Parental shame and guilt: Distinguishing emotional responses to a child’s wrongdoings

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Abstract

This research differentiates shame and guilt as distinct emotional reactions that parents in the United States can have for their children’s misdeeds. In Study 1, when 93 parents wrote about their child’s worst transgression, their ratings of perceived public exposure and threat to their self-image predicted shame, whereas the degree to which they felt a lack of control over their child and believed the act harmed others predicted guilt. In Study 2, when 123 mothers rated their reactions to an imagined wrongdoing, the presence of a critical observer tended to elevate shame but not guilt. Across both studies, guilt predicted adaptive parenting responses, whereas, shame predicted maladaptive responses. The discussion emphasizes the implications that self-conscious emotions have for family dynamics.

The process of raising children is an intensely emotional experience, particularly when parents are faced with the inevitable task of correcting their child’s misbehavior. Although prior research has examined emotions like warmth, anger, and depression in predicting parenting practices (Gottman, Katz, & Hooven, 1996; Lahey, Conger, Atkeson, & Treiber, 1984; Leung & Slep, 2006), research has yet to directly investigate how shame and guilt, the two emotions argued to be at the heart of socialized behavior, predict parents’ reactions to their children’s wrongdoings. The goal of the present research is to investigate the extent to which parental shame and guilt can differentiate parents’ appraisals of and behavioral reactions to their child’s wrongdoing.

Shame and guilt in parent–child interactions

Shame and guilt are related emotions that play a powerful role in regulating behavior. Although these two emotions share variance, shame and guilt are associated with different antecedent appraisals and motivational tendencies (Niedenthal, Tangney, & Gavanski, 1994; Tangney, Miller, Flicker, & Barlow, 1996; Wicker, Payne, & Morgan, 1983). People experience greater shame when they appraise a wrongdoing as implying deep-seated flaws at the core of one’s self, eliciting concerns about social rejection. In contrast, appraisals that focus on the specific controllable behaviors that contributed to the wrongful event predict feelings of guilt. Shame
uniquely predicts a desire to distance oneself from the emotion-eliciting event, whereas guilt tends to predict more adaptive tendencies, including a desire to apologize to the victim and to make amends for damages (Schmader & Lickel, 2006; Tangney et al., 1996; Wicker et al., 1983).

Although prior research has largely focused on these emotions as stemming from one’s own wrongdoings, recent work has begun to investigate when and why individuals come to feel shame and guilt in response to the actions of others and how this influences their response (Lickel, Schmader, Curtis, Scarnier, & Ames, 2005). This work has revealed that like shame and guilt resulting from one’s own actions, shame and guilt caused by others predict distinct motivational tendencies. Shame caused by others uniquely predicts avoidant behaviors with the goal of distancing one’s sense of identity from the other’s wrongdoing, whereas guilt caused by others uniquely predicts more approach behaviors aimed at repairing damage that has been done (Lickel et al., 2005; Schmader & Lickel, 2006).

It is critical to understand the role of self-conscious emotions in how individuals react to the wrongdoing of others, as ingroup members are in the best position to police, correct, and enforce important social norms that facilitate social interaction. The social group that epitomizes the importance of others in socializing behavior is the family, and in particular, the relationship between parents and their children. In fact, given that “conflictual interactions between parents and children occur from 3.5 to 15 times an hour in families with young children” (Dix, 1991, p. 3), it is arguable that parents experience a particularly high number of other-based shame- and guilt-invoking events.

In addition, two dimensions characterize parent–child relationships: shared identity and interdependence, which predict the degree to which individuals feel guilt and shame in response to others’ wrongdoing (Lickel et al., 2005). Shared identity alludes to the notion that group members hold in common an underlying internal essence (Haslam, Rothschild, & Ernst, 2000). As a result, when one person does wrong, others who share a sense of identity with that person might experience that misdeed as a threat to their own self-image, leading to shame (Lickel et al., 2005). Thus, parents might experience shame in response to their child’s misbehavior because their own sense of identity is likely to include their child and their role as a parent, and their child’s wrongdoings threaten this identity (Aron, Aron, Tudor, & Nelson, 1991).

In contrast, interdependence refers to the extent to which two people control each other’s outcomes (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978). Thus, individuals who have an interdependent association to a wrongdoer are prone to feel guilt stemming from an appraisal that they should have prevented the other person’s bad behavior, or did something to promote it (Lickel et al., 2005). Thus, parents might experience guilt in response to their child’s misdeeds because of the expectation that parents will monitor, control, and shape their children’s behavior, and that others will blame them for their child’s blameworthy actions when they do not (Lickel, Schmader, & Hamilton, 2003).

In addition to parenting being a critical and unexplored domain in which to examine basic processes involved in other-based shame and guilt, we also seek to make a significant conceptual advance by bridging the shame and guilt literature with the parenting literature. While research on parenting behavior has considered how general indexes of mood influence discipline (Lorber & Slep, 2005), it has not explored (with the exception of anger) the role that discrete emotions play in motivating discipline practices that map onto theoretically corresponding action tendencies. By integrating theory and research on shame and guilt with the literature on parenting practices, the present research seeks to distinguish parents’ feelings of shame from guilt for their child’s wrongdoing by exploring three sets of variables: appraisals related to the event, appraisals relating the event to the self, and resulting disciplinary strategies.
Event appraisals as predictors of parental shame and guilt

With respect to appraisals of the child’s wrongdoing, we hypothesized that parents would feel greater guilt to the degree that they appraise their child’s act as harming others, whereas they would feel greater shame to the degree that they perceive their child’s act to be public. Emotion theorists have suggested that guilt is a signal that one has damaged an important relationship and thus motivates consideration of how one’s own bad behavior has negatively affected others (Baumeister, Stillwell, & Heatherton, 1994; Tangney & Dearing, 2002). Whereas the perceived harmfulness of an event might uniquely predict guilt, the publicity of a wrongdoing is often associated with shame (Ausubel, 1955). Research indicates that the experience of shame feels more public than does guilt, regardless of the objective publicity of the event (Tangney et al., 1996). Furthermore, Smith, Webster, and Parrott (2002) have shown that a private transgression can take on a public feel if the wrongdoer imagines how others would react if they were to find out about it. Thus, although research has not previously extended the role of perceived harm and publicity to other-based self-conscious emotions, we predict that these two appraisals will play a role in differentiating guilt and shame responses to a child’s wrongdoing. In Study 2, we examine whether public evaluation from a critical source is particularly likely to increase parental shame.

Self-appraisals as predictors of parental shame and guilt

In addition to appraisals of the event itself, we expect parents’ appraisals of how their child’s misdeeds are relevant to their own sense of self will also differentially predict shame and guilt. Consistent with prior research (Lickel et al., 2005; Schmader & Lickel, 2006), we expect parents to experience greater shame to the degree that they view their child’s wrongdoing as posing a threat to their own self-image or image of their family. For example, many parents of gays and lesbians have rejected their children upon learning of their sexual orientation (Green, 2002), an act that might reflect the parents’ sense of shame for their child (Armesto & Weisman, 2001). We anticipate that parents will report greater shame when they perceive that their child’s actions reflect negatively on themselves as parents.

In contrast to the role of image threat in predicting other-based shame, prior research suggests that people feel a sense of guilt for another’s actions when they think they should have been able to control that person’s behavior (Lickel et al., 2005). Parents are in a unique position of shouldering the primary responsibility for socializing their children (Bugental, Lyon, Krantz, & Cortez, 1997), and parents who feel that they have less control than their child has in the relationship experience greater negative affect when their children misbehave (Bugental, Blue, & Cruzcosa, 1989). We hypothesize that parents experience guilt as a reaction to their child’s misdeeds as a result of a felt lack of control in a specific context in light of more general social norms dictating parental responsibility for their children—an appraisal we label control deficiency. This prediction is consistent with self-discrepancy theory (Higgins, 1987), which predicts that people should feel guilt (and other anxiety related emotions) when they perceive their actual behavior as being discrepant with general standards that they or others believe they ought to live up to. In Study 1, we will assess, separately, parents’ rating of the normative standards of control (i.e., that parents should have generally over their children) and their ratings of the actual control they did have over their child. We predict that parents who lack the control that they think parents ought to have over their children will feel guilty because they perceive their control deficiency as a contributing reason for their children’s behavior.

Parental shame and guilt as predictors of punishment

The benefit of understanding the appraisals that differentiate shame from guilt is that discrete emotions are often associated with unique action tendencies and behavioral
motivations (Frijda, Kuipers, & ter Schure, 1989; Roseman, Wiest, & Swartz, 1994). Shame-related appraisals, which link transgressions to perceptions of a flawed self and concerns about negative judgment, motivate behaviors designed to unlink the self from shame-inducing events and from people who pose a threat to one’s self-image (Lickel et al., 2005; Tangney et al., 1996; Wicker et al., 1983). Extending these findings to the parenting domain, we hypothesize that parents’ feelings of shame, but not guilt, will predict less adaptive responses to their child’s misdeeds such as distancing from the event, including from one’s child and people who know about it.

Shame is also sometimes laced with a hostile type of anger and can lead individuals to externalize blame onto others who seem to cast a spotlight on one’s own shameful deed (Tangney, Wagner, Fletcher, & Gramzow, 1992). Perhaps in a similar way, child-focused blame for problem behavior is associated with anger and harsh discipline including yelling, spanking, or hitting one’s child (Lorber & Slep, 2005). Given this constellation of findings, we hypothesize that parents’ feelings of shame, but not guilt, will uniquely predict the degree to which parents report wanting to punish their child for his or her misdeeds.

In contrast, we assert that guilt possesses more of a relationship-enhancement orientation, which prompts reparative action in the face of interpersonal harm (Baumeister et al., 1994; Tangney et al., 1996; Wicker et al., 1983). In the context of parenting, we predict that the relationship-enhancement quality unique to guilt will not only manifest in traditional reparative behaviors (i.e., apologizing to those harmed) but will also be apparent in more adaptive forms of parenting that have the goal of helping the child build stronger social relations by understanding why the act was wrong (e.g., why it might have harmed others) so that he or she will behave more appropriately in the future.

Overview of the present studies

We conducted two studies to examine the appraisals and behavioral reactions that uniquely correspond to parents’ feelings of shame and guilt in response to their child’s wrongdoing. Study 1 used a correlational approach to examine the degree to which we can distinguish parental shame and guilt with the same types of event appraisals, self-appraisals, and behavior responses typically measured in the emotion literature (e.g., distancing vs. reparative responses). Study 2 then built off of these results to experimentally manipulate social criticism as a unique predictor of shame, but not guilt, and to measure behavioral responses to the child’s misbehavior that are more specifically drawn from the parenting literature (e.g., harsh punishment or overreaction vs. inductive discipline).

Study 1

Method

Participants

We recruited 110 parents to participate in the study from six locations (a large public university, a smaller community college, a parent organization, an elementary school, a high school, and a religious organization) in the Southwestern and Midwestern United States. They received either US$10.00 or partial course credit for their participation. Initial coding revealed that 17 participants did not follow instructions (gave no narrative, n = 3; child was the target of another’s wrongdoing, n = 3; this event directly victimized the parent, n = 7; a combination of the above, n = 4). We retained the remaining 93 participants for data analysis. Although we do not have access to the population characteristics of all these various groups, we chose to sample from several different locations to increase the heterogeneity of the sample. The final sample was 80% female, with an ethnic breakdown including 77% Caucasian, 15% Latino, 2% Asian American, 2% Native American or Alaskan Native, 1% Black American, and 2% Other. Seventy-two percent of parents were married, 17% divorced, 6% single, 2% widowed, and 2% were in some other arrangement (n = 2). Participants’ current annual income ranged from below US$15,000 to above US$100,000 with the modal response
being US$30,000–US$60,000. Education levels ranged from having some high school to an advanced or professional degree, with the modal participant being a college or trade school graduate.

**Procedures and measures**

We invited parents to participate in a “study regarding the psychology of family relationships.” We gave respondents the survey to take home and complete at their convenience. Participants returned the completed surveys to the investigators either by mail or a research assistant collected them at a designated time and location. The first part of the survey included several individual difference measures unrelated to the present set of hypotheses. The second half of the survey asked parents to write one or two paragraphs describing the worst wrongdoing they could remember one of their children committing between the ages of 3 and 18 years. We told participants they could describe a single event or an ongoing type of behavior; however, it was not to be an incident that victimized the parent personally. After describing the event in detail, participants rated their emotional reactions, appraisals, and behavioral responses to the event on a 1–7 scale (1 = not at all or strongly disagree, 7 = extremely or strongly agree) where higher numbers reflect greater levels of that construct. Participants completed the demographic questionnaire at the end of the packet.

**Shame and guilt.** We presented participants with a list of emotion words and asked them to “rate how much of each emotion they felt as a result of the event they just described.” As in our prior research (Lickel et al., 2005; Schmader & Lickel, 2006), we assessed shame (reliability as measured by Cronbach’s $\alpha$ is .90) with the emotions, ashamed, humiliated, embarrassed, and disgraced; and guilt ($\alpha = .75$) with the emotions, guilty, sorry, remorse, and regret. We embedded these items among 16 other filler emotions. A maximum likelihood factor analysis with oblique rotation performed on these eight items yielded a two-factor solution with all items loading greater than .45 on the predicted factor. The four shame items loaded on the first factor, which accounted for 50% of the variance, and the four guilt times loaded on the second factor, which accounted for an additional 11% of the variance. These shame and guilt composites were significantly correlated with another ($r = .59$, $p < .001$) but shared only about 35% of their variance in common, suggesting that these measures captured two distinct emotion constructs.

**Event appraisals.** We measured publicity with two items: one was a categorical variable in which participants reported whether or not others knew what their child had done. The second was a self-reported subjective sense of publicity (“I felt that the ‘whole world knew’ about the event and I was on display for everyone to see”). These two items were correlated ($r = .26$, $p < .05$), and thus, we standardized and averaged responses to these items to create an index of publicity. We measured perceived harm to others with two items ($r = .47$, $p < .001$): “How severe did this event seem to you?” and “How much damage did this event have for other people (not including your child)?”

**Self-related appraisals.** We assessed image threat ($\alpha = .88$) with five items adapted from prior research (Lickel et al., 2005). Sample items included “I felt that my child’s actions reflected something bad about the type of person I am” and “I was afraid that my child’s behavior would be viewed by others as indicating that I am a bad parent.” We assessed control deficiency as the discrepancy between participants’ mean ratings of actual control and normative control (measured prior to recalling the event). The normative control measure included four items ($\alpha = .66$): e.g., “In general, how much control should parents have over their children’s behavior?” and “Parents should know where their children are and what they are doing.” The actual control measure also included four items ($\alpha = .75$): e.g., “How much control do you have over your children’s behavior?” and “How much do you feel that you can influence your children’s choices and behavior?”
computed control deficiency by subtracting each individual’s actual control score from his or her normative control score.

**Distancing and reparative behaviors.** The final set of questions measured participants’ behavioral reactions to the event using a series of 10 items constructed to reflect the types of distancing and reparative motivations that previous research has shown can differentiate shame and guilt (Tangney et al., 1996; Wicker et al., 1983). We reduced these 10 items to three behavioral response indices based on the results of a maximum likelihood factor analysis with oblique rotation that yielded a three-factor solution with item loadings greater than .30. Two items capturing avoidance of others loaded on the first factor (“avoid the victim” and “avoid others who knew about the event”) and explained 18% of the variance (α = .73). Three items reflecting an approach motivation to repair the harm done loaded on the second factor (“show disapproval of child’s behavior,” “apologize to the victim,” and “make up for what their child had done”) and explained an additional 19% of the variance (α = .69). The third factor included items reflecting efforts to distance oneself from the event (“sink into the floor,” “escape from the event,” “need for space from one’s child,” “change some aspect of themselves,” and “punish their child”) and explained an additional 8% of the variance (α = .68).

**Results**

**Descriptive information on narratives**

Two trained research assistants independently coded the narratives on multiple dimensions for details surrounding the event (e.g., did child cause event, was there a victim, type of misdeed). The first author resolved discrepancies. Parents’ narratives covered a broad range of misbehavior including: 17.2% physical aggression (e.g., pushing, kicking, hitting, biting), 15.1% stealing, 14% drugs/alcohol, 11.8% verbal aggression (e.g., gossiping, making mean comments or threats), 10.8% disobeying, 9.7% dishonesty, 9.7% damaging property (e.g., arson, vandalizing, car accident), 4.3% temper tantrums, 3.2% having sex, 3.2% failures (i.e., poor grades and lacking time management skills), and 1.1% running away. In addition, 39.8% of the events involved a specific victim (e.g., another person was physically or emotionally harmed) and 62.4% were witnessed by someone else (n = 58). The mean age of the child was 11.36 years (SD = 4.58), and 58.1% of the children were male (n = 52). None of the effects reported were significantly moderated by age of child, sex of child, or sex of parent.

**Differentiating parental shame and guilt with event appraisals**

Table 1 is a summary of mean ratings and correlations of main study variables. The two event appraisals, harm to others and publicity, were only moderately correlated, with guilt showing a stronger bivariate relationship to harm, and shame showing a stronger bivariate relationship with publicity. To provide a more specific test of our hypotheses concerning the event appraisals that uniquely predict parental shame and guilt, we conducted a simultaneous regression analysis in which we regressed shame onto publicity and harm to others. This analysis was repeated using guilt as the outcome variable. To isolate which variables predict variance that is unique to either shame or guilt, all analyses predicting one emotion included the other emotion as a covariate (e.g., we regressed shame onto appraisal controlling for guilt; Tangney et al., 1992).

Consistent with our hypotheses, publicity uniquely predicted shame (standardized regression coefficient [β] = .41, p < .001), whereas harm to others did not (β = −.02, p > .10). Furthermore, harm to others

1. We did not include two other items (wanting to make the situation better and wanting to reason with one’s child) in these analyses because they showed ceiling effects, and preliminary analyses revealed that they were unrelated to the emotions measured.

2. We ran diagnostics to confirm that the correlation between shame and guilt did not lead to problems of multicollinearity in any of these analyses (including those reported in Study 2).
Differentiating parental shame and guilt through appraisals of image threat. In other words, feeling that others know about the child’s bad behavior evokes shame in parents because this public exposure elicits an appraisal that one is flawed as a person or parent. To test this mediation, we first regressed image threat onto publicity (controlling for guilt) to establish a significant relationship between these two variables (β = .51, p < .001). Next, we regressed shame onto guilt, publicity, and image threat. This analysis revealed that the original direct relationship between publicity and shame (β = .40, p < .001) was reduced after controlling for image threat (β = .19, p > .10), which itself was a significant predictor of shame (β = .44, p < .001). A Sobel test (Sobel, 1982) confirmed that the reduction in the direct effect was significant, test statistic = 2.51, p < .05.

Differentiating parental shame and guilt with behavioral responses

In the final set of analyses, we examined the role of shame and guilt in predicting the three behavioral responses that we assessed. Because anger is an emotion that predicts parents’ responses to their children’s misbehavior (Lorber & Slep, 2005) and because of anger’s known links to shame (Tangney et al., 2007), we reasoned that the direct effect of publicity on parental shame is mediated uniquely predicted guilt (β = .28, p < .01), whereas publicity did not (β = −.16, p > .10).

Table 1. Means, standard deviations, and bivariate correlations of emotion and appraisal variables in Study 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measure</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
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<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Shame</td>
<td>3.87</td>
<td>1.69</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Guilt</td>
<td>3.66</td>
<td>1.86</td>
<td>.59**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Harm to others</td>
<td>4.16</td>
<td>1.61</td>
<td>.37**</td>
<td>.42**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Publicity</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0.79</td>
<td>.53***</td>
<td>.26*</td>
<td>.43***</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Image threat</td>
<td>3.16</td>
<td>1.60</td>
<td>.70**</td>
<td>.46**</td>
<td>.38**</td>
<td>.60**</td>
<td></td>
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<td>6. Control deficiency</td>
<td>0.40</td>
<td>0.91</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>.37**</td>
<td>.25*</td>
<td>.16</td>
<td>.20</td>
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<tr>
<td>7. Repair</td>
<td>3.63</td>
<td>1.78</td>
<td>.48***</td>
<td>.51***</td>
<td>.55***</td>
<td>.56***</td>
<td>.49***</td>
<td>.29**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>8. Distance from event</td>
<td>3.64</td>
<td>1.44</td>
<td>.50***</td>
<td>.25*</td>
<td>.41***</td>
<td>.35***</td>
<td>.61***</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>.37***</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>9. Avoid others</td>
<td>1.51</td>
<td>1.04</td>
<td>.26**</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>.22*</td>
<td>.23*</td>
<td>.27**</td>
<td>−.02</td>
<td>.20</td>
<td>.43***</td>
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* p < .05. ** p < .01. *** p < .001.
1992) these analyses also include a single item “angry” that we embedded along with the filler emotions that participants rated. These anger ratings were significantly but only modestly correlated with both shame ($r = .36, p < .001$) and guilt ($r = .29, p < .01$). In a series of regression analyses, we regressed each of the behavioral indices simultaneously onto shame, guilt, and anger to isolate the unique effects of each emotion on the three behavioral measures. These analyses revealed that guilt ($\beta = .36, p < .01$) and shame ($\beta = .26, p < .05$), but not anger ($\beta = .01$), uniquely predicted efforts to repair the harm done by the child. Shame ($\beta = .44, p < .001$) and anger ($\beta = .30, p < .01$), but not guilt ($\beta = -.07$), uniquely predicted efforts to distance oneself from the event. Finally, only shame ($\beta = .29, p < .05$), but neither guilt ($\beta = .07$) nor anger ($\beta = .04$), uniquely predicted efforts to avoid others who knew about the event.

Discussion

Findings from Study 1 suggest that although shame and guilt share variance in common, we were able to distinguish ways in which they are unique emotions that parents can feel in response to their children’s wrongdoing. As predicted, parents were more likely to feel shame, but not guilt, to the degree that their child’s wrongdoing seemed publicly exposed, a finding that extends previous emotion research linking publicity with self-caused shame to a case where another’s actions elicit feelings of shame (Smith et al., 2002). The results of a mediational analysis suggested that the reason publicity elevates parents’ feelings of shame is because that feeling of public exposure highlights the perception that they are somehow flawed as a person or a parent.

In contrast, the perceived harm to other people and the extent to which one feels deficient in one’s ability to control one’s children predicted guilt but not shame. Thus, consistent with the notion of guilt as an interpersonal emotion (Baumeister et al., 1994), guilt reactions were sensitive to perceptions of victimization. But in addition, guilt was intricately linked to a feeling that one lacks the control that a parent thinks he or she should have over one’s children.

The findings on parents’ motivational tendencies provided further support that shame and guilt, even when felt for another’s wrongdoing, can predict distinct behavioral responses, and another negative emotion like anger cannot account for these relationships. For example, shame and guilt, but not anger, predicted behaviors that would rectify the situation in some way. Although prior work often shows guilt to have the stronger relationship to reparative motivations, in this data set, shame was significantly predictive of these reparative tendencies as well. This result is perhaps not so surprising since apologizing or making up for what one’s child has done can both repair a damaged relationship (a motive thought to underlie guilt) and repair a tarnished image (a motive thought to underlie shame). The fact that anger was not uniquely associated with these reparative tendencies suggests that negative emotion in general is not driving these responses, but rather that shame and guilt play a unique role in these situations for helping parents regulate the social disruption that their child’s behavior has caused.

Given shame’s greater focus on public exposure and feelings of inadequacy, it is not surprising that shame, but not guilt or anger, was uniquely related to wanting to avoid others who know about or were harmed by the event. Finally, both shame and anger uniquely predicted the cluster of behaviors that involved distancing oneself from the event either by wanting to sink into the ground or show others they disapproved of their child’s bad behavior. This result supports our primary predictions that shame more than guilt predicts distancing motivations. Of note, anger also had a unique relationship with this category of behavior, a finding that is consistent with prior research showing a close link between anger and shame, which is often manifested as externalized hostility (Tangney et al., 1992). Indeed, it is interesting that the desire to punish the child loaded on this factor along with other efforts to distance oneself from the event.
The goal of Study 2 was to replicate and extend these findings in three ways. First, although the narrative approach we took in Study 1 has the advantage of sampling parents’ actual experiences of shame and guilt for their child’s bad behavior, it also introduces variability in the types of events participants recall. Thus, Study 2 used a more controlled paradigm in which we asked parents to imagine their child committing a specific wrongdoing. Vignettes are a commonly used method in research exploring parents’ reactions to children’s behavior (Hastings & Grusec, 1998; Lopez, Schneider, & Dula, 2002; Mills & Rubin, 1990). An important advantage of using a common situation of child’s wrongdoing is that we reduced variability regarding the age of the child, which might otherwise limit our ability to measure discipline strategies that are developmentally specific (e.g., parents are more likely to spank younger children).

The second goal of Study 2 was to explore the effect of publicity on parental shame using a more experimental approach. In Study 1, parents who reported feeling a heightened sense of public exposure and image threat also reported more shame. The correlational nature of these data prevents us from concluding that a sense of public exposure and image threat actually elevate feelings of shame. Thus, in Study 2, we manipulated the type of public exposure participants imagined. Earlier work by Smith et al. (2002) suggests that merely cuing people to think about others knowing about their transgression can elevate feelings of shame. However, given that an appraisal of image threat mediated the effect of public exposure in Study 1, we reasoned that publicity from a critical observer should be especially likely to elevate feelings of shame. To test this possibility in Study 2, we manipulated whether parents imagined that a critical, neutral, or supportive observer had witnessed their child’s misdeed. However, given that an appraisal of image threat mediated the effect of public exposure in Study 1, we reasoned that publicity from a critical observer should be especially likely to elevate feelings of shame. To test this possibility in Study 2, we manipulated whether parents imagined that a critical, neutral, or supportive observer had witnessed their child’s misdeed.

The third goal of Study 2 was to link parental shame and guilt more directly to discrete disciplinary strategies discussed in the parenting literature. Given guilt’s adaptive focus on repairing and maintaining relationships, and the maladaptive focus of shame on repairing threats to one’s self-image, we generally expected these two emotions to relate to different disciplinary strategies. Thus, rather than measure general motivations that were the focus of Study 1, we included adapted versions of the Parenting Scale (Arnold, O’Leary, Wolff, & Acker, 1993) and the Parenting Styles and Dimensions Questionnaire (Robinson, Mandleco, Frost Olsen, & Hart, 1995) in Study 2 to measure parenting practices that have been associated with authoritative, authoritarian, and permissive parenting typologies (Baumrind, 1971).

Authoritative parenting is the type of child-rearing that best corresponds with secure and emotionally fulfilling parent–child relationships, as well as children’s social and moral maturity (Mackey, Arnold, & Pratt, 2001). Since guilt and authoritative parenting both share the goal of promoting secure interpersonal relationships, we reasoned that parental guilt (in contrast to shame) would similarly predict adaptive parenting practices associated with the authoritative parenting style. Specifically, we hypothesized that parental guilt would predict inductive discipline (e.g., explaining the consequences of the child’s behavior, giving reasons why the child should obey rules). While inductive discipline requires more patience, effort, and emotional regulation from the parent, it also communicates respect for the child and in the long run, it helps to foster better socialization by cultivating a deeper understanding for the reasons that underlie expectations for desirable behavioral conduct.

In contrast, we hypothesized parental shame (and not guilt) to predict two different types of maladaptive disciplinary responses associated with authoritarian and permissive child-rearing practices, which are hallmarkmed by relatively less secure and anxious parent–child relationships. Tangney and Dearing (2002) assert that individuals cope with shame by either externalizing the self-blame onto others or by seeking to hide and escape. Thus, in the parenting context, shame could promote both aggressive and highly passive disciplinary styles. These include authoritarian practices such as physical coercion (e.g., spanking, slapping, or grabbing the child),
verbal hostility (e.g., shouting or yelling when child misbehaves), or punishment (e.g., putting the child off somewhere alone with little, if any, explanations). Other less adaptive practices also include highly permissive practices, called lax parenting (e.g., letting bad behavior go) or the act of removing parental warmth (e.g., being less responsive to the child’s feelings immediately after the event), which may convey an avoidance response associated with shame.

Study 2

Method

Participants

We recruited 123 mothers in the Southwestern United States from nine locations (e.g., schools, religious organizations, youth organizations, a parent group, a fitness center) or through participant referrals to participate. All were entered in a raffle to win one of six US$50.00 prizes. As in Study 1, we do not have access to the population characteristics of these various groups, but we selected multiple groups to increase heterogeneity of the sample. The sample was 82.9% Caucasian, 6.5% Latino, 2.4% Black American, 0.8% Asian American, 2.4% Other, with 4.9% who did not indicate ethnicity. Most participants (83%) were married, 4% single, 1.6% widowed, and 6% in another arrangement, and 4.1% who did not indicate marital status. Participants’ current annual income ranged from below US$15,000 to above US$100,000 with a modal response of US$30,000–US$60,000. Education ranged from high school graduate to advanced or professional degree, with a modal response of college or trade school graduate.

Procedure

Mothers received a flyer inviting them to participate in a “study regarding the psychology of family relationships.” We sent respondents a link to an online version of the survey to complete, which automatically stored their data. We designed the online survey so that participants only viewed and completed one section of the study at a time and were not able to jump forward or backward in the survey. Survey instructions described the study as an investigation of parents’ emotional reactions to children’s bad behavior. The instructions further informed participants that they would be reading a vignette, in which they should imagine themselves as vividly as possible in the role of the mother and their own child in the role of the wrongdoer. We encouraged participants to imagine the situation as vividly as possible, envisioning themselves acting in ways described in the scenario and to imagine what types of thoughts and feelings they might have if their child behaved in the described way. The hypothetical scenario involved their child acting aggressively against another child in the following situation:

Imagine that you are in your home with your 6-year-old son and the neighbor’s 4-year-old son who has been left in your care for the afternoon. As you are sitting on the floor reading a story book to them both, you hear the doorbell ring. You hand the book off to your son and tell him to watch the younger one while you go answer the door. You look through the peephole to see who is there before opening the door. You see that it’s [observer manipulation]. When you open the door, your neighbor asks if she could borrow a cup of milk for a recipe she’s in the middle of preparing. You show her in and as the two of you are walking toward the kitchen, you suddenly hear a very loud commotion coming from your son’s room. You both race from the kitchen into his bedroom to see what’s wrong.

You and your neighbor arrive just in time to watch your son angrily strike the younger boy in the face with a large metal toy truck. You grab the truck from his hand just before he’s able to bring it down for a second blow. The little boy has broken into piercing cries and blood is flowing from a cut in his lip. Your son angrily states that the little boy wouldn’t give him back his favorite transformer.

We randomly assigned participants to one of three versions of this scenario in order to
manipulate the type of publicity surrounding the negative event to be critical, supportive, or neutral (Pierce & Lydon, 1998):

**Critical observer:** “a well-respected neighbor who has been somewhat of a thorn in your side over the past year . . . . a very critical and opinionated person.”

**Supportive observer:** “a well-respected neighbor who has been a good source of support to you over the past year . . . . a very understanding and caring person.”

**Neutral observer:** “a well-respected neighbor you’ve known for over a year now.”

After reading the vignette, participants rated their emotional, cognitive, and behavioral reactions to the hypothetical event. Finally, to leave participants with more positive feelings toward their child, we asked them to read and respond to a hypothetical situation in which they imagine their child doing something positive. The final section of the survey asked for participants’ demographic information.

### Measures

Measures of shame ($\alpha = .86$) and guilt ($\alpha = .81$) were identical to those used in Study 1. As in Study 1, participants rated items on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree), where higher numbers reflect greater levels of that construct. As in Study 1, a maximum likelihood factor analysis with oblique rotation on these eight self-conscious emotion items yielded a two-factor solution. The first factor explained 33% of the variance and included regret, remorse, sorry, and guilt, all with loadings greater than .60. The items guilt and remorse also loaded higher than .30 on the shame factor, but to retain the conceptual distinction between the two factors and consistency with the results of Study 1, we included them in the guilt index. The shame and guilt composite were correlated ($r = .67$, $p < .001$), but the magnitude of the relationship suggests that responses to these two scales share less than half (45%) of their variance in common. As a check on the observer manipulation, participants rated their agreement with the item: “The neighbor described in the vignette was a supportive and caring person.”

After making ratings of emotions, participants rated the degree to which they would engage in two types of maladaptive disciplines measured by the Parenting Scale (Arnold et al., 1993). Laxness is a composite of 10 items ($\alpha = .80$; e.g., “If my child got more upset” and “I would back down and give in for the time being”). Overreactivity is also a composite of 10 items ($\alpha = .86$; e.g., “I would spank, grab, slap, or hit my child”). In addition, we used 8 items from the Parenting Styles and Dimensions Questionnaire (Robinson et al., 1995) to form composite measures of induction ($\alpha = .80$; e.g., “I would explain the consequences of the child’s behavior”) and removal of warmth/support (4 items, $\alpha = .82$; e.g., “I might be less responsive to my child’s feelings immediately after the event”).

### Results

#### Descriptive statistics

Table 2 summarizes the means and correlations for emotion ratings, manipulation checks, and discipline strategies. In terms of discipline, mothers said they would be most likely to use inductive punishment ($M = 6.30$), followed by removal of warmth ($M = 3.20$), overreactivity ($M = 2.15$), and then laxness ($M = 1.68$).

**Does the nature of publicity affect parental shame?**

A one-way analysis of variance on the manipulation check of perceived support yielded the expected effect of observer on how supportive participants perceived the neighbor to be
in the story, $F(2, 120) = 49.47, p < .001$. Participants in the critical condition ($M = 2.15$) viewed the neighbor described in the story as less supportive than did participants in the neutral condition ($M = 3.34$) and supportive condition ($M = 5.79$), which also differed from each other, all $p < .002$.

A one-way analysis of covariance on parental shame, controlling for guilt, revealed only a marginal main effect of type of publicity on shame, $F(2, 119) = 2.32, p = .10$. We next tested our a priori hypothesis that a critical observer would elicit more shame compared to a neutral observer by examining the pairwise comparison of shame ratings between these two conditions. As expected, participants in the critical condition reported significantly more shame ($M = 4.20$) than did participants in the neutral condition ($M = 3.60$), $F(1, 78) = 4.77, p < .05$. Participants’ ratings of shame in the supportive condition ($M = 3.87$) were not different from the other two conditions. No other effects were significant, all $F$s < 1, and the observer manipulation had no corresponding effects on guilt ($M_{\text{neutral}} = 4.60, M_{\text{supportive}} = 4.51, M_{\text{critical}} = 4.33$), $F < 1$. Although the overall difference in shame among the three conditions was marginal, these data provide some support that the presence of a critical observer elevated feelings of shame but not guilt.

**Self-conscious emotion predicting discipline strategy**

Finally, we tested parental shame and guilt as unique predictors of the discipline strategies mothers said they would use in the situation. We expected guilt to predict adaptive discipline (i.e., induction) and shame to predict maladaptive strategies (i.e., overreactivity, removal of warmth, and laxness). As in Study 1, we also explored the role of anger in accounting for these relationships between self-conscious emotions and discipline strategies using a single item “angry” that we had included in the emotion questionnaire. As in Study 1, anger was correlated with both shame ($r = .44, p < .001$) and guilt ($r = .37, p < .001$).

Because initial analyses did not yield systematic effects of observer condition on the discipline strategies, the following analyses collapsed across this variable. We conducted a series of regression analyses, regressing each type of discipline strategy onto shame, guilt, and anger simultaneously. As predicted, guilt was the only unique predictor of inductive strategy, ($\beta = .20, p < .05$). Removal of warmth was positively related to shame ($\beta = .34, p < .001$), negatively related to guilt ($\beta = -.22, p = .01$), and positively related to anger ($\beta = .18, p < .05$). Similarly, the tendency to overreact was uniquely related to both shame ($\beta = .22, p = .01$) and anger ($\beta = .26, p < .01$), but not to guilt. Lax parenting was not related to any emotion. Thus, the results strongly support the hypotheses that guilt promotes more adaptive disciplinary strategies, whereas shame promotes the tendency to

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4. The only significant condition difference was on the analysis of removal of warmth, $F(2, 122) = 3.11$, $p < .05$, but is difficult to interpret (i.e., mothers were more likely to remove warmth from their child if they imagined the event being witnessed by a supportive observer, than by either a critical or neutral observer).

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**Table 2. Means, standard deviations, and bivariate correlations between type of self-conscious emotion, manipulation checks, and discipline strategies in Study 2**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measure</th>
<th>$M$</th>
<th>$SD$</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Shame</td>
<td>3.89</td>
<td>1.27</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Guilt</td>
<td>4.48</td>
<td>1.64</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Support</td>
<td>3.79</td>
<td>2.26</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Inductive</td>
<td>6.30</td>
<td>0.87</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.21</td>
<td>-.02</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Remove warmth</td>
<td>3.20</td>
<td>1.56</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.36</td>
<td>.22</td>
<td>-.05</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Overreact</td>
<td>2.15</td>
<td>0.90</td>
<td>.45</td>
<td>.32</td>
<td>.23</td>
<td>-.03</td>
<td>.50</td>
<td>.36</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Laxness</td>
<td>1.68</td>
<td>0.86</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>-.28</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>.36</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < .05. **p < .01.*
engage in maladaptive disciplinary strategies. Furthermore, although anger seems to play some role in maladaptive parenting strategies like overreaction and removal of warmth, shame has a unique relationship with these maladaptive strategies predicting them above and beyond feelings of anger.

Discussion

Results of Study 2 supported our general hypothesis that we can distinguish parental shame and guilt as related but distinct emotions by considering how the variance that is unique to these two emotions is related to different appraisals and disciplinary strategies. First, manipulating an observer of the child’s wrongdoing to be particularly critical elicited more shame (but not guilt) compared to a neutral condition, although the marginal nature of the overall effect raises questions about the reliability of these findings. Furthermore, shame and guilt predicted distinct types of disciplinary strategies to deal with a child’s misbehavior. As hypothesized, parental shame uniquely predicted maladaptive discipline strategies (e.g., overreactivity and removal of warmth), whereas parental guilt uniquely predicted more adaptive discipline strategies like induction and less removal of warmth. Anger also predicted removal of warmth and overreactivity, but shame still explained a portion of the variance in these responses over and above what anger could explain. Although we had speculated that lax parenting might represent an avoidant approach to discipline and thus be related to parental shame, in fact, neither anger nor shame predicted this last discipline style. The inaction flavor of the items in this measure might not capture the avoidance tendencies that feelings of shame elicit.

General Discussion

Research increasingly recognizes that a parent’s affective reactions to his or her child’s actions are important predictors of the parent’s responses to the child. The present research indicates that when a child engages in blameworthy actions, there may be considerable value to examining parents’ discrete emotions of shame and guilt in order to predict how a parent might react. Although parental shame and guilt are related, there are also ways in which they are distinct. Study 1 used parents’ recall of their child’s misbehavior, whereas Study 2 examined parents’ responses to a standardized scenario in which they imagined their child misbehaving. Across both methods, distinct appraisals predicted parental shame and guilt. The severity of harm to others and parents’ perception that they had failed to exercise normative control over the child’s behavior (which we termed control deficiency) predicted variance unique to guilt. On the other hand, the publicity of the child’s wrongdoing and how the child’s behavior might tarnish the parent’s self-image, particularly in the eyes of a critical observer, predicted variance unique to shame.

Parental shame and guilt, however, are not only distinct with regard to parents’ appraisals but also the motivations that parents report feeling in response to these emotions. These motivational consequences are of particular interest because of their potential link to parenting behavior. Indeed, the current research provides the first empirical evidence that shame and guilt have important practical implications for the quality of parenting behavior. Across both studies, guilt predicted what are arguably more adaptive responses to children’s wrongdoings than did shame. In Study 1, whereas both guilt and shame predicted parents’ effort to repair and apologize for the damages their child’s behavior caused, only shame predicted the degree to which parents tried to distance themselves from the negative event. Furthermore, in Study 2, mothers’ feelings of guilt uniquely predicted their preference for inductive strategies in response to their child’s bad behavior, and their rejection of an avoidant strategy like the removal of warmth. In contrast, mothers’ feelings of shame uniquely predicted their preference for harsh punishment (including items tapping into slapping, hitting, spanking, yelling, and swearing at one’s child) and the removal of emotional warmth from their child in response to the negative event they imagined.
It is also important to note that we were able to distinguish shame and guilt not only from one another but also from the anger that parents may feel in response to their child’s misbehavior. Both because there is a strong theoretical link between shame and anger (Tangney et al., 1992) and because past research has examined parental anger (Lorber & Slep, 2005), it was important in our research to rule out anger as an explanation for the role of shame or guilt in predicting parents’ responses. Although ratings of anger were correlated with shame (and to some degree guilt), controlling for anger did not significantly reduce the extent to which shame and guilt predicted parents’ responses. Anger did, itself, also independently predict parental overreaction and removal of warmth in Study 2. Thus, in future research, there will be value to including ratings of parental anger in addition to ratings of shame and guilt. At present however, it appears that anger does not account for the role of shame and guilt in parents’ responses to children’s wrongdoing.

In addition to the contribution to basic research on self-conscious emotions, the present findings also have practical implications concerning the role that emotion plays in parenting behavior. Guilt’s relationship with approach tendencies, like wanting to explain the consequences of the child’s bad behavior, paints a positive picture of the role that this emotion can play in how parents respond to their children. In contrast, our results suggest a more negative role for shame and anger in promoting maladaptive and overly harsh forms of punishment. As such, programs designed to promote more positive models of parenting might consider interventions aimed at changing parents’ emotional responses to their children’s behavior by changing how they appraise those behaviors. For example, teaching parents to appraise their child’s actions not as a mark of shame but as an opportunity to instill moral values could be an effective way to promote guilt instead of shame and foster a more inductive style of parenting.

Limitations and future directions

As we have discussed, our results indicate that parental shame and guilt are each strongly correlated with distinct parental responses to their child’s wrongdoings, particularly in terms of each emotion’s unique relationship with discrete discipline strategies. Although these findings provide a strong preliminary foundation for identifying the unique relationships between these emotions and distinct disciplinary responses, neither study established the causal nature of these relationships. Therefore, the next step for future research should be to employ methods for directly manipulating shame and guilt experiences in order to establish that the emotions do indeed cause distinct disciplinary responses.

Future research on parental shame and guilt may also gain important insights from addressing developmental variables. Although we did not find any effects of the child’s age or sex on our findings in Study 1, it seems plausible that research explicitly designed to compare parents’ reactions to wrongdoings committed by younger children versus adolescents may yield meaningful differences. To the extent that parents feel more responsibility to control younger children, parental guilt may play a more prominent role in responses to younger children’s wrongdoings, whereas it may take a backseat to shame when children enter into adolescence and their personality characteristics are seen as more fixed. In addition, the child’s sex may become a strong moderator of parents’ emotional reactions to their transgressions during early adolescence since gender identification intensifies during this stage of development (Galambos, Almeida, & Peterson, 1990) and parents may hold different behavioral standards for their sons and daughters.

Another potential limitation of the work is that both studies relied on self-report measures that might be subject to social desirability effects. For example, the self-report nature of Study 2 only accounts for motivational tendencies in response to a hypothetical wrongdoing rather than actual disciplinary action. Even so, it is notable that we still found some parents imagining that
they would overreact and remove warmth as a disciplinary strategy. Although we made efforts to control for social desirability in the present work by allowing participants to complete the surveys in the privacy of their own home and emphasizing the anonymity of their responses, future research should include more direct behavioral measures.

Finally, one of the strengths of the present research is that the participants in both studies were actual parents, which allowed us to investigate important relational issues that are far less applicable in the lives of traditional undergraduate university students who account for the majority of participants in psychology experiments. The convenience samples used in the present research do, however, raise the question about the general applicability of these findings. For example, the parents who participated in the current research were predominantly White, middle-class American women, leaving open the question of whether our findings apply to parents from different economic classes or cultures. Our findings are most likely applicable to parents living in individualist cultures, which place strong values on the self and on the nuclear family where most of the responsibility for disciplining children is placed on the parents versus extended family or the community at large. In particular, future research on parental shame and guilt should investigate whether the patterns we found between self-conscious emotion and discipline replicate both in other individualistic populations and in more shame-based cultures (e.g., collectivist cultures) where research shows shame to be far less debilitating than it is for individuals from nonshame-based cultures (Bagozzi, Verbeke, and Gavino, 2003).

Conclusions

The findings of these studies contribute to our understanding of the unique role that shame and guilt play in parents’ reactions to their children’s transgressions. Following past research, the primary question was whether contemporary models that differentiate cognitive antecedents and motivational consequences of shame and guilt experiences caused by self or others (Lickel et al., 2005; Tangney & Fischer, 1995) generalize to the parenting domain.

The results of two studies provide evidence of processes that are largely consistent with mainstream perspectives on self-conscious emotion and offer new conceptual angles from which to consider how publicity and behavioral control variables play out in shame and guilt experiences. Most importantly, the current research illuminates the relationships between shame and guilt, and adaptive versus maladaptive types of parenting behavior.

References


