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### Internal Shame, External Shame, and Depressive Symptoms: A Meta-Analytic Review

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# Internal Shame, External Shame, and Depressive Symptoms: A Meta-Analytic Review

## Disciplines

Psychology

## Comments

Poster presented at Faculty Scholarship Celebration, St. John Fisher College, October 25, 2012.

## INTRODUCTION

- Shame is a self-conscious emotion marked by painful negative self-evaluation after some (usually social) transgression
- Shame is linked to many psychological disturbances, including mood (Kim, Thibodeau, & Jorgensen, 2011) and anxiety disorders (e.g., Lee, Scragg, & Turner, 2001).
- Yet, shame is not one thing. There may be subtypes of shame that show differential links to psychopathological variables. Two such subtypes are *internal shame* and *external shame* (Gilbert, 1998).
- Internal shame, which originates inside the self, involves self-generated criticism and negative self-evaluation. External shame, which originates outside the self, involves a distressing awareness that others view the self negatively. Internal shame is painful insofar as the actor condemns herself; external shame is painful insofar as the actor possesses knowledge that others condemn her.
- External shame could show tighter links to indices of psychological distress compared to internal shame. Why?
- Because external shame involves the awareness that one has lost the favor of others in the social landscape, it reflects evolutionarily primitive anxieties related to the possibility of ostracism from the group. The more dire circumstances surrounding elicitation of external shame could be mirrored by equally serious deleterious consequences for psychological adjustment.
- Although the self-condemnation of internal shame may be painful, one's own views of self may ultimately be less important than others' views of self.
- The current study utilized meta-analytic techniques to test the hypothesis that external shame is more closely associated with depressive symptoms compared to internal shame.

## METHOD

### Literature Search

- We conducted a literature search of the PsycNET database using the search terms depress\* (for depression, depressed, and depressive) with shame\* (for shame, shamed, and shaming). Reference lists of articles obtained using these means were reviewed to locate additional published articles. Unpublished data were obtained by contacting authors of articles identified using the above procedures.

### Inclusion Criteria

- Studies were included if they (a) were published in an English language journal or book, or were obtained using previously described procedures for the identification of unpublished data; (b) measured shame and depressive symptoms using self-report scales that produced quantitative values of all constructs; and (c) reported information necessary for computation of an effect size, or information absent from the published article was obtained through contact with authors.

### Analysis of Effect Sizes

- 226 effect sizes were identified. We generated a smaller subset of studies that utilized scales that we could unambiguously categorize as measuring internal or external shame. Effect sizes were analyzed according to procedures outlined in Lipsey and Wilson (2001).

## RESULTS

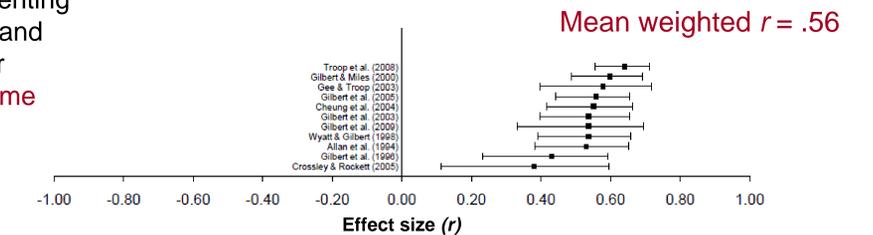
- As predicted, external shame showed a significantly stronger association with depressive symptoms ( $k = 11$ ;  $r = .56$ ; 95% CI = .52 – .60) compared to internal shame ( $k = 63$ ;  $r = .42$ ; 95% CI = .39 – .45),  $Q_B(1) = 31.74$ ,  $p < .001$ .

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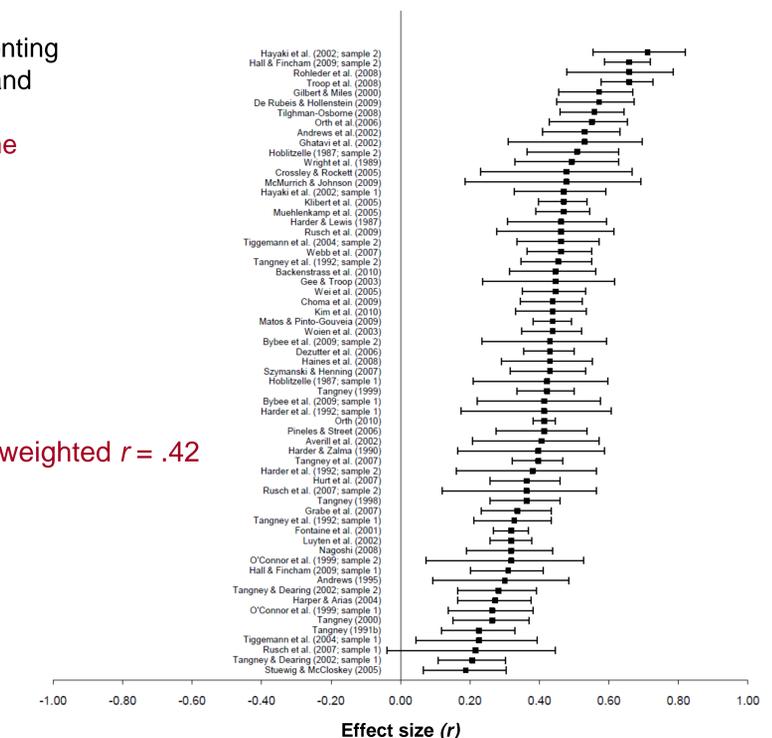
## RESULTS (continued)

**Figure 1.** Forest plot representing Mean weighted effect sizes and 95% confidence intervals for associations of *external shame* and depressive symptoms.



**Figure 2.** Forest plot representing Mean weighted effect sizes and 95% confidence intervals for associations of *internal shame* and depressive symptoms.

Mean weighted  $r = .42$



## DISCUSSION

- Perhaps because of the more dire circumstances surrounding elicitation of external shame, this subtype showed stronger links to depressive symptoms than internal shame.
- Because both types of shame showed statistically reliable associations with depressive symptoms, neither type of shame should be regarded as psychologically wholesome.
- Only one scale (Goss, Gilbert, & Allan, 1994) could be unambiguously categorized as measuring external shame. There exists the possibility that other properties of this scale help account for robust links to depressive symptoms above and beyond its sensitivity to external shame.