Children's Attributional Style and Socio – Demographic Factors as Predictors of Shame & Guilt Proneness and Gratitude in Middle Childhood

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Introduction

There is no doubt on the moral nature of shame and guilt. By this, we mean that they are seen as preventive and reparative emotions of the undesirable or reprehensible behavior. The first empirical investigation has been conducted in the field. However, the moral nature of gratitude is not established yet. Its empirical research is in the early phase. One of the latest theoretical conceptions views gratitude as a pure emotion too (McCullough, 2001). The same authors point out that *"…emotions and expressions of gratitude themselves are not moral, but gratitude itself results from and stimulates ethical behavior that is motivated out of concern for another person"*. Thus, following different paths all these three emotions try to fulfill the same function: driving the pro-social behavior. The authors mentioned above give gratitude three useful features. Firstly, they see it as a moral barometer, due to its efficient sensibility to all kinds of change in relationships. Secondly, they see it as a moral motive due to its ability to prompt people to behave pro-socially. Thirdly, as a good reinforcement since the benefactor is motivated to repeat the same kind of behavior in the future.

On the other hand, guilt arises from the consciousness that our behavior hurt someone, and the regret, or preoccupation for the proper effects of our behavior.

Obviously, it is harder to find a real function of shame and yet something can be stated: shame serves as a warning and a prevention signal for the shaming person to stop his behavior toward the confused one. Besides, the previous personal experiences of shame or the mere knowledge of the consequences of an inappropriate behavior can inhibit someone to act shamefully.

It is thus, evident that causal attributions hold a critical position in this interplay. The interaction between their dimensions, Globality versus specificity, internality versus externality, and stability versus instability determines whether the person will firstly experience shame, or guilt which in turn can result in huge differences in the overall behavior and even personality traits. Gratitude is affected too by their interplay. McCullough, Kimeldorf & Cohen (2010) argue that the evolutionary function of recognition is facilitating the collaboration with unfamiliar people and saving the reciprocal altruism in a relationship.

According to Thompson et al. (1998) children who make stable, internal and global attributions for negative events and external, concrete and unstable attributions for positive events are more prone to depressive symptoms than their counterparts with an inverse attributional style. Such consequences derived from the method mentioned above are opposite to hope, pride, optimism, emotional support, feedback to help, pleasure from school, family, friends, and self (Froh, Yurkewicz & Kashdan, 2009). On the other hand, such an unhealthy style is typical for shame – prone children who show difficulty in giving value to their actions after receiving messages they consider disapproving, and depreciatory. Therefore, despite its sensitivity to changes in relationships, research shows that shame does not enhance, nor does it save the actual prosocial behavior. These emotions can be considered as opposite to each other in content and functions. However, those prone to guilt can experience gratitude since it is characterized by specific, not global attributions. Moreover, it motivates the child (and people in general) to express their regret, and when appropriate to show respect and conformity to the authority thus confirming itself as the moral emotion of the new millennium (Tangney & Salovey, 2010). The failures undergone by the child are not seen as consequences of a poor self but as wrong solutions of individual events. Guilt does not take away hope, pride, optimism, emotional support, or the overall estimation of others.

The current study

Considering the relationship among the variables mentioned above the researcher is further interested in exploring the relationship features among them, the effect of attributional dimensions on shame and guilt proneness and gratitude, and the influence of some socio-demographic factors on them. Hence, the following research questions were addressed:

- Is there a relationship between the below-mentioned variables: shame proneness, guilt proneness, gratitude, positive attributions & negative attributions? What is their strength and direction of relationship?
- How well does CASQ – R predict shame proneness/guilt proneness/gratitude? How much variance in shame proneness/guilt proneness/gratitude can be explained by scores of CASQ – R subscales? Which of them is the best predictor?
- What is the effect of age on shame proneness/guilt proneness/ gratitude respectively for males and females?
- Is there a difference in shame proneness/guilt proneness/gratitude respectively for children according to their birth order?

Method

Subjects

The sample comprised 118 students of a public school in Shkoder, Albania, aged 8 to 12 (Mean age 10.45; *SD* = 1.29). 64 of them were female students (54.23%), 53 male students (44.92%), while one student gave no gender information.

Permission of the school administration was taken before the study and standards of ethical conduct were strictly followed.

Measures

Shame and Guilt Proneness

TOSCA -C. It is the most well – known measure of self – conscious emotions: shame & guilt proneness, Alpha pride, Beta pride, externalization and detachment (Tangney et al. 1990). It is a scenario based measure with no forced choice. Each of them is followed by 4 or 5 items giving various responses for the situation. Shame, guilt and externalization score in all of them, while detachment appears ten times, only in adverse scenarios. On the contrary Alpha and Beta, pride appears five times, only in the positive ones. The measure uses a five-point Likert scale (1 – 5) from *Not at all likely* to *Very likely.*

Only shame and guilt proneness subscales were used for the current study. They have shown a strong reliability in Albanian[1], αs.74 for shame subscale, and .77 for guilt subscale. An example

[1] Haka, F. (2016). Effects of the Integrated Humanistic & Cognitive – Behavioral Treatment of Shame in Institutionalized Children. The University of Tirana. Unpublished Dissertation.

scenario is: *Your aunt is giving a big party. You are carrying drinks to people and you spill one all over the floor.*

a. I should have been more careful.

b. My aunt wouldn't mind that much.

c. I would run upstairs to be away from everybody.

d. The tray was too heavy.

Gratitude

GQ – 7. It is a new promising measure adapted for use with young people. It is composed of 7 items that score on a 7 point scale (1 – 7) from *Strongly disagree* to *Strongly agree*. It has shown a moderate reliability in Albanian α = .52.

An example item is: *If I had to list everything that I feel grateful for, it would be a very long list.*

Attributional Style

CASQ – R. It was firstly presented by Seligman et al. (1984), and since then it has continuously known a growing use in research. It includes 24 forced-choice items. Half of them address real events, and half of them negative ones. Each of these subscales has three smaller ones that tap three attributional dimensions: internal – external; global – specific; stable – unstable. The overall composite, as well as the positive and negative subscales, have shown a somewhat weaker reliability than the original CASQ. On the other hand, it is seen as more appropriate than the original scale, especially when used as part of a battery of measures because of its reduced length.

Socio – Demographic Data

At this point, the researcher was interested in the respondents' age, sex, and birth order.

Data gathering

The researcher was accompanied by a trained assistant who read aloud the statements and scenarios during children's classes. They were instructed with appropriate guidelines before the measures administration, or during this process when necessary. It took approximately 40 minutes to the respondents to complete the battery of tests, though time seemed to be smaller in older children.

Conclusions

Variables	**Mean**	***SD***	**Bivariate correlations**							
			1	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6**	**7**	**8**

1. Shame Pr.	39.86	8.03	1	.43***	.26**	-.14*	-.02	-.06	-.01	-.18**
2. Guilt Pr.	58.30	10.61		1	.42***	-.18**	.08	.00	.01	-.21**
3. Gratitude	35.67	6.39			1	-.16**	-.14	-.06***	-.07*	-.25**
4. Positive Att.	7.23	2.27				1	-.22**	.33***	.15***	.72***
5. Negative Att.	4.04	1.67					1	.32***	.42*	.12*
6. Stability D.	3.70	1.22						1	-.09*	.08
7. Internality D.	4.03	1.29							1	-.07
8. Globality D.	3.55	1.82								1

N = 118
**p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001*

After controlling for normality, linearity, and homoscedasticity possible violation Pearson product – moment correlation was used to explore the relationship between shame – proneness, guilt – proneness, gratitude, and the dimensions of attributions. High positive correlations were obtained among shame and guilt proneness and gratitude. As expected the strongest one resulted between shame-proneness and guilt proneness, $r = .43$, $p < .001$, while the weakest one between shame – proneness and gratitude $r = .26$, $p < .01$ as they are practically opposed to each other. Some of the attributions' dimensions showed strong relationships among them, while others obtained modest ones with results ranging from .12 to .72. It is to be noted that despite the strength of the relationship the direction is a positive one. The only exception is the negative correlation between positive and negative attributions of CASQ – R. As for the relationship between self – conscious emotions and attributions' dimensions the strongest one was noted between gratitude and globality dimension $r = -.25$, $p < .01$. On the other hand, shame and guilt proneness showed equally the same weak relationship with internality dimension. Strangely, no relationship was observed between guilt proneness and stability dimension.

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A series of two – way between groups analyses of variance were conducted to explore the impact of sex and age on shame & guilt proneness and gratitude as measured by TOSCA – C and GQ7. Subjects were divided into three groups according to their age (Group1 = 8 – 10 years; Group 2 – 11 years; Group 3 – 12 years). The interaction effect between age and sex was not statistically significant in none of these ANOVAs.

The following result was obtained when the dependent variable was shame: $F = (2, 114) = .006$, $p = .99$. Also, there was no statistically significant main effect for either age or sex. In each case $p > .05$. Post Hoc comparisons using Tukey HSD indicated that only the mean score for the 12 years age group ($M = 41.23$, $SD = 8.11$) was different from the 8 – 10 years age group ($M =$

39.63, *SD* = 7.16) & 11 years age group (*M* = 39.11, *SD* = 8.97). However, all mean scores are only a few points away from each other, indicating no big difference.

When the dependent variable was guilt the following result was obtained for the interaction effect: *F* = (2, 109) = 1.31, *p* = .28, thus showing no statistical significance. Neither age, nor sex reached a significant statistical result: *F* = .13, *p* = .87 for age and *F* = .29, *p* = .75 for sex. Post Hoc comparisons showed that the 8 – 10 and 11 years age groups almost do not differ from each other. The 12 years age group (*M* = 59.31, *SD* = 7.55) indicated a bigger difference.

The results obtained when gratitude was the dependent variable of the analysis showed the following results: *F* = (2, 108) = .20, *p* = .85. In this case p > .05 too. Even the main effect of the independent variables was not statistically significant: *p* = .98 for sex and .35 for age. Tukey HSD test confirmed that there is a negligible difference between 11 & 12 year age groups, but that the 8 – 10 year age group differs somewhat from them (*M* = 36.89, *SD* = 6.63).

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Group	N	Mean	SD	SE	F
1st child	43	39.63	8.50	1.30	
2ndchild	30	41.30	7.35	1.34	
3rd child	20	39.15	7.77	1.74	.639
4th child	12	35.60	10.55	4.72	
5th child	13	40.67	6.81	3.93	
Total	118	39.86	8.03	.80	

Group	N	Mean	SD	SE	F
1st child	43	59.05	9.84	1.52	
2ndchild	30	61.03	8.29	1.51	
3rd child	20	51.05	13.29	2.97	3.532
4th child	12	61.00	9.82	4.39	
5th child	13	64.33	2.08	1.20	
Total	118	58.30	10.62	1.06	

Group	N	Mean	SD	SE	F
1st child	43	36.26	6.28	.97	
2ndchild	29	34.83	6.25	1.16	
3rd child	20	35.05	7.04	1.57	.728
4th child	12	35.00	7.18	3.21	
5th child	13	40.67	3.21	1.86	
Total	117	35.67	6.39	.64	

A series of one-way between groups analysis of variance were conducted to explore the impact of birth order on shame proneness, guilt proneness, and gratitude respectively. The subjects' number ranged from 117 to 118. They were divided into five groups according to their birth

order. To be sure we haven't violated the homogeneity of variance the Levene's test of homogeneity of variances was checked. The ANOVA analysis that explores the impact of birth order on guilt proneness showed a slightly smaller Sig. Value than .05, therefore we consulted the Welsh and Brown – Forsyth tests. The first ANOVA, measuring the impact of birth order on shame proneness, shows no statistical difference among groups as the significance value is clearly greater than .05. On the contrary, the one measuring the impact of birth order on guilt proneness shows a statistically significant result: $F = (4.95) = 3.5$, $p = 0.1$. The third ANOVA doesn't show any statistically significant results as well. Meanwhile, the means plot shows a substantial change in the third group which is further supported by the average scores. However, the effect size calculated using the eta squared was .01 which in Cohen's terms is considered a tiny one.

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The researcher couldn't conduct any multiple regressions using attributions' dimensions as independent variables and shame proneness, guilt proneness and gratitude as dependent ones because the preliminary analyses were not met.

As the results show, neither age nor sex and birth order has any impact on shame and guilt proneness and gratitude. Research provides a vague explanation about the impact of age and sex on the overall experiences of shame and guilt in childhood. However, Walter and Burnaford (2006) point out that they are inconsistent during childhood, while in the onset of adolescence they decrease. Because the subjects' average age was 10.45, this can partially explain the obtained results. There is still a persistent question: what characteristics reduction in the onset of adolescence and how do they relate to shame and guilt proneness? It is with great sorrow that even gratitude doesn't have any significant contributions. If we consider that middle childhood is the time when social justice and fairness awareness rises vigorously and compare these with gratitude characteristics, then we can probably state that these children have insufficient levels of empathy and smaller chances to behave pro-socially. Should we say that there is an apparent deficiency in their emotional education and that they weren't given appropriate emotional messages by their caregivers and probably their community? Though the current study's purpose is different, the findings indicate that there is an implication of these factors.

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