The relationship between Guilt and Shame feelings with the dimensions of Loneliness: The Moderating Effect of Gender

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Abstract

Introduction: Similar to social and conscious emotions, shame and guilt have gained increasing attention because of their eminent emotional, motivational, and cognitive functions that ultimately guide human beings' perception and behavior. The aim of this study was to assess the relationship between shame and guilt feelings with the dimensions of loneliness (familial, social, and romantic).
Methods: For conducting this study, 398 grade 12 high school students (218 girls and 180 boys) were selected using the randomized multistage cluster sampling method in Shiraz. Cohen's Guilt and Shame Proneness Scale and the Social-Emotional Loneliness Scale for Adults (Short Form) were used for data collection. The validity and reliability of the measures were evaluated.
Results: Results revealed that guilt feeling could positively predict familial, social, and romantic loneliness. Moreover, guilt could negatively predict social and familial loneliness. Furthermore it was observed that gender had a mediating effect on the studied relationships. By comparing both genders the results obtained by the girls were congruent with the total score while the results were different regarding the boys.
Conclusion: Conclusively, we found that shame and guilt feelings predict the dimensions of loneliness differently and thus this study provides evidence in line with differentiating the effects of these feelings.

Keywords: Shame, Guilt, Familial Loneliness, Social Loneliness, Romantic Loneliness

Introduction

Studying the feelings and emotions of human beings is vital since they have a fundamental role in human functioning [1, 2]. Various factors are considered for categorizing emotions such as conscious (fear) vs unconscious (hope), positive (sorrow) vs negative (shame), and personal (fear) vs social (guilt). Among various emotions, shame and guilt have gained researchers' attention as negative, conscious, and moral and social feelings. These feelings occur following negative evaluations (by self or others) as a result of deviating from what is considered right, desirable, and moral [3], and are therefore assumed as moral emotions [4]. Also, these feelings are conscious because they require an understanding of "self" and consider "oneself" as the object of evaluations [5].

In other words, shame and guilt can be considered as self-regulating emotions that have a key role in guiding behavior, motivating the individual for paying attention to moral and social standards and prompting suitable reactions [6], by providing feedback to the self about thoughts, motifs, and behavior. Moreover, as moral-social emotions, shame and guilt are experienced when one relates to others. In fact, connection with others and the concept of "others" is the subject of these two emotions [7, 8]. These emotions are based on mutual judgments and evaluations of self and others and play a vital role in social interactions [9, 10].

Other researchers in the field of shame and guilt [3, 8, 11, 12] emphasize that although

these two feelings seem to be similar, they have important fundamental differences. Tangney and Dearing [8] state that although these two feelings have negative values and are the result of self-attribution, shame results from general stable internal attributions, while guilt results from specific, unstable internal attributions. Moreover, these feelings result from different interpretations of events and differ in cognitive, emotional, and motivational aspects [8]. As a result, shame has a negative relationship with pro-social behavior, while guilt has a facilitating role in pro-social behavior and tendency to relate with others. [13]. Also, shame is generally related with loneliness and fear of closeness [10, 12].

Teroni and Deonna [14] found that shame and guilt differ with respect to four aspects: 1) social function (shame prevents creating intimate relationships while guilt is socially adaptive for maintain social relationships, 2) Shame completely focuses on the self while guilt focuses on behavior, 3) Shame is related with ideals while guilt is related to forbidden, and 4) Shame is directed towards the self while guilt is directed towards others. Considering the conceptual and behavioral differences related to these feelings, researchers have strived to provide evidence for differentiating them based on their antecedents and outcomes. Therefore, increasing emphasis has been put on the role of shame and guilt in evaluating social relationships [9, 10]. Researchers have assessed the outcomes of variables that relate to adaptive social interactions. The construct of loneliness is one of the most important indices for maladaptive social interactions [15, 16]. It seems that shame and guilt play a key role in the emergence of the feeling of loneliness [10, 12, 14], because the main core of loneliness is the mental and quantitative perception of relationship with others and defining our relation with others [15]. Therefore, since shame and guilt have a defining role in how these perceptions are understood, they can have different functions in the occurrence of loneliness. Therefore, the aim of this study was to assess how shame and guilt could predict loneliness.

Previous definitions on loneliness are similar in three main hypotheses: understanding deficits in social interactions, the subjective nature of loneliness, and its undesirability [17]. Researchers have also studied different forms of loneliness besides defining and conceptualizing it. Weiss [16] initially defined loneliness with respect to two dimensions of romantic and social loneliness. He defined romantic loneliness as the lack of meaningful and intimate romantic relationships throughout life. Social loneliness however, is defined as a lack of social interactions and experiencing peer group rejection [16, 18]. In general, Weiss believed that lack of intimate romantic dependent is more prominent in romantic loneliness, while in social loneliness, lack of interaction with social networks is more evident [19].

Kaufman [20] believes that avoiding social interactions is the byproduct of shame. Individuals with higher levels of shame not only avoid trusting people and have close relations with them [20], but are also afraid of social interactions [21] and evaluation and are socially anxious

[22] [23]. Also, *Tahmasiyan*, *Anari* and *Sedghpoor* [24] believe that social anxiety and social support affect the social self-efficacy on loneliness directly and indirectly. Moreover, *Geranett* [12] found a significant relationship between high scores of shame and general loneliness. Moreover, people who suffer from shame tend to do actions which ultimately lead to fear of intimacy [10]. *Nock* (2010) revealed that self-destruction and depression have a relationship with shame and guilt [25]. Guilt, as well as the generalized positive solutions to interpersonal relationships and self-efficacy [26], well-being [27] and psychological adjustment, self-regulation and spiritual well-being [26] are positively correlated. Therefore, studies support the hypothesis which stated that shame and guilt have different effects.

Studies on emotion and emotional regulation have also shown that there might be some gender differences regarding shame, guilt, and loneliness. Women express evident and obvious social emotions (such as happiness and love) as well as emotions implying vulnerability (such as sadness) much more than men. On the other hand, men express emotions that imply control such as pride and anger more and with higher intensity than men [28, 29]. It should be noted that most related studies were done in European and American cultures and few studies have been conducted on gender differences in emotional expression in other cultures [30].

Therefore, according to previous literature and theoretical background, the aim of this study was to differentiate shame and guilt feelings in predicting different dimensions of loneliness (familial, social, and emotional).

Method

This study was a correlational study and a regression analysis. In order to conduct this study, 398 grade 12 high school students were selected through random multistage cluster sampling during 2013-2014. Initially, among the four educational districts, two were randomly selected. In these two districts, four high schools were selected (2 boys and 2 girls). On class from each grade was chosen randomly from each school. All the students in these classes were enrolled. The sample size was selected using Morgan and Krejcie's table [31]. Cohen's Guilt and Shame Proneness Scale and the Social-Emotional Loneliness Scale for Adults (Short Form) were used for data collection.

Guilt and Shame Proneness Scale (GASP): This scale has 16 items and is used for measuring shame and guilt. It was firstly devised by Cohen and colleagues in 2011. This scale is scored based on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (very unlikely) to 5 (very likely). Therefore, the scores range from 16 to 80. This scale has two general dimensions (shame and guilt). Cohen et al. [32] reported a Cronbach's alpha of 0.70-0.88 indicating high internal consistency. Moreover, a significant correlation was found between shame and guilt subscales and the total self-esteem scale.

In this study, in order to assess the reliability of this scale, Cronbach's alpha was used and a reliability coefficient of 0.83 and 0.76 was obtained for shame and

guilt scales, respectively, indicating desirable reliability. For assessing the validity of this scale, factor analysis was performed. The KMO coefficient was 0.91 using the main variables method. Bartlett's sphericity test yielded a result of 7018 (P<0.0001) indicating a significant correlation matrix. Considering an Eigen value of more than one, the scree plot, and the Varimax rotation, two factors were obtained that defined 37.45% of the total variance together.

Social-Emotional Loneliness Scale for Adults Short Form (SELSA-S): The short form of the social-emotional loneliness scale for adults [33] was used based on Weiss's theory [16] which measures romantic and social loneliness. Although this scale has two general dimensions (romantic and social), it assesses loneliness in three romantic, familial, and social domains using 15 items (5 for each domain). Scoring is done using a 5-point Liker scale from 1 (completely disagree) to 5 (completely agree). Items 2, 3, 5, 6, 7, 10, 11, 12, and 13 were reversely scored. Higher scores indicate higher amounts of loneliness. The inventors of the scale reported a Cronbach's alpha of 0.87-0.90 showing a high internal consistency. Moreover, a significant correlation was found between SELSA-S subscales and the total score of the University of California at Los Angeles

Loneliness Scale (UCLA-3) and the Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment (IPPA), indicating this scale's high concurrent, convergent, and discriminant validity. For the purpose of this study, factor analysis was used for assessing the validity of the scale with the main variables method and Varimax rotation. The scree slope and Eigen value which was higher than 1 was considered for factor extraction. Accordingly, three factors were extracted. The KMO coefficient was 0.78 and Bartlett's sphericity coefficient was 1.301E3 (P<0.0001).

Results

In order to conduct this study, 398 grade 12 high school students (218 girls and 180 boys) were selected using the randomized multistage cluster sampling method in Shiraz. A significant relationship was observed between the model's dependent and independent variables which permits subsequent analyses (table 1). Simultaneous regression analysis was done for determining the predictive power of different domains of loneliness (familial, social, and romantic) on shame and guilt. The results are shown in table 2. As shown in table 2, shame was a significant positive predictor of familial (β=0.21, P<0.001) and social (β=0.18, P<0.001), and a significant negative predictor of romantic loneliness (β=-0.18, P<0.001). Guilt could negatively and significantly predict social (β=-0.22, P<0.001) and romantic (β=-0.22, P<0.001) loneliness.

Table 1. Mean ± SD and correlation coefficients between the study variables.

Variables	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5
1-Shame feeling	12.04	3.20	1				
2-Guit feeling	47.67	8.23	00.00	1			
3-Familial loneliness	14	4.73	00.22**	-0.22*	1		
4-Social loneliness	8	2.70	0.19**	-0.14**	0.29**	1	
5-Romantic loneliness	9.08	3.24	-0.18**	0.07	0.08	00.2*	1

P*<0.05, P**<0.01

Table 2. Regression analysis results of the study variables.

Predictive Variable	Familial loneliness					Social loneliness					Romantic loneliness				
	R	R²	β	t	P<	R	R²	β	T	P<	R	R²	β	T	P<
Shame	0.30	0.09	0.21	4.50	0.001	0.23	0.05	0.18	3.83	0.001	0.19	0.03	-0.18	-3.69	0.001
Guilt			-0.22	-4.60	0.001			-0.14	-2.94	0.03			-0.07	-1.49	N.S

Table 3. Simultaneous regression analysis of familial loneliness based on shame and guilt according to gender.

	Familial loneliness									
Predictive variables	R		R²		β		t		P<	
	Girl	Boy	Girl	Boy	Girl	Boy	Girl	Boy	Girl	Boy
Shame	0.25	0.21	0.06	0.04	0.19	0.18	2.90	2.48	0.004	0.01
Guilt					-0.16	-0.13	-2.43	-1.88	0.01	N.S
	Social loneliness									
Predictive variables	R		R²		β		t		p<	
	Girl	Boy	Girl	Boy	Girl	Boy	Girl	Boy	Girl	Boy
Shame	0.32	0.08	0.10	0.00	0.27	0.05	4.26	0.70	0.001	N.S
Guilt					-0.15	-0.07	-2.44	-1.02	0.01	N.S
	Romantic loneliness									
Predictive variables	R		R²		β		t		p<	
	Girl	Boy	Girl	Boy	Girl	Boy	Girl	Boy	Girl	Boy
Shame	028	0.10	0.07	0.01	-0.27	-0.04	-0.26	0.56	0.001	N.S
Guilt					0.02	0.10	0.39	1.38	N.S	N.S

With respect to gender, we found that among the girls, shame was a significant positive predictor of familial ($\beta=0.19$, P<0.004) and social ($\beta=0.27$, P<0.001) loneliness and a significant negative predictor of romantic loneliness ($\beta=-0.33$, P<0.001). Moreover, in girls, guilt was a significant negative predictor of romantic ($\beta=-0.33$, P<0.001), familial ($\beta=-0.15$, P<0.01), and social ($\beta=-0.16$, P<0.01) loneliness. In boys, shame could significantly and positively predict familial loneliness ($\beta<0.01$).

As shown in table 3, no significant difference was observed between boys and girls with respect to familial loneliness. However, with respect to social loneliness the coefficients differed between boys and girls. In boys, shame and guilt could not significantly predict social loneliness. In girls, shame was a negative predictor of romantic loneliness while in boys these coefficients tended towards zero.

Discussion

Whether shame and guilt feelings predict loneliness differently and whether this pattern differed in boys and girls was assessed during this study. Based on previous literature it was assumed that shame would predict loneliness domains positively while guilt predicted them negatively and gender had a moderating effect. The obtained results confirmed this studies hypotheses to some extent.

We found that shame positively and guilt negatively predicted familial and social loneliness, respectively, with different mechanisms. An unexpected finding in this research was that shame negatively predicted romantic loneliness while guilt could not predict it at all. Also, with respect to gender, the third hypothesis was confirmed.

In order to provide some explanations for the positive prediction of social and familial loneliness by shame, the nature and essence of this feeling should be considered. Shame can lead to familial and social loneliness due to negative judgments by others [3] stable negative evaluation of self and stable internal attribution [8], as well as maladaptive outcomes [8, 20-22]. Such a person evaluates oneself as worthless, unchangeable and thus they think that a change of relationship is not possible [8, 14]. Moreover, studies show that people who prone to shame either choose aggression or avoidance while facing interpersonal conflicts [3], or are behaviorally inhibited that could interfere with communicating with others and requires adaptive strategies [3]. On the other hand, in guilt, individuals evaluate their passive behavior and attribute them to unstable internal factor. Moreover, the outcomes of this feeling are considered adaptive [3, 8]. Therefore, these individuals use compensatory strategies and in case they have some faults, they initially feel responsible and then compensate.

With respect to the negative relationship between shame and romantic loneliness, we should initially reflect on romantic loneliness. Romance occurs in intimate romantic relationships, especially with the opposite sex [16]. We can explain this finding from the cultural perspective [34]. In the Iranian culture, intimate relationships, especially with the opposite sex, are generally and religiously forbidden and such relationships, and thus romantic loneliness is not considered maladaptive [16]. Individuals might consider this type of loneliness an advantage for themselves and not feel bad about it. In other words, since romantic loneliness is not considered maladaptive, it would have a negative relationship with shame that predicts maladaptive outcomes. A strong negative relationship was found between shame and romantic loneliness in girls but not boys. It seems that in the Islamic-Iranian culture girls consider romantic loneliness (especially regarding relationships with the opposite sex) an advantage compared to boys. This is while boys do not have a certain orientation regarding romantic loneliness and might even consider it as a disadvantage. It should be noted that the negative relationship between shame and romantic loneliness was mostly related to girls.

Moreover, the results of social loneliness among girls were compatible with the total group of participants (negative prediction of social loneliness by guilt and its positive prediction by shame), while this was not true for the boys. To explain this finding, social loneliness might be considered as more threatening among Iranian girls compared with boys. Girls are more socially dependent and more sensitive to social judgments. However, further research should be done regarding the role of gender in conscious emotions in different cultures.

One of the limitations of this study was related to the measures used. Since shame, guilt, and loneliness were assessed using self-report inventories, issues of social desirability bias should be taken into account when interpreting the results.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study provided new evidence on the different mechanisms of shame and guilt as well as the effect of demographic characteristics such as gender. Further research is required in order to assess the effect of other demographic variables such as economical status, cultural factors, religious beliefs, etc. It can be suggested that further research be done in order to focus on the simultaneous assessment of adaptive (mental wellbeing) and maladaptive outcomes.

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