	1.30245	22
	Bathroom	1.5500	1.02161	20
	Total	2.0733	1.37431	75