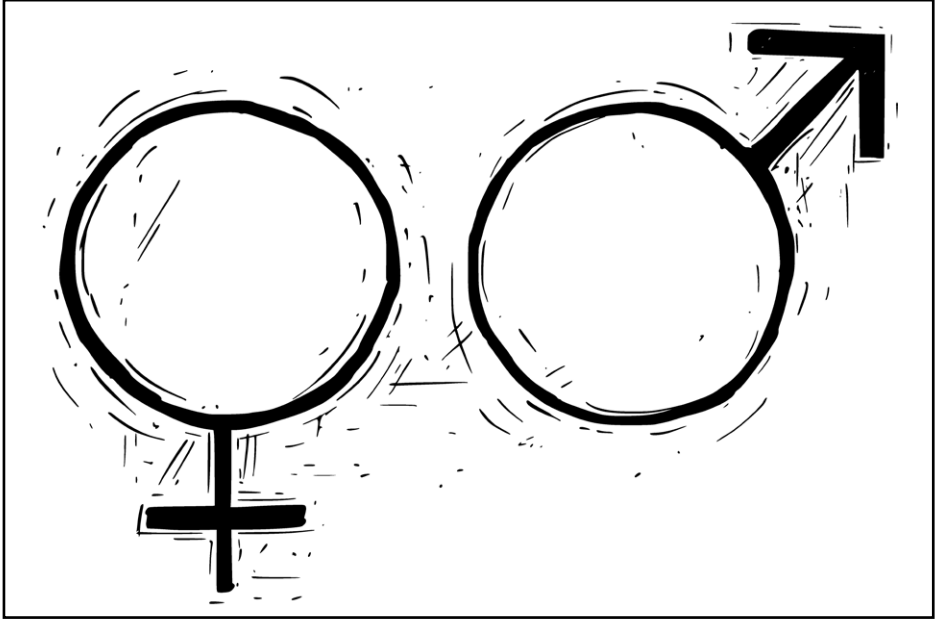


Does the way we measure shame create a gender difference?

Emma Herring



THE SELF-CONSCIOUS EMOTIONS (shame, guilt, pride, and embarrassment) emerge towards the end of the second year of life; they are cognitively complex, and to be experienced the individual must have the ability to form a stable self-representation, to internalise external standards, and to evaluate their actions against those standards (Lewis et al., 1989). Tracy and Robins (2004) proposed a model which stated that the experience of self-conscious emotions was dependent on attributions. Shame is a powerful, distressing emotion experienced when an individual feels they have not met an external standard, and global, stable attributions are made. For example, ‘I failed the test because I am stupid.’

Gender difference in shame

Research has reported a gender difference in the experience of shame. Meta-analyses by Else-Quest et al. (2012), and Chaplin and Aldao (2013), concluded that girls experience more shame than boys, although the cause of this has not been conclusively demonstrated. Some researchers have highlighted the importance of socialisation in how emotions are expressed, e.g. noting that both parental evaluative feedback and culture affect expression of self-conscious emotions (Bidjerano, 2010). Perceived negative parenting

has been shown to correlate with shame-proneness in emerging adulthood (Mintz et al., 2017). Else-Quest et al. (2012) suggested that the gender difference in shame could be caused by innate sex differences, but did not specify what this innate difference may be.

Exploring the possibility that there is no gender difference in shame

Differential responses to shame

An alternative view is that there is no gender difference in shame but, instead, the experience of shame for boys and men is not being recognised. The secondary appraisal model of self-conscious emotions is a theoretical model which could explain this observed gender difference. Muris and Meesters (2014) proposed this model to explain why self-conscious emotions are linked to a variety of outcomes. For example, shame has been linked to both depression (Thompson & Berenbaum, 2006) and aggression (Elison et al., 2014). The model proposes that after an individual experiences shame, they either blame themselves, which is associated with avoidant behaviour, or blame others, which is associated with hostility. If individuals sustain excessive shame, then repeatedly experiencing avoidance could lead to anxiety/depression, and repeatedly experiencing hostility could lead to aggression.

Rather than there being a gender difference in shame, it can be argued that males and females experience shame equally, but may differ in their response to the emotion. If men and boys attribute their behaviour to external factors, blaming others, they may show hostility and aggression, whereas if women and girls attribute their behaviour to internal factors, blaming themselves, they may show avoidance and depression/anxiety.

Measuring shame

The tools currently used to measure self-conscious emotions may create the reported gender difference by failing to capture an aggressive response to shame. Much of the research into shame uses situation-based measures (Tangney & Dearing, 2004). The Self-Conscious Affect and Attribution Inventory (SCAAI) and Test of Self-Conscious Affect (TOSCA) present individuals with scenarios and ask them to choose from several responses (Tangney & Dearing, 2004). Although these measures capture externalising attributions, they do not reflect aggressive responses. If current self-report measures do not recognise that aggressive responses are part of experiencing shame for some individuals, then they may not accurately reflect emotional experiences and create an impression of a gender difference where one does not exist.

Shame in childhood and adolescence

Further evidence that the gender difference in shame is created as a result of the measures used comes from findings that this difference may emerge at adolescence (Else-Quest et al., 2012). Shame is stereotyped as a female emotion (Plant et al., 2000), whereas the male gender role consists of an inexpression of emotion (Blazina et al., 2005), and aggression and power (Richardson & Hammock, 2007). Gender difference in shame may emerge in adolescence because it is at this point in development that boys, being aware of the male gender stereotype, became reluctant to honestly report their emotional experiences. Social identity theory proposes that a person's social identity contributes to their self-concept, and early-adolescents are focused on achieving a sense of belonging (Tanti et al., 2011). Boys who conform to the masculine display rituals are seen more positively by their peers (Brody, 2000). To achieve peer acceptance, adolescent males may become more reluctant to honestly disclose their emotional experiences.

Implications

Theory and research has highlighted that aggression can be a reaction to shame. Externalising problems make up a large proportion of the behaviour cases referred to educational psychologists who support children and young people in schools (Bramlett et al., 2002), and interventions often target anger management techniques (Lochman et al., 2006). However, psychologists working in a range of settings need to be aware that aggression may be rooted in shame, and work could instead focus on attribution retraining so individuals experience the less painful emotion of guilt which motivates reparative behaviour (Tangney et al., 2011).

The recently developed adolescent shame-proneness scale developed by Simonds et al. (2016) has included an externalisation component which recognises aggressive reactions to the experience of shame. Future research could use this tool to consider if recognition of such shame responses minimises previously observed gender differences. Finally, psychologists need to acknowledge epistemological issues in the study of emotions, that our understanding of what is true is affected by the tools we use to measure, and how individuals choose to report their own, internal experiences.

The author

Emma Herring is an Educational Psychologist working for Oxfordshire Educational Psychology Service. A previous version of this article was submitted as part of the Doctorate in Educational Psychology at the University of Southampton.

References

- Bidjerano, T. (2010). Self-conscious emotions in response to perceived failure: A structural equation model. *The Journal of Experimental Education*, 78(3), 318–342.
- Blazina, C., Pisecco, S. & O’Neil, J.M. (2005). An adaptation of the gender role conflict scale for adolescents: Psychometric issues and correlates with psychological distress. *Psychology of Men and Masculinity*, 6(1), 39–45.
- Bramlett, R.K., Murphy, J.J., Johnson, J. et al. (2002). Contemporary practices in school psychology: A national survey of roles and referral problems. *Psychology in the Schools*, 39(3), 327–335.
- Brody, L.R. (2000). The socialisation of gender differences in emotional expression: Display rules, infant temperament, and differentiation. In A.H. Fischer (Ed.), *Gender and emotion: Social psychological perspectives*. (pp.3–23). Cambridge: The Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge.
- Chaplin, T.M. & Aldao, A. (2013). Gender differences in emotion expression in children: A meta-analytic review. *Psychological Bulletin*, 139(4), 735–65.
- Elison, J., Garofalo, C. & Velotti, P. (2014). Shame and aggression: Theoretical considerations. *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, 19(4), 447–453.
- Else-Quest, N.M., Higgins, A., Allison, C. & Morton, L.C. (2012). Gender differences in self-conscious emotional experience: A meta-analysis. *Psychological Bulletin*, 138(5), 947–981.
- Lewis, M., Sullivan, M., Stanger, C. & Weiss, M. (1989). Self development and self-conscious emotions. *Child Development*, 60(1), 146–156.
- Lochman, J.E., Powell, N.R., Clanton, N. & McElroy, H.K. (2006). Anger and aggression. In G.C. Bear & K.M. Minke (Eds.), *Children’s needs III: Development, prevention, and intervention* (3rd edn., pp.115–134). Bethesda, MD: NASP Publications.

- Mintz, G., Etengoff, C. & Gryzman, A. (2017). The relation between childhood parenting and emerging adults' experiences of shame and guilt. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, 1–12. Retrieved 23 August 2017 from <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007%2Fs10826-017-0778-5>.
- Muris, P. & Meesters, C. (2014). Small or big in the eyes of the other: On the developmental psychopathology of self-conscious emotions as shame, guilt, and pride. *Clinical Child and Family Psychology Review*, 17, 19–40.
- Plant, E.A., Hyde, J.S., Keltner, D. & Devine, P.G. (2000). The gender stereotyping of emotions. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 24(1), 81–92.
- Richardson, D.S. & Hammock, G.S. (2007). Social context of human aggression: Are we paying too much attention to gender? *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, 12(4), 417–426.
- Simonds, L.M., John, M., Fife-shaw, C. et al. (2016). Development and validation of the adolescent shame-proneness scale. *Psychological Assessment*, 28(5), 549–562.
- Tangney, J.P. & Dearing, R.L. (2004). *Shame and guilt*. New York: The Guilford Press.
- Tangney, J.P., Stuewig, J. & Hafez, L. (2011). Shame, guilt, and remorse: Implications for offender populations. *Journal of Forensic Psychiatry and Psychology*, 22(5), 706–723.
- Tanti, C., Stukas, A., Halloran, M.J. & Foddy, M. (2011). Social identity change: Shifts in social identity during adolescence. *Journal of Adolescence*, 34(3), 555–567.
- Thompson, R.J. & Berenbaum, H. (2006). Shame reactions to everyday dilemmas are associated with depressive disorder. *Cognitive Therapy and Research*, 30(4), 415–425.
- Tracy, J.L. & Robins, R.W. (2004). Putting the self into self-conscious emotions: A theoretical model. *Psychological Inquiry*, 15(2), 103–125.