

# Are Shame, Guilt, and Embarrassment Distinct Emotions?

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182 undergraduates described personal embarrassment, shame, and guilt experiences and rated these experiences on structural and phenomenological dimensions. Contrary to popular belief, shame was no more likely than guilt to be experienced in "public" situations; all 3 emotions typically occurred in social contexts, but a significant proportion of shame and guilt events occurred when respondents were alone. Analyses of participants' phenomenological ratings clearly demonstrated that shame, guilt, and embarrassment are not merely different terms for the same affective experience. In particular, embarrassment was a relatively distant neighbor of shame and guilt, and the differences among the 3 could not be explained simply by intensity of affect or by degree of moral transgression. Finally, participants generally were their own harshest critics in each type of event, evaluating themselves more negatively than they believed others did.

Shame, guilt, and embarrassment are common—albeit generally unwelcome—emotions that are well known to most people. Nonetheless, because our use of emotion language can be imprecise, both psychologists and laypeople may find it difficult to differentiate these three types of affective experiences. For example, just now in writing this article, the first author felt guilty for her procrastination after her coauthors diligently completed their work; she felt embarrassed by an elementary grammatical error that had slipped by in a previous draft; and she felt mild shame after barking at her 2-year-old daughter, who reset the computer in the middle of a particularly difficult paragraph. On the other hand, did she feel embarrassed by her procrastination, shame over the grammatical error, and guilt over

her impatience with her daughter? Or are these three essentially all shades of the same fundamental emotion?

Our guess is that shame, guilt, and embarrassment represent distinct affective experiences. It probably is adaptive to have access to a range of diverse self-relevant negative affect. Emotions serve a variety of functions in daily life, calling our attention to important events and motivating and directing subsequent behavior. To the extent that emotions inform and foster change, one might expect humans to develop particularly well-articulated affective responses to negative events. When bad things happen—especially those under our control—it is adaptive to notice and understand the problem. It also is adaptive to be appropriately motivated to withdraw from, defend, remedy, or ignore the event, depending on the situation.

However, if they exist, the differences among shame, guilt, and embarrassment are poorly understood. The terms *shame* and *guilt* are sometimes used interchangeably; the Subject Index of *Psychological Abstracts*, for example, refers readers interested in "Shame" to the subject heading "Guilt." Furthermore, embarrassment has long been thought to be merely a "mild form" of shame (Borg, Staufienbiel, & Scherer, 1988, p. 82; M. Lewis, 1990). Considerable imprecision exists. Thus, we undertook the present study to determine whether participants do reliably differentiate the three emotions.

## Shame and Guilt

One longstanding notion, emphasized in the early anthropological literature (e.g., Ausubel, 1955; Benedict, 1946) is that shame is a more public emotion, whereas guilt is a more private affair. From this perspective, a disapproving audience is a key component of the shame experience. Shame is an affective reaction that follows public exposure (and disapproval) of some impropriety or shortcoming. In contrast, guilt is thought to be the reaction of one's internalized conscience to a breach of one's

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personal standards and thus may be felt when one is entirely alone.

This public-private distinction, however, did not fare well in a recent investigation of children's and adults' autobiographical accounts of shame and guilt experiences (Tangney, Marschall, Rosenberg, Barlow, & Wagner, 1994). Analyses of these emotion events indicated that although both shame and guilt were most often experienced when others were present, "solitary" shame and guilt experiences did occur with some regularity—and shame was just as likely as guilt to be experienced when alone. Moreover, "audiences" were no more likely to be aware of the respondents' behavior in shame-inducing than in guilt-inducing events. In other words, public exposure and disapproval did not appear to be special prerequisites for the feeling of shame.

In fact, the specific situations that give rise to shame and guilt, respectively, are quite similar—even beyond the public-private dimension. Analyses of narrative accounts of personal shame and guilt experiences provided by both children and adults have indicated that there are very few "classic" shame-inducing or guilt-inducing situations (Tangney, 1992; Tangney et al., 1994). Most types of events (e.g., lying, cheating, stealing, failing to help another, disobeying parents, etc.) were cited by some people in connection with feelings of shame and by other people in connection with guilt. Unlike moral transgressions, which are equally likely to elicit shame or guilt, there was some evidence that nonmoral failures and shortcomings (e.g., socially inappropriate behavior or dress) may be more likely to elicit shame. Even so, failures in work, school, or sport settings and violations of social conventions were cited by a significant number of children and adults in connection with guilt.

How do shame and guilt differ, if not in terms of the types of situations that create them? In her landmark book *Shame and Guilt in Neurosis*, Helen Block Lewis (1971) presented a radically different, and now highly influential, distinction. Lewis proposed that a fundamental difference between shame and guilt centers on the role of the self in these experiences:

The experience of shame is directly about the *self*, which is the focus of evaluation. In guilt, the self is not the central object of negative evaluation, but rather the *thing* done or undone is the focus. In guilt, the self is negatively evaluated in connection with something but is not itself the focus of the experience. (p. 30)

According to Lewis (1971), both shame and guilt can arise from a specific behavior or transgression, but the processes involved in shame extend beyond those involved in guilt. In shame, an objectionable behavior is seen as reflecting, more generally, a defective, objectionable self ("I did that horrible thing, and therefore I am an unworthy, incompetent or bad person"). With this painful self-scrutiny comes a sense of shrinking or of "being small" and feelings of worthlessness and powerlessness. Shamed people also feel exposed. Here, in introducing the notion of a "split" in self-functioning, Lewis moved beyond the definition of shame as an affective reaction to public disapproval. In shame, the self is both agent and object of observation and disapproval, as shortcomings of the defective self are exposed before an internalized observing "other." Finally, shame often leads to a desire to escape or to hide—to sink into the floor and disappear.

In contrast, the guilt experience is generally less painful and devastating than shame because guilt does not directly affect one's core self-concept. Feelings of guilt can be painful, nonetheless, involving a sense of regret or remorse. People in the midst of a guilt experience often report a nagging focus or preoccupation with the specific transgression—thinking of it over and over, wishing they had behaved differently or could somehow undo the bad deed that was done. Whereas shame motivates concealment or escape, guilt typically motivates reparative action—confessions, apologies, and attempts to undo the harm done.

Lewis's (1971) phenomenological analysis has received support from several case studies (e.g., Lindsay-Hartz, 1984) and quantitative investigations (Tangney, 1993; Wicker, Payne, & Morgan, 1983). For example, Tangney (1993) asked 65 young adults to describe a personal shame experience and a personal guilt experience and found that shame experiences were rated as significantly more painful and more difficult to describe. When experiencing shame, people felt physically smaller and more inferior to others; they felt they had less control over the situation. Shame experiences were more likely to involve a sense of exposure (feeling observed by others) and a concern with others' opinions of the event, and people reported that when feeling shame they were more likely to want to hide and less likely to want to confess, compared to when they were feeling guilt.

It is notable that investigations of more general cognitive appraisal dimensions (e.g., Smith & Ellsworth, 1985, 1987) typically have established few differences between shame and guilt. The null results may be due, in part, to low power. (Smith & Ellsworth's landmark 1985 study involved ratings from only 16 participants.) More important, as discussed by Manstead and Tetlock (1989), the Smith and Ellsworth dimensions are largely individualistic, ignoring social types of content so relevant to shame and guilt experiences (e.g., the notion of harm to others, and others' evaluations of the self). Manstead and Tetlock's (1989) revised dimensions showed somewhat more differentiation between shame and guilt, but this study, too, was conducted with a small sample ( $N = 20$ ).

### Shame and Embarrassment

Fewer studies have compared shame and embarrassment (and none, to our knowledge, have systematically compared embarrassment and guilt). In part, this may be because shame and embarrassment have often been considered to be even more closely related than shame and guilt. Izard (1977), for example, conceptualized embarrassment as an element of shame. Kaufman (1989) asserted that "however mild or intense, embarrassment is not a different affect" (p. 24) from shame, and Lewis (1971), in her extensive treatment of shame and guilt, only briefly mentioned embarrassment as a "shame variant."

Nonetheless, there have been recent suggestions that shame and embarrassment may be distinguishable along several dimensions. Shame is generally assumed to be a more intense emotion than embarrassment. Some observers (e.g., Borg et al., 1988) have asserted that intensity is the *only* difference between the two emotions, but others have surmised that this difference in intensity derives from reliable differences in the events that

elicit each emotion. For instance, Buss (1980) and others (M. Lewis, 1992; Ortony, Clore, & Collins, 1988) suggested that shame results from more serious failures and moral transgressions, whereas embarrassment follows relatively trivial social transgressions or untoward interactions. In fact, although Buss (1980) cited a variety of differences between the two emotions (e.g., with embarrassment being less intense; more likely to be accompanied by blushing, smiling, or feelings of foolishness; and less likely to involve feelings of regret and depression), he strongly implied that the root of these differences lies in the nature of the shame versus embarrassment-eliciting event: "Shame has moral implications, but embarrassment does not" (p. 161).

Other theorists have identified different patterns of attributions for negative events associated with shame and embarrassment. Modigliani (1968), Shott (1979), and Klass (1990) all proposed that shame is tied to perceived deficiencies of one's *core* self, whereas embarrassment results from deficiencies in one's *presented* self. As a result, shame is associated with more global and enduring negative attributions about oneself, whereas embarrassment is tied to more transient, situation-specific failures and pratfalls. Buss (1980) similarly contrasted the enduring loss of self-esteem of shame with the temporary loss of self-esteem of embarrassment.

Shame has thus been considered a grimmer, weightier emotion; whereas feelings of foolishness or awkwardness are likely to accompany embarrassment, feelings of regret and depression are likely to accompany shame (Buss, 1980; Plutchik, 1980). There may also be a public-private distinction like that used in early comparisons of shame and guilt. Edelman (1981) hypothesized that shame and embarrassment differ in the degree of public exposure that underlies each state; shame, but not embarrassment, can be felt when one is alone: "it is possible to be embarrassed only in the presence of real or imagined others, while shame can occur for a private act" (Edelman, 1981, p. 126). (Of course, this is just the reverse of the early assumption that guilt could be private whereas shame was a principally public emotion.)

A number of potential differences between shame and embarrassment have thus been postulated, but only a handful of studies have compared the two emotions (Babcock & Sabini, 1990; Manstead & Tetlock, 1989; Mosher & White, 1981), and only one investigation has considered a comprehensive set of dimensions specifically selected to assess theorists' assumptions about the two states. Miller and Tangney (1994) asked 104 undergraduates to sort 56 theoretically derived descriptive statements into "shame" or "embarrassment" categories on the basis of their own past experiences and found that shame and embarrassment appeared to be quite distinct affective experiences. Of the 56 statements, 39 described one emotion significantly better than the other. Participants did indicate that shame is a more intense, enduring emotion that follows more serious transgressions. Whereas embarrassment resulted from surprising, relatively trivial accidents, shame occurred when foreseeable events revealed one's deep-seated flaws both to oneself and to others. When embarrassed, people felt awkward, but when shamed they felt immoral. Embarrassment was associated with humor, smiles, and jokes, but shame was associated with disgust, self-directed anger, and apologies.

Miller and Tangney's (1994) sorting task thus revealed several theoretically relevant differences between shame and embarrassment. However, the sorting method did not allow examination of the magnitude of the differences between the emotions, and it did not permit us to determine whether the observed differences generally resulted simply from shame's greater intensity. Ambiguities still remain.

### Overview of the Current Study

In the present study we sought to clarify the similarities and differences among shame, guilt, and embarrassment. Guided by existing conjectures and remaining uncertainties, we tried to address four central themes bearing on the situations, feelings, cognitions, and actions that characterize and distinguish discrete emotions (Lazarus, 1991). First, we examined the structural and interpersonal aspects of the situations that elicit each emotion. In particular, we examined the characteristics of any audiences present during these events and inquired whether the emotions were exclusively public phenomena that required the presence of an evaluative audience or whether they could be experienced alone. We assumed that shame and guilt could be experienced privately but that embarrassment could not. Second, we examined the degree to which shame, guilt, and embarrassment differ along a comprehensive set of theoretically derived phenomenological dimensions. We assumed that meaningful differences that could not be explained simply by the relative intensities of the various affects did exist. Our selection of dimensions of interest was in part informed by prior studies (e.g., Miller & Tangney, 1994; Tangney et al., 1994) of the three emotions. In addition, because feelings, thoughts, and behavior are known to differentiate negative emotions (Roseman, Wiest, & Swartz, 1994), we selected dimensions to assess each of these three components. Third, we examined discrepancies between participants' own perceptions and their beliefs about others' perceptions in these situations. Babcock and Sabini (1990) suggested that embarrassment arises from violations of one's "persona," or situated identity, whereas shame arises from violations of one's "ideal" self. In a similar vein, Buss (1980) and Miller (1992) theorized that embarrassment is more closely linked to a perceived loss of approval from others than from changes in self-regard. From this perspective, embarrassment depends on social disapproval (vs. self-disapproval) to a greater extent than do shame and guilt; one would thus expect greater discrepancies between self- and other-perceptions in embarrassment than in the other emotions. Finally, guided by Plutchik's (1980) notion that discrete emotions can be differentiated by the unique mixture of primary affects that constitute them, we examined the "feeling profiles" associated with shame, guilt, and embarrassment using an adapted version of Izard's (1977) Differential Emotions Scale (DES). We expected the three emotions to comprise recognizably distinct emotion components.

### Method

#### *Participants*

One hundred eighty-two undergraduates attending a large state university on the east coast of the United States received credit toward a course requirement by participating. They ranged in age from 18 to 78

years, with a median age of 21. Three-fourths (76%) were female. Most (79%) were White, 6% were Black, 5% Asian, 5% Hispanic, and 4% other. One hundred sixty-six (91%) students provided ratings for all three emotions. (Seven participants did not provide data for shame, 3 omitted guilt, and 7 omitted embarrassment.)

### Measures and Procedure

The data reported here were collected as part of a larger investigation of the personality correlates of proneness to shame and guilt. Altogether, students participated in four 1-hr sessions conducted on separate days. Informed consent forms emphasized the voluntary, confidential, and anonymous nature of the study and reminded participants not to write their names on any of the questionnaires. The questionnaire booklets were indexed by unique ID numbers, but participants identified their own copies from session to session with pseudonyms affixed to the questionnaires with Post-It notes. These labels were removed at the completion of the study, preserving respondents' anonymity.

Participants were first asked to provide a detailed written account of a personal shame, guilt, or embarrassment experience. The narrative portion of the written questionnaire opened with the prompt "Think of a time when you felt guilt (shame, embarrassment). Try to recall as many details of the incident as you can." No definitions of these emotions were provided. Our intent was to learn more about shame, guilt, and embarrassment as the respondents experience them, without imposing any of our own a priori notions about the definition of these emotion terms. To help respondents recapture vivid memories of the experience, additional prompts were provided, with space for written responses, adapted from protocols used by Shaver, Schwartz, Kirson, & O'Connor (1987) (e.g., "Tell in detail what happened to cause you to feel guilt [shame, embarrassment]." "Why did it happen?" "Tell in as much detail as you can what you were feeling and thinking; what you said, if anything, and how you said it; what physical signs of [emotion] you showed, if any" etc.). Our purpose here was to encourage respondents to become immersed in their recollection of the specific events and their phenomenological experiences—to recapture the richness of real, naturally occurring shame, guilt, and embarrassment reactions rather than merely "cold" knowledge or preconceptions of emotion scripts (as might be more likely if participants were asked to describe a "typical" emotion experience or if they were asked to identify appraisal dimensions or features associated with emotion words in the abstract, without reference to specific personal experiences as a context).

After the written narrative, respondents completed a structured questionnaire that addressed our hypotheses. They first completed a series of phenomenological ratings of the emotion experience. The 31 items were drawn from existing conceptual and empirical analyses of the three emotions (e.g., Miller, 1992; Miller & Tangney, 1994; Tangney, 1989, 1993; Tangney et al., 1994)<sup>1</sup> and were modeled after phenomenological dimensions used by Tangney (1989, 1993) and Wicker et al. (1983). Respondents were directed to "once again remember as vividly as you can what happened and how you felt. Recalling how you felt during the situation you just described, please rate the following." Each of the 31 items was presented as a 5-point rating scale, anchored at both ends (e.g., 1 = *The feeling was mild* versus 5 = *The feeling was extremely intense* and 1 = *Wanted to hide what I had done* versus 5 = *Wanted to admit what I had done*).

Participants then reported the various feelings associated with the event by rating the experience on the DES as modified by Mosher and White (1981) to include embarrassment and shy clusters. They were instructed: "People often have a number of different emotions in a given situation. Thinking back to the situation in which you felt guilt (shame, embarrassment), please indicate how much you experienced each of the following feelings." Respondents then rated 12 clusters of three emotion words (e.g., *scared, fearful, afraid; angry, irritated, annoyed*) on a

5-point scale that ranged from 1 (*Not at all*) to 5 (*Extremely*). This scale allowed us to determine whether the broad affective profiles of the three emotions were similar or dissimilar.

Next, the questionnaire assessed potential differences between self-appraisals and the assumed appraisals of others. Twenty questions concerned the participants' own perceptions of themselves and the situation (e.g., "I thought I looked ridiculous," "I thought I was morally wrong," "I thought I was clumsy," "I thought 'This could have happened to anyone,'" "I thought I really let everyone down"), and a parallel set of questions concerned how participants believed other people present during the event viewed them and the situation (e.g., "They thought I looked ridiculous," "They thought 'This could have happened to anyone,'" "They thought I really let everyone down"). These items were rated on a 5-point scale that ranged from 1 (*Not at all*) to 5 (*Extremely*).

Finally, to assess the social context in which the emotion occurred, we asked participants to indicate who else (if anyone) was present during the situations they described. Participants reported (a) whether any bystanders were well-known, acquaintances, or strangers, and whether they were loved, liked, or disliked; (b) whether they were older or younger than the respondents themselves; (c) whether a bystander had authority over the participant (e.g., employer, parent, teacher, policeman), was a subordinate (e.g., employee, child, student), or was an equal or peer; and (d) whether bystanders were male or female. Participants checked all that applied, considering the entire set of others present during the event.

When this work was complete, participants wrote an account of another emotion and completed the questionnaire for that experience, continuing until they had described one shame, one guilt, and one embarrassment experience. The order in which they reported the three emotions was randomized across participants, as was the order of the questions concerning one's own versus others' perceptions.

## Results

### Nature of the Social Settings

We first coded the number of other people present during each event.<sup>2</sup> A repeated measures analysis of variance (ANOVA) revealed that the emotions clearly differed in this regard,  $F(2, 192) = 35.65, p < .001$ , and post hoc (Tukey) comparisons revealed that embarrassment typically involved larger audiences ( $M = 6.8$  other people) than did shame ( $M = 3.1$  people) or guilt ( $M = 2.5$  people). The difference in audience size between shame and guilt was not significant.

This result was suggestive but did not directly address the question of whether the emotions can be experienced when no others are present. (It may be that all three emotions are always experienced in social settings, even though embarrassment tends to occur before larger crowds.) However, the distribution of audience sizes for each emotion showed that "solitary" shame and guilt experiences were not uncommon. All three emotions were predominantly experienced in social contexts, but 10.4% of the guilt events were experienced by participants who were alone, and a surprising 18.2% of shame experiences

<sup>1</sup> We are grateful to the participants of the 1990 Nags Head Conference on "The Self" for their assistance in constructing this set of dimensions.

<sup>2</sup> Codes ranged from 0 to 11, with 11 used for crowds clearly greater than 10. It was not possible to determine the number of people present in about 16% of the narratives on the basis of the descriptions provided.

were private events. This obviously contradicts the anthropological notion that shame is the more public emotion. In contrast, embarrassment was almost universally a public phenomenon. Only 2.2% of the embarrassment events occurred when participants were alone. Cochran's  $q$  test showed this difference among the emotions to be significant,  $q = 11.55$ ,  $p < .01$ , with embarrassment appearing to be more public than the other two emotions.

Shame and guilt are thus sometimes reported to be private experiences, but all three emotions are usually public experiences. Who is likely to be present when such negative, self-conscious emotions arise? Table 1 shows the proportion of each set of emotion events that included a particular type of audience member. Generally speaking, shame, guilt, and embarrassment all tended to occur in the presence of people whom the participants liked and with whom they were well acquainted. These observers were often older than the participants but were usually peers; only rarely did the emotions occur around subordinates (a finding that may be due to the sample used—college students may rarely have interactions with subordinates). Audiences were equally likely to include men or women, same-sex or opposite-sex individuals.

However, typical audiences varied significantly across emotions. Most notably, embarrassment was more likely to occur in the presence of acquaintances and strangers and less likely to occur among loved ones than were shame and guilt. Embarrassment was also more likely to occur in the presence of peers or equals, who were both younger and older than the respondent. Thus, it is especially notable that shame and guilt tended to occur before observers of greater familiarity and affective connection than did embarrassment.

There were relatively few differences in the composition of audiences to shame versus guilt events. Shame was somewhat more likely to occur in the presence of acquaintances and somewhat less likely to occur in the presence of subordinates.

### Phenomenological Ratings

Table 2 presents the data associated with repeated measures ANOVAs of the participants' ratings of the emotions on the phenomenological dimensions derived from prior studies. Of the 31 items considered, 27 differentiated at least two of the emotions. We focus first on the observed differences between shame and guilt.

*Shame and guilt.* In general, shame and guilt were both considered to be fairly intense, dysphoric emotions that involved serious situations and that lasted a long time. Both were characterized by substantial feelings of responsibility, regret, and desires to make amends. When feeling shame or guilt, respondents generally felt angry and disgusted with themselves.

However, there were important differences between the two experiences. Post hoc (Tukey) tests indicated that shame and guilt differed significantly on 11 (35%) of the 31 items. Shame was regarded as a more intense and more dysphoric feeling that occurred more suddenly and was accompanied by greater physiological change (e.g., blushing, increased heart rate). When feeling shame, participants felt physically smaller and more inferior to others. They felt a greater sense of isolation and believed others to be angrier at them. Perhaps as a result, they felt a greater press to hide and were less inclined to admit what they had done when they were shamed than when they were guilty. They also wished that they had acted differently.

Table 1  
*Audience Characteristics in Shame, Guilt, and Embarrassment Experiences*

Characteristic	Shame	Guilt	Embarrassment	Cochran's $q$
<b>Intimacy</b>				
Loved one	47 (69) <sub>a</sub>	55 (81) <sub>a</sub>	34 (49) <sub>b</sub>	16.00***
Someone liked	51 (75)	55 (80)	63 (92)	4.72
Someone disliked	14 (21)	8 (12)	16 (24)	4.88
Acquaintance	31 (45) <sub>a</sub>	20 (29) <sub>b</sub>	49 (71) <sub>c</sub>	29.00***
Stranger	17 (25) <sub>a</sub>	12 (17) <sub>a</sub>	46 (67) <sub>b</sub>	54.10***
<b>Relative age</b>				
Someone older	78 (116) <sub>a</sub>	70 (104) <sub>a</sub>	88 (130) <sub>b</sub>	14.72***
Someone younger	45 (66) <sub>a</sub>	44 (65) <sub>a</sub>	62 (92) <sub>b</sub>	14.20***
<b>Relative power</b>				
Someone in authority	45 (66)	40 (59)	44 (64)	0.75
Subordinate	7 (10) <sub>a</sub>	15 (22) <sub>b</sub>	9 (13) <sub>a,b</sub>	6.69*
Equal or peer	68 (100) <sub>a</sub>	66 (97) <sub>a</sub>	89 (131) <sub>b</sub>	25.01***
<b>Gender</b>				
<b>Male respondent</b>				
Male	71 (20)	68 (19)	79 (22)	0.82
Female	57 (16)	75 (21)	82 (23)	4.33
<b>Female respondent</b>				
Male	68 (82) <sub>a</sub>	65 (78) <sub>a</sub>	83 (100) <sub>b</sub>	13.51**
Female	72 (86) <sub>a</sub>	73 (87) <sub>a</sub>	84 (100) <sub>b</sub>	6.42*

*Note.* Numbers of respondents appear in parentheses. Categories are not mutually exclusive; respondents checked all that applied. Numbers (except Cochran's  $q$ s) indicate the percentage of respondents who indicated that a given type of person was present during a particular type of emotional experience. Row frequencies with different subscripts differ significantly at  $p < .05$ .

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

Table 2  
*Participants' Ratings of Embarrassment, Shame, and Guilt Experiences on Phenomenological Items*

Phenomenological item	Embarrassment		Shame		Guilt		<i>F</i> <sup>a</sup>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	
<b>Intensity, duration, and onset</b>							
Feeling was intense	3.8	1.2 <sub>a</sub>	4.1	0.9 <sub>b</sub>	3.8	1.0 <sub>a</sub>	7.08**
Emotion lasted a long time	2.7	1.6 <sub>a</sub>	4.2	1.1 <sub>b</sub>	4.0	1.3 <sub>b</sub>	61.83***
Sudden onset of feeling	4.2	1.0 <sub>a</sub>	3.8	1.3 <sub>b</sub>	3.4	1.4 <sub>c</sub>	24.26***
Anticipated these events	2.0	1.1 <sub>a</sub>	2.6	1.3 <sub>b</sub>	2.7	1.2 <sub>b</sub>	18.57***
<b>Feelings</b>							
Felt bad during experience	3.4	1.4 <sub>a</sub>	4.3	1.0 <sub>b</sub>	4.1	1.2 <sub>c</sub>	29.36***
Pleased/disgusted with self	2.6	0.9 <sub>a</sub>	1.8	0.9 <sub>b</sub>	2.0	0.9 <sub>b</sub>	42.56***
Anger at self	2.9	1.5 <sub>a</sub>	4.3	1.0 <sub>b</sub>	4.1	1.1 <sub>b</sub>	67.89***
Angry at others	2.5	1.5	2.8	1.5	2.4	1.4	2.34
Overcome in outward expression of feeling	3.3	1.2 <sub>a</sub>	3.0	1.4 <sub>a,b</sub>	2.7	1.4 <sub>b</sub>	8.25***
Overcome in inward experience of feeling	3.6	1.2	3.8	1.1	3.7	1.2	1.34
<b>Sensations</b>							
Felt physically smaller	3.6	1.1 <sub>a,b</sub>	3.8	1.1 <sub>b</sub>	3.5	0.9 <sub>a</sub>	3.36*
Felt isolated from others	3.2	1.4 <sub>a</sub>	3.7	1.2 <sub>b</sub>	3.1	1.3 <sub>a</sub>	11.87***
Felt superior/inferior to others	2.2	0.9 <sub>a</sub>	2.1	0.9 <sub>a</sub>	2.5	0.8 <sub>b</sub>	11.30***
Underwent physical changes (e.g., blushed, heart rate up)	4.3	1.1 <sub>a</sub>	3.9	1.2 <sub>b</sub>	3.3	1.4 <sub>c</sub>	32.93***
Time moved quickly	2.4	1.2	2.2	1.2	2.5	1.2	2.21
<b>Attributions</b>							
Felt violation of moral standard	1.8	1.2 <sub>a</sub>	3.8	1.3 <sub>b</sub>	3.8	1.4 <sub>b</sub>	138.00***
Situation serious/funny	2.4	1.4 <sub>a</sub>	4.4	1.0 <sub>b</sub>	4.2	1.0 <sub>b</sub>	167.00***
Felt responsible	3.6	1.5 <sub>a</sub>	4.5	0.9 <sub>b</sub>	4.4	1.1 <sub>b</sub>	33.12***
In control of situation	2.1	1.2 <sub>a</sub>	2.2	1.2 <sub>a,b</sub>	2.5	1.3 <sub>b</sub>	5.44**
Blamed own self/own actions	2.4	1.2	2.5	1.5	2.5	1.5	0.23
<b>Focus of attention</b>							
Focused on own thoughts/others' thoughts about self	2.1	1.3 <sub>a</sub>	2.9	1.5 <sub>b</sub>	3.2	1.4 <sub>b</sub>	32.43***
Felt others were looking	4.4	1.1 <sub>a</sub>	3.1	1.6 <sub>b</sub>	2.7	1.4 <sub>b</sub>	70.13***
<b>Responses</b>							
Wanted to be with others/hide	1.8	1.0 <sub>a</sub>	2.1	1.2 <sub>b</sub>	2.7	1.3 <sub>c</sub>	29.59***
Wanted to admit/hide what was done	2.3	1.2 <sub>a</sub>	2.3	1.3 <sub>a</sub>	2.7	1.4 <sub>b</sub>	6.71**
Wanted to make amends	3.2	1.2 <sub>a</sub>	3.9	1.3 <sub>b</sub>	4.1	1.2 <sub>b</sub>	22.92***
Wished had acted differently	3.4	1.4 <sub>a</sub>	4.3	1.0 <sub>b</sub>	4.0	1.2 <sub>c</sub>	24.65***
<b>Social context</b>							
Others amused/indifferent	3.9	1.2 <sub>a</sub>	2.8	0.9 <sub>b</sub>	2.7	0.9 <sub>b</sub>	75.83***
Others angry/indifferent	2.1	1.1 <sub>a</sub>	3.4	1.2 <sub>b</sub>	3.1	1.2 <sub>c</sub>	56.77***
<b>Present effect</b>							
Okay to talk about now	4.4	1.1 <sub>a</sub>	3.5	1.5 <sub>b</sub>	3.6	1.4 <sub>b</sub>	25.46***
Hurts now/can laugh about it now	1.6	1.1 <sub>a</sub>	3.2	1.3 <sub>b</sub>	3.3	1.3 <sub>b</sub>	100.57***
Difficult to write scenario	1.7	1.2 <sub>a</sub>	2.8	1.4 <sub>b</sub>	2.5	1.3 <sub>b</sub>	45.08***

Note. Items were rated on 5-point scales. Higher scores indicate greater agreement with item. In some cases, anchors for the low end follow anchors for the high end, to clarify the nature of the dimension rated. Row means with different subscripts differ significantly at  $p < .05$  (Tukey test).

<sup>a</sup> Degrees of freedom ranged from (2, 316) to (2, 330).

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

Two additional items bearing on the nature of respondents' interpersonal concerns narrowly missed statistical significance when the conservative Tukey test was used.<sup>3</sup> When feeling shame, people felt more intensely scrutinized by others, and they focused more on others' thoughts (as opposed to their own thoughts) about themselves than they did when they were feeling guilt. These trends suggest that although shame is no more "public" than guilt in terms of the actual structure of the eliciting situation, when feeling shame, people's awareness of others' reactions may be somewhat heightened.

Shame and guilt experiences were rated similarly on other items. Most notably, there were no differences in (a) the degree to which participants felt that they had violated a moral standard, (b) their sense of responsibility for what had happened, or (c) their reported motivation to make amends. In addition,

there were no differences in the degree to which participants "blamed [their] actions and behavior" versus "blamed [their] personality and self." Overall, however, the phenomenological ratings showed that these young adults did make reliable distinctions between shame and guilt.

*Shame and embarrassment.* Ironically, despite common claims that shame and embarrassment are almost synonymous (e.g., Borg et al., 1988; Kaufman, 1989), they appeared to have even less in common than shame and guilt. Embarrassment differed from shame on fully 22 (71%) of the 31 items (and

<sup>3</sup> Two-tailed *t* tests revealed significant differences between shame and guilt on these items but, because of the large number of comparisons, we elected to use the more conservative Tukey post hoc procedures despite our a priori expectations for them.

from guilt on 24 [77%] of the items). In fact, embarrassment was clearly the most distant relative among the three emotions; it could be reliably distinguished from both shame and guilt on 14 items that did not differentiate the other two emotions.

Whereas shame was the most intense, bad feeling of the three, embarrassment was the least negative and most fleeting, although it was most likely to be accompanied by physiological changes (e.g., blushing, increased heart rate). There were fewer moral implications in embarrassment than in either guilt or shame, and embarrassed people were less angry at themselves; they also expressed less interest in making amends. In fact, compared to shame and guilt, embarrassment seemed lighthearted; it emerged from less serious situations that participants could more easily tolerate talking about—or laughing at—now. Indeed, it was easier for the participants to describe past embarrassments than it was for them to recall past guilt or shame.

Two other themes distinguished embarrassment from the other emotions. First, episodes of embarrassment were typically more surprising and accidental than experiences of shame or guilt. Embarrassment followed events for which people felt less responsible and that were more unexpected, and the emotion occurred more suddenly. Second, embarrassment involved a greater sense of exposure. When they were shamed or guilty, people were less likely to feel that others were looking, and they were less focused on others' judgments. Nonetheless, participants perceived others' evaluations to be more benign in embarrassing situations. In particular, participants believed that others were likely to be amused by the embarrassing events, whereas shame- or guilt-inducing events were amusing to no one. Participants were also less motivated to hide from others in embarrassing situations.

#### *Do These Differences Depend on Intensity and Morality?*

Shame, guilt, and embarrassment appear to differ from one another along a range of phenomenological dimensions. Arguably, however, these differences may largely depend on differences in the intensity of the various affects. Consider shame and embarrassment, for example. Are shamed individuals more inclined to hide, feel isolated from others, and feel disgusted with themselves, simply because shame is a stronger feeling than embarrassment? Similarly, are shamed individuals more likely to feel small and inferior to others, compared to individuals experiencing guilt, simply because shame is a more intense emotion than guilt?

To examine this issue, we conducted a series of repeated measures analyses of covariance (ANCOVAs) on the phenomenological items, covarying the rated intensities of the emotions. The results did not change substantially. The overall  $F$  value associated with 1 item (felt physically smaller) became nonsignificant, but all of the other 26 effects remained significant. Moreover, most of the significant post hoc comparisons held when intensity was accounted for.<sup>4</sup> All 21 of the shame-embarrassment comparisons remained statistically significant, and 2 previously nonsignificant comparisons (feeling overcome in one's outward expression of emotion, and feeling in control of the situation) reached statistical significance once the covariate was introduced.<sup>5</sup>

The intensity covariate had a greater effect on the shame-

guilt comparisons. With intensity accounted for, four comparisons (suddenness of onset, feeling bad during the experience, wishing one had acted differently, and perceiving that others were angry) dropped below statistical significance. However, differences along other theoretically important dimensions held (e.g., degree of physiological change, feelings of isolation and inferiority, desire to hide, desire to admit what one had done). Moreover, one previously nonsignificant comparison (focus on others' thoughts vs. one's own thoughts about the self) became significant once the covariate was introduced, demonstrating that shame involved closer consideration of others' judgments than guilt did.<sup>6</sup> Altogether, the majority of the phenomenological differences were independent of the relative strengths of the three emotions.

A similar question arose concerning the degree to which shame-, embarrassment-, and guilt-eliciting events involve moral transgressions (vs., say, violations of social norms). The results indicated little difference between shame and guilt in the degree to which participants felt they had violated a moral standard. However, consistent with theory, shame and guilt were more likely to involve a sense of moral transgression than was embarrassment. To what extent do the pervasive differences between embarrassment and the other two emotions simply reflect the moral versus nonmoral nature of these emotion-eliciting events? As noted previously, Buss (1980) argued that a key difference in the experiences of shame versus embarrassment lies precisely in this distinction.

To evaluate this hypothesis, we conducted another series of repeated measures ANCOVAs, covarying the degree to which participants felt they had violated a moral standard. Here, too, the results remained largely unchanged. In no case did a previously significant overall  $F$  value drop below statistical significance when the covariate was introduced. Four of the 22 previously significant specific shame-embarrassment comparisons did drop below statistical significance (intensity of affect, feelings of isolation, focus on others' vs. one's own thoughts, and desire to make amends).<sup>7</sup> However, if anything, the shame-guilt comparisons were enhanced by the covariate. All previously significant post hoc comparisons between shame and guilt held at (at least)  $p < .05$ . In addition, with morality accounted for, 5 new items emerged as significant at least at  $p < .05$  (viewing the situation as serious, feeling scrutinized by others, focusing on others' thoughts vs. one's own, feeling less control over the situation, and having difficulty writing about the event, each greater in the case of shame).

In sum, mere intensity does not adequately capture or explain the range of observed phenomenological differences among shame, guilt, and embarrassment. Neither does a sense

<sup>4</sup> The Tukey test used previously is not appropriate for repeated measures ANCOVAs with varying covariates (i.e., the intensity ratings for shame, guilt, and embarrassment events, respectively). Here, we conducted pairwise ANCOVAs and considered both a .05 critical level and the more conservative Bonferroni-corrected critical level of .0167.

<sup>5</sup> On the item that assessed sense of isolation, shame and embarrassment differed at  $p < .05$ , but not at  $p < .0167$ .

<sup>6</sup> This comparison was significant at  $p < .05$  but not at  $p < .0167$ .

<sup>7</sup> Of the remaining 17 items, 15 remained significant at both  $p < .05$  and  $p < .0167$  with "morality" accounted for.

of having morally transgressed explain the pattern of results. The three emotions appear to represent qualitatively distinct experiences along a variety of affective, cognitive, motivational, and situational dimensions.

### *Self-Perceptions Versus Others' Perceptions*

Shame, guilt, and embarrassment are "self-conscious" emotions (M. Lewis, 1990; see also Fischer & Tangney, 1995) in that they each involve a heightened sense of awareness and evaluation of the self. Still, theory suggests, and the phenomenological ratings confirmed, that these are also "other-conscious" emotions. Embarrassment, in particular, involves a sense of exposure and a heightened concern for others' judgments of the self.

Forty additional questionnaire items allowed an explicit comparison of the participants' self-perceptions and their judgments of others' perceptions of them. Twenty questions concerned the participants' *own* perceptions of themselves and the situation (e.g., "I thought I looked ridiculous," and "I thought I really let everyone down"), and a parallel set of questions concerned how participants believed *other people* present during the event viewed them and the situation (e.g., "They thought I looked ridiculous," and "They thought I really let everyone down").

The profiles of means for participants' own perceptions mirrored their phenomenological ratings. For example, participants felt more "morally wrong" in shame and guilt events than in embarrassing events. In contrast, they felt they'd be more able to look back and laugh about the situation when considering embarrassment events than when remembering shame or guilt.

Of primary interest here, however, were (a) any differences between participants' own perceptions and their beliefs about others' perceptions and (b) the degree to which such differences varied across the three emotions. We expected that embarrassment would involve the greatest discrepancies between self- and other-perceptions as people feared they looked foolish to others without really taking their relatively trivial transgressions to heart; because shame and guilt presumably result from violations of more central moral criteria, we expected that they would cause greater corresponding changes in self-evaluation as well.

Results of the 3 (type of emotion)  $\times$  2 (own vs. others' perspective) repeated measures ANOVAs did not reveal such a pattern of interactions. For 19 of the 20 ratings, there were clear main effects for type of emotion, paralleling our earlier findings. Compared to shame and guilt, embarrassed people felt that they were less "morally wrong" and that their behavior was more forgivable and less deserving of punishment. Embarrassed people also felt that they had been "victims of circumstance" and "simple mistakes" that "could have happened to anyone" to a greater extent than did those who were shamed or guilty. People felt more "clumsy," "ridiculous," and laughable when they were embarrassed but also felt that they would "get over it" sooner.

For 15 of the 20 ratings, there were main effects for perspective. Participants generally evaluated themselves more harshly than they believed others did across all three emotion types. For example, participants felt that they had "let everyone

down," "should have known better," and that there was no way to "make up for it" to a greater extent than they believed others did.

Significant interactions were observed for only 7 (35%) of the 20 ratings, and these patterns did not provide much support for the hypotheses. In two cases greater discrepancies between self versus others' evaluations occurred for embarrassment than for shame or guilt. Contrary to expectations, however, embarrassed participants judged themselves more harshly; they considered themselves more ridiculous (see Figure 1) and more a "laughingstock" than they thought others did.<sup>8</sup>

The other interactions emerged from weightier evaluations of the event, and on those items the discrepancies between self- and other-perceptions were greater for shame and guilt events. When feeling shame or guilt, participants felt more morally wrong, were more likely to wonder how they could live with themselves, felt their behavior was more unforgivable, and felt more disappointed in themselves than they thought others did; these differences did not exist when they were feeling embarrassment (see Figure 2).

In sum, there was little evidence that embarrassment involves greater discrepancies between self-appraisals and the assumed appraisals of others than guilt and shame do. Instead, participants were their own harshest critics, even in embarrassing situations, and this tendency seemed to depend only marginally on the type of evaluation and emotion involved.

### *Emotion "Profiles" of Shame, Guilt, and Embarrassment*

People rarely experience "pure" emotions. That is, beyond infancy, we typically experience a mixture of emotions in response to daily events, even though a particular emotion may be dominant. To assess the other affective experiences that typically accompany shame, guilt, and embarrassment, participants also completed a modified version of the DES. Table 3 shows that shame, guilt, and embarrassment differed significantly on 11 of the 12 DES dimensions. Post hoc Tukey comparisons indicated that many of these differences were again due to embarrassment's differences from shame and guilt. Positive feelings (i.e., happiness and joy) and startled astonishment and shyness were more characteristic of embarrassment than of shame or guilt. In contrast, all of the other negatively toned emotions, such as disgust, contempt, sadness, fear, and anger, were more characteristic of shame and guilt.

Fewer differences were observed between shame and guilt. Shame was more likely to be accompanied by additional feelings of shyness and embarrassment, but otherwise the two emotions were distinguished only by the "guilt" or "shame" items that were synonymous with each of them.

### Discussion

Are shame, guilt, and embarrassment distinct emotions? Our results clearly demonstrate that these are not merely different

<sup>8</sup> To conserve space, only a few illustrative results are presented in detail. Complete particulars on the results in this section can be obtained from June Price Tangney.



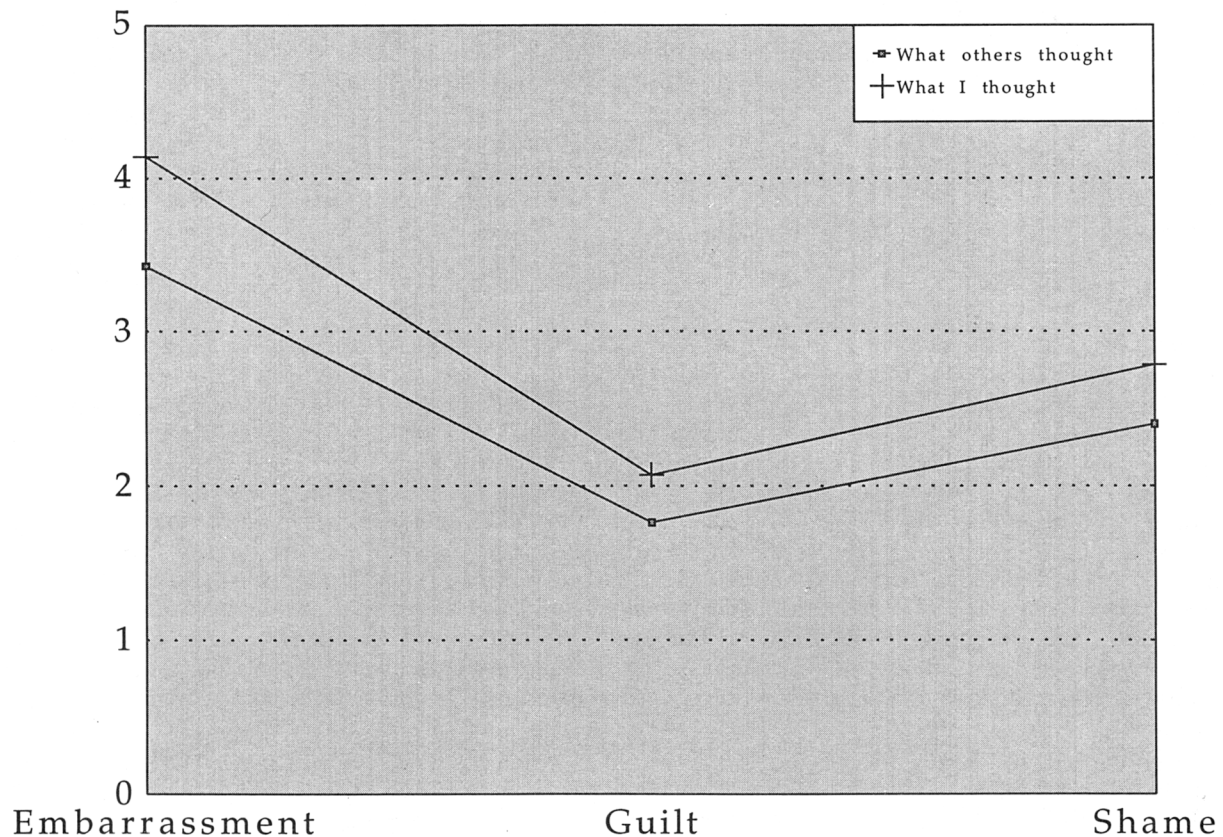


Figure 1. Participants' own perceptions and their beliefs about others' perceptions of how ridiculous they looked in shame, guilt, and embarrassment events.

terms for the same affective experience, and they do not differ solely in terms of affective intensity. Participant ratings of personal shame, guilt, and embarrassment experiences strongly suggest that these are distinct emotions with different phenomenological features, different ways of experiencing interpersonal contexts, different ways of construing the emotion-eliciting behavior or situation, and different motivations for subsequent action.

This is not to suggest that shame, guilt, and embarrassment do not share substantial features in common. One might construe them as members of a common emotion "family"—the family of negative "self-conscious" emotions (Barrett & Campos, 1987; Fischer & Tangney, 1995). Our results confirm that these emotions bear a familial resemblance in the sense that they are each negatively valenced emotions of considerable intensity that arise from personally relevant failures or transgressions of one sort or another and that involve a substantial degree of self-evaluation or self-reflection. At the same time, participant ratings underscore important differences along the majority of dimensions viewed as relevant to the identification of distinct categories of emotion—for example, situational antecedents, patterns of appraisal, subjective experiences, physiological changes, action tendencies, and self-control or coping processes (Frijda, 1986; Lazarus, 1991; Scherer, 1984; Shaver et al., 1987).

### Shame and Guilt

Consistent with recent conceptualizations (e.g., H. B. Lewis, 1971; Lindsay-Hartz, 1984), the key differences between shame and guilt appear to lay less in the situations that cause them and more in their respective phenomenologies and motivations for subsequent action. In previous content analyses of shame- and guilt-inducing situations reported by both children and adults, we found a surprisingly high degree of overlap in the specific types of events that give rise to these emotions (Tangney, 1992; Tangney et al., 1994). In the current study, too, respondents rated shame- and guilt-eliciting events similarly in terms of severity, degree to which a moral transgression was involved, their level of responsibility for the event, and the degree to which they had anticipated the event.

Regarding the interpersonal structure of shame- and guilt-eliciting events, there were relatively few differences in the composition of "audiences" to shame and guilt events. Most important, there was no support for the classic anthropological view (e.g., Benedict, 1946) that shame results from a public exposure of some impropriety or shortcoming, whereas guilt results from more private events. In line with other investigations (e.g., Tangney et al., 1994), we found that shame and guilt occurred most often in social contexts, but "solitary" shame and guilt experiences were not uncommon. In fact, if anything,

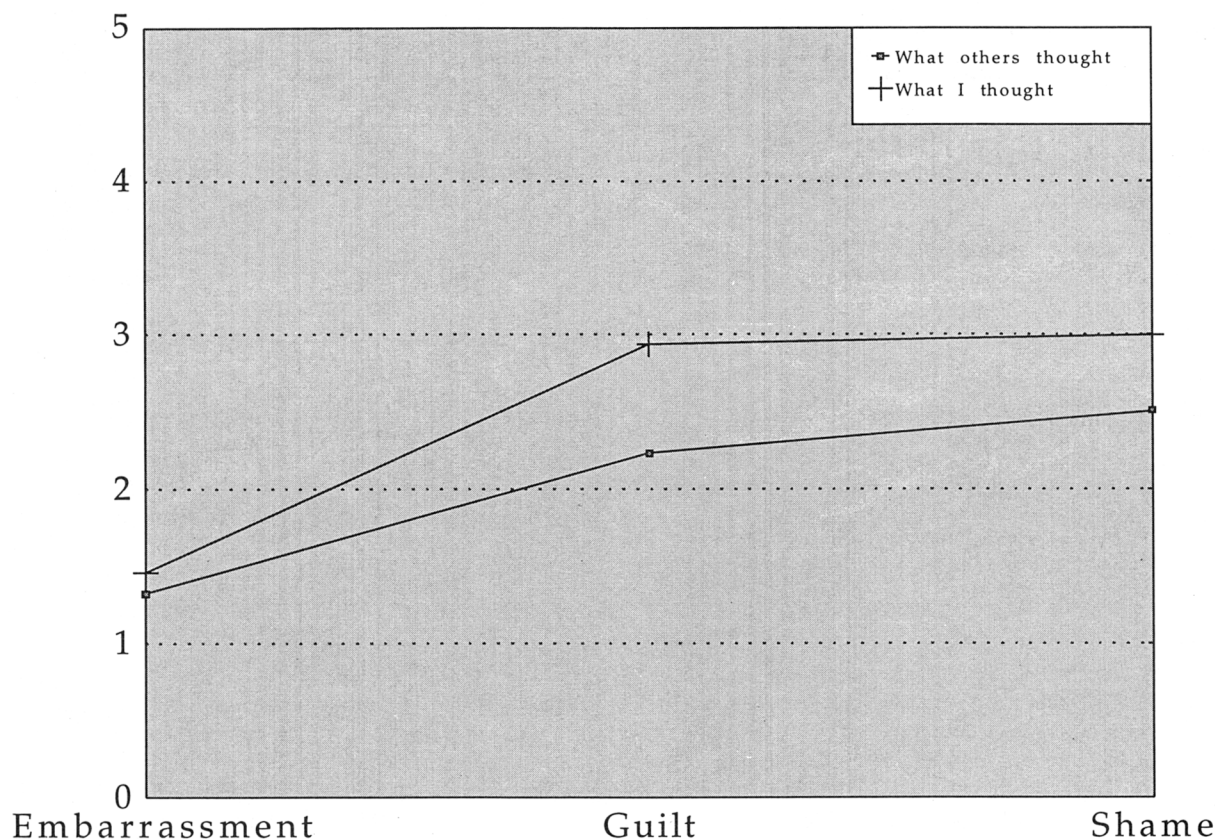


Figure 2. Participants' own perceptions and their beliefs about others' perceptions of how unforgivable their behavior was in shame, guilt, and embarrassment events.

shame was experienced when people were alone—away from the scrutiny of others—more often than was guilt. Thus, although there was some evidence from the phenomenological ratings that shame involves an increased awareness of being observed by others, shame and guilt appear not to differ much in terms of the actual contexts from which they spring.

The most substantial differences between shame and guilt were observed in participants' phenomenological ratings of these experiences. Participants rated shame as the more intense and aversive experience, involving more obvious physiological change. When feeling shame, these young adults felt more isolated, diminished, and inferior to others. When shamed, they felt more compelled to hide and less inclined to admit what they had done.

These findings fit with H. B. Lewis's (1971) hypothesized differences between shame and guilt, except for one central distinction: the focus on one's self as opposed to one's behavior. Participants' responses on the only relevant item (i.e., "blamed my actions and behavior" vs. "blamed my personality and my self") did not differ across shame and guilt experiences. However, this single rating may have been an inadequate measure of this distinction—too abstract for college undergraduates with little background in psychology. In fact, secondary analyses indicated that participants' ratings of this item did not correlate with other dimensions in a manner one would expect. For example, blaming self versus behavior was uncorrelated with the degree to which participants wished they had acted differently,

the degree to which they wanted to make amends (both behavior-focused items), and the degree to which they felt disgusted with the self (a clearly self-focused item).

We recently conducted a richer analysis of this self-versus-behavior distinction in four independent studies that examined participants' counterfactual thinking associated with shame and guilt (Niedenthal, Tangney, & Gavanski, 1994). For example, participants in one study described a personal shame or guilt experience and then listed four things that might have caused the event to end differently. Counterfactual responses were coded according to whether aspects of the self, behavior, or situation were "undone." The findings across several studies were remarkably consistent. Shame descriptions were more often followed by statements undoing aspects of the self; guilt descriptions were more often followed by statements undoing aspects of behavior.

In sum, in conjunction with studies of counterfactual thinking (Niedenthal et al., 1994) and emotion-eliciting situations (Tangney, 1992; Tangney et al., 1994), the present results suggest that shame and guilt fundamentally differ not in the content or structure of the situations that engender them but rather in the manner in which people construe and then experience such self-relevant negative events.

### Embarrassment

There were even clearer distinctions among embarrassment and guilt and shame. The results seriously challenge the wide-

Table 3  
*Participants' Ratings of Embarrassment, Shame, and Guilt Experiences on the Differential Emotions Scale*

Emotion	Embarrassment		Shame		Guilt		<i>F</i> <sup>a</sup>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	
Shame: Ashamed, humiliated, disgraced	3.4	1.4 <sub>a</sub>	4.2	1.1 <sub>b</sub>	3.4	1.3 <sub>a</sub>	25.75***
Guilt: Repentant, guilty, blameworthy	2.0	1.2 <sub>a</sub>	3.9	1.2 <sub>b</sub>	4.3	0.9 <sub>c</sub>	211.11***
Embarrassment: Embarrassed, self-conscious, blushing	4.5	1.0 <sub>a</sub>	3.6	1.2 <sub>b</sub>	2.8	1.4 <sub>c</sub>	106.02***
Glad, happy, joyful	1.8	1.1 <sub>a</sub>	1.4	0.9 <sub>b</sub>	1.4	0.9 <sub>b</sub>	10.73***
Surprised, amazed, astonished	3.3	1.3 <sub>a</sub>	2.5	1.3 <sub>b</sub>	2.3	1.3 <sub>b</sub>	34.46***
Sheepish, bashful, shy	3.2	1.3 <sub>a</sub>	2.4	1.3 <sub>b</sub>	1.9	1.2 <sub>c</sub>	53.88***
Sad, downhearted, unhappy	2.4	1.5 <sub>a</sub>	3.8	1.26 <sub>b</sub>	3.6	1.3 <sub>b</sub>	57.64***
Scared, fearful, afraid	2.5	1.5 <sub>a</sub>	3.4	1.5 <sub>b</sub>	3.2	1.4 <sub>b</sub>	24.73***
Angry, irritated, annoyed	2.9	1.5 <sub>a</sub>	3.4	1.4 <sub>b</sub>	3.1	1.4 <sub>a,b</sub>	6.46**
Contemptuous, scornful, disdainful	1.7	1.1 <sub>a</sub>	2.6	1.3 <sub>b</sub>	2.5	1.2 <sub>b</sub>	27.83***
Disgusted, feeling distaste/revulsion	2.0	1.4 <sub>a</sub>	3.3	1.4 <sub>b</sub>	3.2	1.4 <sub>b</sub>	62.82***
Interested, alert, curious	2.5	1.3	2.2	1.4	2.4	1.3	2.65

Note. Items were rated on 5-point scales. Higher scores indicate greater agreement with item. Row means with different subscripts differ significantly at  $p < .05$  (Tukey test).

<sup>a</sup>Degrees of freedom ranged from (2, 322) to (2, 328).

\*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

spread notion that shame and embarrassment are highly similar (Borg et al., 1988; Izard, 1977; Kaufman, 1989; H. B. Lewis, 1971). In fact, the phenomenological ratings suggest that shame and embarrassment have less in common than do shame and guilt.

Shame and guilt were clearly rated as more intense, painful emotions that involved a greater sense of moral transgression. However, even with intensity and morality controlled, embarrassment differed markedly along a range of affective, cognitive, and motivational dimensions. For example, shamed or guilty participants felt greater responsibility and regret. They felt more angry and disgusted with themselves and believed that others, too, felt anger toward them. In contrast, embarrassment arose from more trivial and humorous events and occurred more suddenly and with a greater sense of surprise. It was accompanied by more obvious physiological changes (e.g., blushing, increased heart rate) and by a greater sense of exposure and conspicuousness.

The interpersonal situations from which embarrassment emerged were quite different. Compared to shame and guilt, embarrassment occurred much less often when one was alone. This finding is consistent with the results of a diary study that tracked the embarrassments of young adults over a 2-month period (Stonehouse & Miller, 1994). On those rare occasions when embarrassment occurred without anyone else present, it invariably involved a vivid imaginary audience that had the embarrassed actor envisioning what others would think if they knew what the actor had done. Embarrassment always resulted from events that involved either real or imagined exposure to others and thus was always a response to phenomenologically "public" events (Miller, 1996). The same sense of imagined exposure could underlie shame and guilt experiences as well, but (a) the greater gravity of shame and guilt transgressions and (b) the frequency with which they were reported in solitary conditions suggest that they may have a private component that embarrassment does not possess. Most episodes of shame and guilt are public events, and public disclosure of one's shameful

and guilty acts is undoubtedly awful, but our reading of the data is that, unlike embarrassment, shame and guilt can be experienced privately when one's substantial transgressions are known only to oneself.

Compared to shame and guilt, embarrassment also occurred in front of larger audiences that were more likely to contain acquaintances and strangers (as opposed to loved ones). This result is intriguing because it supports the argument that an acute concern for social evaluation causes embarrassment (see Miller, 1995). Presumably, despite the same number of faux pas and awkward pratfalls, people are less likely to become embarrassed around loved ones because they are more certain of their continued high regard.

Furthermore, subordinates were rarely present when any of these emotions occurred. This may be an artifact of our sampling, which attracted a young student population that may rarely interact with subordinates. However, this finding may indicate that these emotions do occur less often before audiences of lower prestige or authority about whose judgments one can be relatively unconcerned. Further investigation with a more diverse sample should address this question.

On the other hand, there was little support for the assumption (Buss, 1980; Miller, 1992) that embarrassment (as compared to shame or guilt) results from larger losses of perceived approval from others than from changes in self-appraisal. In embarrassment, as in shame and guilt, people evaluated themselves more harshly than they believed others did. This result is interesting because embarrassed people typically believe that they have made more negative impressions on others than they really have (Semin, 1982); given the relatively trivial nature of their transgressions, the current data suggest that they are also castigating themselves more than they should.

#### *Clinical and Research Implications*

These findings emerged from experiences that participants recalled when they were simply asked to "think of a time when

you felt" each of the three emotions. Because they were given no examples or definitions to guide their recollections, their reported experiences were undoubtedly based on their own schematic representations of the three emotions as well as on the emotions' distinct phenomenologies. In our view, this makes the findings reported here more impressive. Reliable differences among the emotions emerged despite the idiosyncrasies of person-specific situations and despite the idiosyncrasies with which respondents may have labeled their experiences. Because there is substantial variability in emotion prototypes across individuals (Shaver et al., 1987), our findings attained significance despite error variance that should have obscured them. The procedure that invited participants to create detailed recollections of an emotional event before providing their ratings of the incident is also a reasonable guarantee that the results reflect authentic experiences with the three emotions rather than just shared stereotypes about them (see Shaver et al., 1987).

Our findings have several implications for basic research on human emotions. Past studies have often adopted measurement strategies that implicitly or explicitly combined elements of shame, guilt, and embarrassment into a single scale or construct. In some cases, such approaches derived from theoretical perspectives that essentially equate the emotions in question; for instance, Izard's (1977) DES combines shame and embarrassment descriptors, assuming that the difference between the two is trivial. In other cases, the conceptual framework is less clearly articulated and does not directly address possible distinctions among these emotions. For example, the Mosher (1966) Forced-Choice Guilt Inventory and the Guilt scale from the Buss-Durkee Hostility Inventory (Buss & Durkee, 1957) each contain elements of both shame and guilt. In neither case is the construct of guilt clearly defined, especially as distinct from shame. Depending on the question involved, researchers who draw on these scales may be obscuring important differences in the relation of shame, guilt, or embarrassment to other constructs of interest.

For example, when shame and guilt are differentiated, important differences arise in their relation to interpersonal empathy (Tangney, 1991, 1995). Proneness to shame is generally inversely correlated with empathy, whereas proneness to "shame-free" guilt is positively correlated with empathic responsiveness. The present results underscore that shame, guilt, and embarrassment *are* distinct emotional experiences that differ along a number of significant psychological dimensions. Our understanding of the nature and implications of these emotions would be further enhanced if future research uses measurement strategies that are sensitive to the distinctions among these emotions.

Our results have clinical implications as well. Psychotherapists frequently encounter clients who are troubled by inordinate feelings of shame, guilt, or embarrassment. Interventions with such clients may be significantly enhanced to the degree that therapists understand the distinctions among these three different types of emotional experiences. For example, because embarrassment involves a higher concern with others' evaluations of the self, therapies focusing on distorted perceptions of the social environment may be most effective for embarrassment-prone clients. In contrast, clinical interventions focusing on self-related cognitions and perceptions may be more effective with shame-prone clients. In addition, given the accumulating

evidence that a "guilt-prone" style is a far more adaptive orientation to failure and transgression than a "shame-prone" style (Tangney, Burggraf, & Wagner, 1995; Tangney, Wagner, & Gramzow, 1992) clinicians might well consider cognitive interventions that aim to transform maladaptive shame reactions into more functional guilt reactions.

### *Closing Speculation*

Overall, the familial resemblance among these emotions suggests that they share similar interpersonal origins, but the present data argue that each is distinct from the others. Why should humans need three different states of these types? Each is (or once was) presumably adaptive or it would not commonly occur; as Hatfield and Rapson (1990) asserted, "the reason the primary, prototypic emotions developed in the first place, were shaped and reshaped over the millennia, and continued to survive, was because they were adaptive" (p. 129). Conceivably, then, each emotion serves a function important enough to require differentiated, specific responses.

One such need is the human need to belong (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Our species appears to seek frequent, rewarding interactions with others within the context of close, lasting relationships. This need is important enough that "even potential threats to social bonds generate a variety of unpleasant emotional states" (Baumeister & Leary, p. 520). Indeed, the specter of social disapproval or rejection is typically so distressing that specific emotions should have evolved to (a) alert one to the threat of exclusion and (b) motivate remedial responses (Baumeister & Tice, 1990; Miller & Leary, 1992).

Shame, guilt, and embarrassment can all be conceived to serve these functions. Each responds to significant social threat—embarrassment to violations of social conventions, and shame and guilt to more fundamental personal failures and transgressions that harm others—and each motivates interpersonally relevant behaviors (Keltner & Buswell, in press; Miller & Tangney, 1994; Tangney, 1995). Embarrassment promotes desirable, conciliatory responses to social predicaments (Miller, in press). Guilt serves a range of relationship-enhancing functions, perhaps most notably fostering reparative behavior in response to interpersonal harm (Baumeister, Stillwell, & Heatherton, 1994; Tangney, 1995). The adaptive functions of shame are somewhat less clear. There are numerous indications that shame may promote less helpful behavior in many instances (e.g., withdrawal, anger, externalization of blame), at least among adults (see Tangney, 1991, 1995; Tangney, Wagner, Fletcher, & Gramzow, 1992). Our hunch is that shame is, in some sense, a more primitive emotion that served adaptive functions especially at earlier stages of development (either in earlier stages of evolution or individual development). We are not much persuaded by Tomkins's (1987) view of shame as a regulator of interest/joy. However, it seems likely that feelings of shame play a key role in inhibiting undesirable behavior among young children, before the cognitive capacity to experience the more differentiated feeling of guilt develops. Moreover, among individuals of all ages, there may occasionally arise instances of such malfeasance that temporary social withdrawal is a useful response—allowing the individual "time out" for

necessary soul-searching and re-evaluation of values and standards for conduct.

From this perspective, the private components of shame and guilt would be secondary to, and probably derived from, their interpersonal functions. The primary source of all three emotions would be the drive for social inclusion that results from the central need to belong. Whatever their similarity of origin, however, each addresses this key interpersonal need in its own fashion. The present data show that, although shame, guilt, and embarrassment may all emerge from the same fundamental concern, there are important, reliable distinctions among these oft-confused emotions.

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