

Guilty, But Not Ashamed: “True” Self-Conceptions Influence Affective Responses to Personal Shortcomings

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Abstract

The current research examined how true self-conceptions (who a person believes he or she truly is) influence negative self-relevant emotions in response to shortcomings. In Study 1 ($N = 83$), an Internet sample of adults completed a measure of authenticity, reflected on a shortcoming or positive life event, and completed state shame and guilt measures. In Study 2 ($N = 49$), undergraduates focused on true versus other determined self-attributes, received negative performance feedback, and completed state shame and guilt measures. In Study 3 ($N = 138$), undergraduates focused on self-determined versus other determined self-aspects, reflected on a shortcoming or neutral event, and completed state shame, guilt, and self-esteem measures. In Study 4 ($N = 75$), undergraduates thought about true self-attributes, an achievement, or an ordinary event; received positive or negative performance feedback; and completed state shame and guilt measures. In Study 1, differences in true self-expression positively predicted shame-free guilt (but not guilt-free shame) following reminders of a shortcoming. Studies 2–4 found that experimental activation of true self-conceptions increased shame-free guilt and generally decreased guilt-free shame in response to negative evaluative experiences. The findings offer novel insights into true self-conceptions by revealing their impact on negative self-conscious emotions.

It is an undeniable fact of life that, despite our very best efforts, we sometimes fall short of the standards that we strive to meet. Students fall short of their academic goals. Dieters succumb to the temptation of “forbidden” sweets. Even exceptionally talented athletes like LeBron James and Tiger Woods do not always live up to their competitive (and moral) expectations. These types of experiences have the obvious potential to trigger self-evaluative processes that can elicit a wide range of negative consequences. Yet, while some people respond to negative evaluative events in a potentially dysfunctional fashion (e.g., aggression; Baumeister, Smart, & Boden, 1996), other people appear to be relatively unaffected by their shortcomings and display little to no defensiveness. What accounts for such divergent reactions? A number of factors likely play a role, but an emerging literature suggests that the activation and expression of one’s “true” self-concept may be especially important (e.g., Kernis, 2003). In the current research, we examined whether or not true self-conceptions influence the affective reactions that people have to personal shortcomings. We focused on the distinction between shame and guilt, and drew upon research indicating that “shame-free guilt” (guilt controlling for shame) and “guilt-free shame” (shame controlling for guilt) are differentially related to important psychological outcomes (e.g., depression; Orth, Berking, &

Burkhardt, 2006). We hypothesized that true self-conceptions would promote greater shame-free guilt and less guilt-free shame in response to personal shortcomings.

True Self-Conceptions and Security in the Face of Self-Evaluative Threat

References to the “true self” abound. They can be found in the everyday expressions of both Eastern and Western cultures (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999), in classic psychological theories (e.g., Becker, 1962; Horney, 1937; Rogers, 1961), and in more recent empirical perspectives on psychological health. Kernis (2003), for example, posited that the awareness and expression of one’s perceived true self contribute to overall well-being, and self-determination theory argues that the pursuit of goals consistent with who one believes he or she truly is aids in the fulfillment of basic psychological needs (e.g., Deci & Ryan, 1995; Sheldon & Elliot, 1999). These perspectives and lay

beliefs center on the idea that the true self is composed of core attributes that are relatively immutable and define who people really are inside (Johnson, Robinson, & Mitchell, 2004). The true self-concept is thus commonly conceptualized as the characteristics that people perceive to be indicative of who they truly are, regardless of whether or not those characteristics are accurate or always expressed publicly (e.g., Schlegel & Hicks, 2011). Moreover, the true self-concept is theoretically and empirically distinct from other self-concepts (e.g., ideal selves, possible selves) in that it is experienced in the present (cf. Bargh, McKenna, & Fitzsimons, 2002) and is directly tied to people's inner states.

There is now broad support for the importance of true self-conceptions for psychological functioning. For instance, greater authenticity (defined as the "the unobstructed operation of one's true, or core, self in one's daily enterprise"; Kernis, 2003, p. 13) predicts higher self-esteem, physical health, and vitality (Kernis & Goldman, 2006), and merely increasing the cognitive accessibility of true self-conceptions or the feeling of metacognitive ease when describing true self-conceptions increases perceptions of meaning in life (Schlegel, Hicks, Arndt, & King, 2009; Schlegel, Hicks, King, & Arndt, 2011). In addition, a growing literature has supported classic theorizing (e.g., Horney, 1937; Rogers, 1961) by showing that true self-conceptions can alleviate some of the negative repercussions of self-evaluative threats. In one study, people who reported greater (vs. lower) authenticity were less likely to distort the negative implications of threatening life events (e.g., breaking rules; Lakey, Kernis, Heppner, & Lance, 2008). This attenuated defensiveness was mediated by authentic individuals' higher levels of mindfulness, a state characterized by a reduced concern over the evaluative implications of internal and external experiences (cf. Hodgins & Knee, 2002). In experimental research, affirmations of true self-conceptions have similarly eliminated self-handicapping prior to threatening tests and reduced the accessibility of rejection-related thoughts prior to an evaluative social interaction task (Schimel, Arndt, Banko, & Cook, 2004). Taken together, these and other findings (Schimel, Arndt, Pyszczynski, & Greenberg, 2001; Arndt, Schimel, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 2002) support the role of true self-conceptions in "quieting" the ego and attenuating defensive tendencies to protect the global self from negative evaluations.

True Self-Conceptions and Negative Self-Conscious Affect

While research suggests that true self-concept activation reduces defensive reactions to negative evaluative events, research has not fully considered how it might also trigger qualitatively different types of affective responses. Rather than affecting just the *degree* of a particular response, true self-conceptions may also promote distinct patterns of self-conscious emotions. Shame and guilt, in particular, are affective

states that are commonly distinguished by the target of people's self-evaluative processes (Lewis, 1971; see Tangney & Tracy, 2012). Responding to an event with a negative evaluation of the self ("I'm a terrible person") promotes feelings of shame, whereas responding to an event with a negative evaluation of the behavior ("What I did was terrible") promotes feelings of guilt. This distinction between "self" and "behavior" evaluations and their differential impact on shame and guilt has garnered much empirical support (see Tangney & Dearing, 2002) and offers a foundation for making specific predictions about the affective states that might be triggered by true self-conceptions.

Indeed, highly ego-involved states promote the negative global self-evaluations that fuel feelings of shame, but not guilt. For example, a heightened concern with demonstrating one's competence to others (i.e., performance goal) fosters responses to negative self-evaluations that are consistent with shame (Dweck & Legget, 1988; Pekrun, Elliot, & Maier, 2006), and situations that amplify ego involvement (e.g., evaluative audiences) are likely to amplify global concerns about the self's inadequacy that catalyze feelings of shame, but not guilt (Dickerson, Gruenewald, & Kemeny, 2004). Moreover, the exaggerated ego involvement that is characteristic of narcissism has been offered as an explanation for why narcissism is positively associated with the proneness to experience shame after controlling for the proneness to experience guilt (Gramzow & Tangney, 1992). These associations between heightened ego involvement and the unique experience of shame (but not guilt) suggest that true self-conceptions may attenuate propensities to experience shame following personal shortcomings due to their mitigating impact on ego involvement.

On the other hand, this attenuated ego involvement may also set the stage for an enhanced propensity to experience negative feelings about personal shortcomings that are decoupled from global self-evaluations (i.e., guilt). For example, a less ego-involved goal orientation (i.e., learning goal) increases effort in the face of personal setbacks (e.g., Dweck & Legget, 1988) and promotes a belief that performance is directly related to effort (Nicholls, Patashnick, & Nolen, 1985). Improvement motivation and the tendency to attribute failures to effort are notably consistent with the motivational signature and attribution patterns uniquely tethered to feelings of guilt (Tracy & Robins, 2006). There is also evidence that true self-conceptions may fuel similar processes, as affirmations of the true self (vs. achievements) increase the upward counterfactuals that people generate about negative life events (Schimel et al., 2001). These upward counterfactuals have been shown to trigger improvement motivation (e.g., Markman, McMullen, & Elizaga, 2008) and feelings of guilt (but not shame) over personal shortcomings (Mandel & Dhami, 2005). There is thus conceptual and empirical support for the notion that, in the face of personal shortcomings, true self-conceptions may attenuate negative feelings about the self's inadequacy that are unique to shame, but enhance the negative feelings decoupled from self-evaluations that are unique to guilt.

The Present Research

Guided by the foregoing analysis, we assessed whether true self-conceptions affect the specific type of negative feelings that people experience in response to personal shortcomings. We followed previous research (e.g., Tangney, Wagner, Hill-Barlow, Marschall, & Gramzow, 1996) and analyzed the effects of true self-conceptions on shame-free guilt (guilt controlling for shame) and guilt-free shame (shame controlling for guilt). This analytic approach has proved to be important, as shame and guilt are correlated and their relationships to certain outcomes are obscured when this shared variance is not accounted for (Paulhus, Robins, Trzesniewski, & Tracy, 2004). For instance, shame-free guilt is a more robust negative predictor of aggression than guilt alone (not controlling for shame), and guilt-free shame is a more robust positive predictor of aggression than shame alone (not controlling for guilt). This analytic approach also aligns with our conceptual focus on negative self-conscious feelings indicative of global self-evaluations (i.e., guilt-free shame) and negative self-conscious feelings decoupled from global self-evaluations (i.e., shame-free guilt). We hypothesized that true self-conceptions would increase feelings of shame-free guilt and decrease feelings of guilt-free shame in response to personal shortcomings.

STUDY 1

The relationship between authenticity and negative self-conscious emotions following reminders of a personal shortcoming was assessed in Study 1. Three interrelated components of authenticity were assessed: authentic living, acceptance of external influence, and self-alienation (Wood, Linley, Maltby, Baliousis, & Joseph, 2008). *Authentic living* reflects how frequently people express their true selves and behave in ways consistent with their core values/beliefs. *Acceptance of external influence* reflects how much people believe they should adhere to others' expectations and introject others' views. *Self-alienation* reflects how much people subjectively experience a feeling of disconnect from or uncertainty about who they truly are. We expected that authentic living would have the most robust associations with shame-free guilt and guilt-free shame because it most closely reflects the expression and activation of true self-conceptions in everyday life. We hypothesized that, following reminders of a personal shortcoming, authentic living would positively predict shame-free guilt and negatively predict guilt-free shame.

Methods

Participants. Eighty-three (44 females) adults ($M_{\text{age}} = 32.75$, $SD_{\text{age}} = 11.54$) living in the United States were recruited from Amazon Mechanical Turk (see Burhmester, Kwang, & Gosling, 2011).¹ Participants were compensated \$0.45.

Materials and Procedure. Participants accessed the online survey and were presented with a cover story describing the

study as an examination of how personality affects memories for life events. After reading this information, participants completed a filler personality measure (Ten Item Personality Inventory [TIPI]; Gosling, Rentfrow, & Swann, 2003) and the multifaceted measure of trait authenticity (Wood et al., 2008) described above. Participants indicated how descriptive of them 12 statements were on 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very well*) scales. Each item taps into one of three distinct components of authenticity (e.g., authentic living, "I am true to myself in most situations"; acceptance of external influence, "I am strongly influenced by the opinions of others"; self-alienation, "I feel alienated from myself"), and each subscale was reliable (authentic living, $M = 5.67$, $SD = 1.15$, $\alpha = .90$; acceptance of external influence, $M = 3.04$, $SD = 1.43$, $\alpha = .89$; self-alienation, $M = 2.75$, $SD = 1.57$, $\alpha = .91$).

After the authenticity measure, participants completed a second filler measure and a "life event description task" that served as the personal shortcoming manipulation. Participants in the shortcoming condition were asked to identify and describe a time in their life when they did something that hurt someone's feelings. This topic was selected based on evidence that such events equally arouse both shame and guilt (Keltner, 1996). Participants in the positive event condition were asked to identify and describe a time in their life when they did something to help someone. All participants identified the event, identified their relationship to the person they hurt/helped, and wrote a brief description of what they did to hurt/help the person.

Participants then completed two measures of state shame and guilt. They first completed the State Shame and Guilt Scale (Marschall, Sanftner, & Tangney, 1994), which consists of a series of statements indicative of shame (e.g., "I feel humiliated, disgraced") and guilt (e.g., "I feel remorse, regret"). Participants were instructed to respond based on how they were currently feeling. The responses were made on 1 (*not feeling this way at all*) to 8 (*feeling this way very much*) scales and were averaged to create state shame ($M = 2.66$, $SD = 1.82$, $\alpha = .94$) and guilt ($M = 3.06$, $SD = 1.94$, $\alpha = .94$) scores.

Following the Marschall et al. (1994) measure, participants indicated the extent to which they were currently feeling a variety of positive (e.g., interested, alert, proud) and negative (e.g., afraid, hostile, irritable) emotions. These emotions were taken from the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS; Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988) and were not critical to our hypotheses. Embedded within these items, however, were five items used in previous research (Dickerson, Kemeny, Aziz, Kim, & Fahey, 2004) to measure state shame (ashamed, disgraceful) and guilt (guilty, regretful, remorseful). Responses were made on 1 (*very slightly or not at all*) to 5 (*extremely*) scales and were averaged into state shame ($M = 1.96$, $SD = 1.29$, $r = .83$) and guilt ($M = 2.24$, $SD = 1.34$, $\alpha = .95$) scores.

Because the two state shame and two state guilt measures were scaled differently, we standardized the average scores on each of those measures. The standardized scores on the two state shame measures were averaged to create a composite

shame index ($r = .78$), whereas the standardized scores on the two state guilt measures were averaged to create a composite guilt index ($r = .80$). Correlations between key study variables are presented in Table 1.

Results

Primary Analyses. We subjected the state guilt and state shame composites to regression analyses by entering state shame (or state guilt) in Step 1, event condition (hurt = 0, help = 1) and authentic living (mean-centered) in Step 2, and the Event Condition \times Authentic Living interaction in Step 3.

State (Shame-Free) Guilt. As presented in Table 2, significant event condition and authentic living main effects on shame-free guilt were qualified by the predicted Event Condition \times Authentic Living interaction (Figure 1). Authentic living positively predicted shame-free guilt among participants who recalled a time when they hurt someone's feelings, $\beta = .20, t(78) = 3.72, p < .001$, but was unrelated to shame-free guilt among participants who described a time when they helped someone, $\beta = -.03, t(78) = 0.48, p = .631$.

Parallel analyses examining the acceptance of external influence and self-alienation effects were also conducted. Neither acceptance of external influence nor self-alienation interacted with event condition to predict state guilt ($ps > .347$). In addition, the Event Condition \times Authentic Living interaction remained significant when controlling for the effects of these variables, $\beta = -.15, t(74) = 2.14, p = .036$.

Table 1 Study 1: Correlations Among Variables

	1	2	3	4	5
1. Authentic living	—	-.50**	-.55**	-.05	-.21 [†]
2. External influence		—	.60**	.22 [†]	.27*
3. Self-alienation			—	.23*	.32**
4. State guilt composite				—	.91**
5. State shame composite					—

Note. [†] $p < .06$. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Table 2 Study 1: Results of Primary Regression Analyses

	Predicting State Guilt				Predicting State Shame			
	B(SE)	β	t	ΔR^2	B(SE)	β	t	ΔR^2
<i>Step 1</i>				.827**				.827**
State shame	.92(.05)	.91	$t(81) = 19.68^{***}$					
State guilt					.90(.05)	.91	$t(81) = 19.68^{***}$	
<i>Step 2</i>				.042**				.036**
Event condition	-.29(.08)	-.15	$t(79) = 3.50^{***}$.19(.09)	.10	$t(79) = 2.11^*$	
Authentic living	.09(.04)	.11	$t(79) = 2.40^*$		-.12(.04)	-.14	$t(79) = 3.28^{***}$	
<i>Step 3</i>				.012**				.005 [†]
Event Condition \times Authentic Living	-.19(.07)	-.15	$t(78) = 2.81^{**}$.13(.07)	.11	$t(78) = 1.80^{\dagger}$	

Note. [†] $p = .075$. ** $p < .01$. * $p < .05$.

State (Guilt-Free) Shame. Also as presented in Table 2, significant event condition and authentic living main effects on guilt-free shame were qualified by a marginal Event Condition \times Authentic Living interaction. Authentic living was negatively related to guilt-free shame in the shortcoming condition, $\beta = -.21, t(78) = 3.68, p < .001$, but was unrelated to guilt-free shame in the positive event condition, $\beta = -.05, t(78) = 0.74, p = .463$.

Parallel analyses examining the acceptance of external influence and self-alienation effects were also conducted. Neither acceptance of external influence nor self-alienation interacted with event condition to predict guilt-free shame ($ps > .446$). The Event Condition \times Authentic Living interaction was not significant when these variables were included in the model, $\beta = .11, t(74) = 1.40, p = .165$.

Ancillary Analyses. Although our conceptual and empirical focus was on shame-free guilt and guilt-free shame, we also conducted regression analyses that did not account for the overlapping variance between shame and guilt.

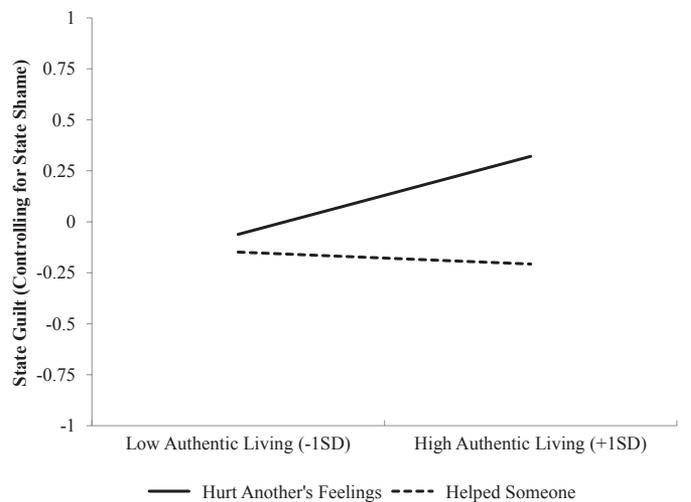


Figure 1 Event Reflection \times Authentic Living interaction on state guilt (Study 1).

State Guilt (Not Controlling for State Shame). When state shame was not included as a covariate, there was a significant Event Condition \times Authentic Living interaction on state guilt, $B = -.48$, $SE = .17$, $\beta = -.39$, $t(79) = 2.89$, $p = .005$. The nature of this interaction was, however, quite different from that observed for shame-free guilt. There was no relationship between authentic living and state guilt in the personal shortcoming condition, $\beta = .12$, $t(79) = 0.85$, $p = .400$, but authentic living negatively predicted state guilt in the positive event condition, $\beta = -.47$, $t(79) = 3.13$, $p = .002$.

State Shame (Not Controlling for State Guilt). When state guilt was not included as a covariate, there was a marginally significant Event Condition \times Authentic Living interaction, $B = -.33$, $SE = .18$, $\beta = -.27$, $t(79) = 1.90$, $p = .061$. As with state guilt above, authentic living was unrelated to state shame in the shortcoming condition, $\beta = -.10$, $t(79) = 0.70$, $p = .488$, but negatively related to state shame in the positive event condition, $\beta = -.51$, $t(79) = 3.18$, $p = .002$.

Discussion

Study 1 provided initial support for our hypotheses. Following reminders of a personal shortcoming, differences in the everyday expression of true self-conceptions (authentic living) positively predicted a form of negative self-conscious affect that is decoupled from global self-evaluations (shame-free guilt). In contrast, there was a nonsignificant tendency for authentic living to negatively predict feelings of guilt-free shame, a form of negative self-conscious affect indicative of global feelings about the self's inadequacy. These effects only emerged when the overlapping variance between shame and guilt was statistically removed, suggesting that the effects of true self-conceptions on shame and guilt following shortcomings may be suppressed when the common variance between these emotions is not accounted for (Paulhus et al., 2004).

STUDY 2

We aimed to extend the Study 1 results in Study 2 by experimentally inducing people to focus on characteristics that define who they "truly are" or characteristics that other people want them to possess. This manipulation was modeled after procedures utilized in previous research, and its effects have been found to emerge independent of the objective valence of the self-characteristics that participants generate (Schlegel et al., 2009). Following the manipulation, all participants received negative performance feedback on an extremely difficult intelligence test, allowing us to assess online reactions to a recently experienced event rather than a retrospectively recalled one (as in Study 1). All participants then completed the State Shame and Guilt Scale featured in Study 1 (Marschall et al., 1994). We expected that participants who generated true self-characteristics would evidence greater shame-free guilt and

less guilt-free shame relative to participants who generated self-characteristics based on others' expectations.

Methods

Participants. Forty-nine (28 females) introductory psychology students at Texas A&M University participated for course credit ($M_{\text{age}} = 18.78$, $SD_{\text{age}} = .77$).

Materials and Procedure. Participants completed the study on laboratory computers in private cubicles. Following filler measures, they were asked to generate either five traits that reflect who they truly are or five traits that other people want them to possess. All participants then completed a difficult version of the Remote Associates Test (RAT; Mednick, 1962), which was utilized to induce a failure experience. The RAT was described as a reasoning task that is positively associated with future academic and professional success. Each RAT problem (10 total) presented a series of three words (e.g., *cheese, blood, music*) that were linked in some way to a fourth word (e.g., *blue*). Participants' task was to generate the fourth word for each problem. Standardized difficulty ratings were used to create a very difficult version of the test, and participants were informed that the computer would calculate their score. All participants privately read that they scored in the 13th percentile of all university students.

Finally, all participants completed the State Shame and Guilt Scale (Marschall et al., 1994) featured in Study 1. Responses were made on 1 (*disagree strongly*) to 7 (*agree strongly*) scales and averaged to create state shame ($M = 2.14$, $SD = 1.67$, $\alpha = .82$) and guilt ($M = 2.63$, $SD = 1.38$, $\alpha = .83$) composites.

Results

Preliminary Analyses. As expected, performance on the RAT was poor ($M_{\text{correct}} = 0.67$, $SD_{\text{correct}} = 0.90$) and did not differ as a function of the self-trait generation task, $t(47) = .38$, $p = .709$. It is thus likely that participants had a difficult and negative evaluative experience.

Primary Analyses. Analyses of covariance (ANCOVAs) were performed on state guilt (controlling for shame) and state shame (controlling for guilt), respectively.² Shame and guilt were correlated, $r = .65$.

State (Shame-Free) Guilt. Shame-free guilt was higher, $F(1, 45) = 8.93$, $p = .005$, $\eta_p^2 = .17$, among participants who identified true self-characteristics ($M = 2.94$, $SD = 1.11$) relative to those who generated self-characteristics expected by others ($M = 2.22$, $SD = 1.17$).

State (Guilt-Free) Shame. Guilt-free shame was lower, $F(1, 45) = 5.35$, $p = .025$, $\eta_p^2 = .11$, among participants who

identified true self-characteristics ($M = 1.90$, $SD = .99$) relative to participants who generated self-characteristics expected by others ($M = 2.46$, $SD = 1.18$).

Ancillary Analyses. We also assessed the effects of true self-conceptions on state shame and guilt when the overlapping variance between these states was not statistically removed.

State Guilt (Not Controlling for State Shame). An independent-samples t -test revealed a marginal effect of self-aspect condition on state guilt, $t(46) = 1.87$, $p = .067$. Participants who identified true self-characteristics reported somewhat greater state guilt ($M = 2.90$, $SD = 1.11$) than participants who generated self-characteristics expected by others ($M = 2.28$, $SD = 1.17$), a pattern that is consistent with the ANCOVA results on shame-free guilt above.

State Shame (Not Controlling for State Guilt). There was no difference in state shame, $t(46) = 0.47$, $p = .641$, between participants who identified true self-characteristics ($M = 2.08$, $SD = 0.99$) and those who generated self-characteristics expected by others ($M = 2.23$, $SD = 1.18$).

Discussion

The primary results of Study 2 indicate that the activation of true self-conceptions causally impacts the nature of people's affective reactions to negative evaluative events. Although all participants experienced the same evaluative event, their affective responses to it were uniquely shaped by whether they had previously been asked to generate self-characteristics that reflect who they truly are. Participants who identified true self-characteristics, relative to participants who generated characteristics expected by others, evidenced stronger feelings of shame-free guilt and weaker feelings of guilt-free shame. Similar patterns were also observed with state shame and guilt when their overlapping variance was not accounted for, but the effects did not reach statistical significance. Thus, as in Study 1, it appears that the effects of true self-conceptions most prominently emerge for shame-free guilt and guilt-free shame.

STUDY 3

Of course, given the strong associations between shame and guilt, one might wonder whether the approach of controlling for the overlapping variance between these measures substantially alters the meaning of the constructs. We addressed this issue in Study 3 by including a measure of state self-esteem. If the nonoverlapping variances between shame and guilt reflect the constructs that are being targeted, then, based on previous theory and research (e.g., Leith & Baumeister, 1998), state self-esteem should negatively predict guilt-free shame and be unrelated to shame-free guilt.

Participants in Study 3 were induced to write about self-characteristics that are based on their own expectations or the

expectations of others. This manipulation was modeled after the idea that a person's true self is perceived to be self-determined and free from the valuing conditions of others (Rogers, 1961). Following this manipulation, all participants reflected on a personal shortcoming or a neutral event and subsequently completed measures of state shame, state guilt, and state self-esteem. We hypothesized that reflecting on self-determined characteristics prior to reflecting on a personal shortcoming would increase feelings of shame-free guilt and decrease feelings of guilt-free shame relative to reflecting on self-attributes that are based on others' expectations. We expected no differences in the neutral event condition.

Methods

Participants. One hundred thirty-eight (84 females) psychology students at Texas A&M University participated for course credit ($M_{\text{age}} = 18.68$, $SD_{\text{age}} = .88$).

Materials and Procedure. Participants completed the study in private cubicles on laboratory computers and were told that the study would investigate how personality shapes people's life descriptions. Participants completed an initial personality measure (TIPI; Gosling et al., 2003), which was followed by the self-conception manipulation. Half of the participants were asked to describe aspects of themselves that are based on their *own* expectations and evaluations (true self condition), whereas the other half of the participants were asked to describe aspects of themselves that are based on the expectations and evaluations that come from other people in their lives.

Following this self-description task, all participants completed the "life event description task" utilized in Study 1. Participants in the personal shortcoming condition described a time when they had hurt someone's feelings. Control participants reflected on a time when they had made plans with someone, a more neutral event than the control topic featured in Study 1.

All participants then completed the two state shame and guilt measures described in Study 1. Responses to both measures were made on 1 (*strongly disagree* or *not at all*) to 7 (*strongly agree* or *extremely*) scales and were averaged to create shame ($M = 2.04$, $SD = 1.19$, $r = .64$) and guilt ($M = 2.57$, $SD = 1.54$, $r = .70$) composites. Because both measures were scaled on a 1–7 scale, we did not standardize scores prior to combining them into the composites.

In addition to shame and guilt, participants also completed the Rosenberg (1965) Self-Esteem Scale, which was modified to reflect participants' current feelings. The self-esteem scale was presented between the two state shame and guilt measures. Responses to each item (e.g., "RIGHT NOW, I am satisfied with myself") were made on a 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) scale and averaged into a state self-esteem composite ($M = 5.64$, $SD = 1.06$, $\alpha = .89$).

Table 3 Study 3: Results of ANCOVAs on Shame-Free Guilt and Guilt-Free Shame

	Shame-Free Guilt		Guilt-Free Shame	
	Hurt Feelings	Made Plans	Hurt Feelings	Made Plans
Self-determined aspects	2.93 (.116)	2.21 (.115)	1.86 (.095)	2.12 (.094)
Other-determined aspects	2.55 (.115)	2.49 (.117)	2.10 (.092)	1.95 (.093)

Note. Means and standard errors by condition.

Results

Primary Analyses. Separate 2 (self-aspect) \times 2 (life event) ANCOVAs were conducted on state guilt (controlling for shame) and state shame (controlling for guilt), respectively. Shame and guilt were correlated, $r = .88$.

State (Shame-Free) Guilt. For shame-free guilt, there was no effect of self-aspect condition ($p = .667$), but a significant event reflection effect did emerge, $F(1, 131) = 11.00$, $p = .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .08$. These effects were qualified by a significant Self-Aspect \times Event Reflection interaction, $F(1, 131) = 8.32$, $p = .005$, $\eta_p^2 = .06$.³ As seen in Table 3 (panel A), shame-free guilt did not vary as a function of self-aspect condition among participants who reflected on a time when they had made plans ($p = .086$). After thinking about a time when they had hurt someone's feelings, however, participants who reflected on self-determined aspects reported greater shame-free guilt than participants who reflected on self-aspects derived from others' expectations, $F(1, 131) = 5.51$, $p = .020$, $\eta_p^2 = .04$.

State (Guilt-Free) Shame. For guilt-free shame, neither the self-aspect nor event reflection main effects were significant ($ps > .557$), but the Self-Aspect \times Event Reflection interaction did emerge, $F(1, 131) = 4.77$, $p = .031$, $\eta_p^2 = .04$. As seen in Table 3 (panel B), there were no differences in guilt-free shame among participants who reflected on a time when they had made plans ($p = .208$). In contrast, after reflecting on a time when they had hurt someone's feelings, participants in the self-determined aspects condition had marginally less guilt-free shame than participants in the other-determined aspects condition, $F(1, 131) = 3.32$, $p = .071$, $\eta_p^2 = .03$.

Ancillary Analyses. We also conducted two sets of ancillary analyses. First, we conducted separate 2 (self-aspect) \times 2 (life event) ANOVAs on state shame and guilt when the overlapping variance between these states was not statistically removed. Second, given the strong correlation between state shame and state guilt, we conducted ancillary analyses to better explicate the meaning of the nonoverlapping variances between state shame and guilt.

State Guilt (Not Controlling for State Shame). The ANOVA on state guilt returned only a main effect of life

event, $F(1, 132) = 18.37$, $p < .001$; all other effects, $ps > .311$. Thinking about hurting someone's feelings increased guilt ($M = 3.07$, $SD = 1.53$) relative to thinking about making plans ($M = 2.02$, $SD = 1.35$).

State Shame (Not Controlling for State Guilt). The ANOVA on state shame also only returned a significant life event main effect, $F(1, 132) = 14.25$, $p < .001$; all other effects, $ps > .606$. Thinking about hurting someone's feelings increased shame ($M = 2.35$, $SD = 1.16$) relative to thinking about making plans ($M = 1.66$, $SD = 0.96$).

Associations Between State Self-Esteem, Shame-Free Guilt, and Guilt-Free Shame. We examined the partial correlation between state self-esteem and state guilt (controlling for state shame), as well as the partial correlation between state self-esteem and state shame (controlling for state guilt), to assess the construct validity of shame-free guilt and guilt-free shame. Consistent with previous research (e.g., Leith & Baumeister, 1998), state guilt was not correlated with state self-esteem after controlling for state shame ($r = .07$), but state shame was correlated with state self-esteem after controlling for state guilt ($r = -.38$). Thus, despite the strong association between state shame and state guilt, the variances that remain when one is covaried out of the other do show expected relationships with state self-esteem. This suggests that the primary analyses are accounting for meaningful unique variance in guilt and shame.

Discussion

The results of Study 3 provide additional support for the primary hypotheses. After reflecting on a personal shortcoming, participants who focused on true-self-conceptions experienced greater shame-free guilt and marginally less guilt-free shame than participants who focused on aspects of themselves that are expected by others. These effects were specific to shame-free guilt and guilt-free shame, as similar results did not emerge when the overlapping variance between shame and guilt was unaccounted for. This pattern of results converges with the results of Studies 1 and 2 and further demonstrates that true self-conceptions influence the type of affective responses that people experience when faced with personal shortcomings.

STUDY 4

Despite the convergent findings of Studies 1–3, two important issues remain. First, the manipulations up to this point have compared true self-conceptions to self-conceptions that are based on the expectations of others. While previous research indicates that such self-conceptions do not differ in valence (e.g., Schlegel et al., 2009), it is plausible that participants view true self-conceptions as more socially desirable or positive than self-attributes fueled by others' expectations. This raises the possibility that the findings of Studies 2 and 3 may be driven by the positivity of the self-characteristics that participants generated, rather than their links to the true self. To address this, we included a condition in Study 4 that asked participants to reflect on an important accomplishment in their lives. Accomplishments are obviously positive self-relevant experiences, but they do not necessarily reflect true self-attributes. Indeed, Arndt and colleagues (2002) argued that accomplishments are often tethered to external valuing conditions and demonstrated that writing about true self-characteristics reduced conformity relative to writing about an achievement. We utilized the Arndt et al. (2002) manipulation in Study 4 to compare the effects of true self activation to another distinct positive self-attribute.

A second remaining issue is that the comparison conditions featured in the earlier studies, as well as the achievement condition described above, may be unintentionally affecting people's affective responses and thus driving the observed effects. For example, it seems plausible that focusing on others' expectations could heighten one's propensity to experience guilt-free shame, given the heightened ego involvement and salience of an evaluative audience (real or imagined) that such topics might arouse. To address this potential interpretational ambiguity, Study 4 included a more neutral condition in which participants were asked to reflect on an ordinary event in their lives. We again predicted that participants who wrote about true self-conceptions, relative to both an accomplishment and an ordinary event, would show greater feelings of shame-free guilt and weaker feelings of guilt-free shame following a negative evaluative event.

Methods

Participants. Seventy-five (51 females) introductory psychology students at the University of Missouri participated for course credit ($M_{\text{age}} = 19.08$, $SD_{\text{age}} = 1.22$).

Materials and Procedure. Participants completed the study in private computer cubicles. They first completed a series of filler measures and the self-concept activation task. Following Arndt et al. (2002), participants in the true self condition were asked to reflect on and write about the characteristics that define who they truly are, deep down. Participants in the positive self-attribute condition reflected on and wrote about a significant accomplishment in their lives. Participants in the

neutral condition reflected on and wrote about a recently experienced ordinary event.

Following the self-concept activation task, participants were randomly assigned to one of two versions of the RAT. As in previous research (McFarlin & Blascovich, 1984), standardized difficulty ratings were used to create easy and difficult versions of the test. Correct answers and feedback ostensibly regarding how participants performed relative to other students were presented upon completion. Participants in the easy (difficult) RAT condition read: "Your performance on the RAT is above (below) average relative to other University students. Overall, you scored in the 87th (13th) percentile." This feedback was presented on the computer screen so that participants reviewed their feedback in privacy, free from social evaluation pressures. All participants then completed the Marschall et al. (1994) state shame ($M = 2.14$, $SD = 1.67$, $\alpha = .82$) and guilt ($M = 2.63$, $SD = 1.38$, $\alpha = .83$) measure.

Results

Primary Analyses. Separate 3 (self-concept) \times 2 (RAT condition) ANCOVAs were conducted on state guilt (controlling for shame) and state shame (controlling for guilt). State shame and guilt were correlated, $r = .59$.

State (Shame-Free) Guilt. For shame-free guilt, there was no effect of RAT or self-concept condition ($ps > .132$), but the Self-Concept \times RAT interaction was significant, $F(2, 66) = 4.07$, $p = .022$, $\eta_p^2 = .11$.⁴ As seen in Figure 2, shame-free guilt did not vary as a function of self-concept condition following the easy RAT ($ps > .15$). Following the difficult RAT, however, participants who described true self-aspects reported greater shame-free guilt than participants who reflected on accomplishments ($p = .006$) and ordinary events ($p = .024$). Participants in the accomplishment and ordinary event conditions did not differ ($p = .424$).

State (Guilt-Free) Shame. For guilt-free shame, there was a marginal RAT main effect, $F(1, 68) = 3.68$, $p = .059$,

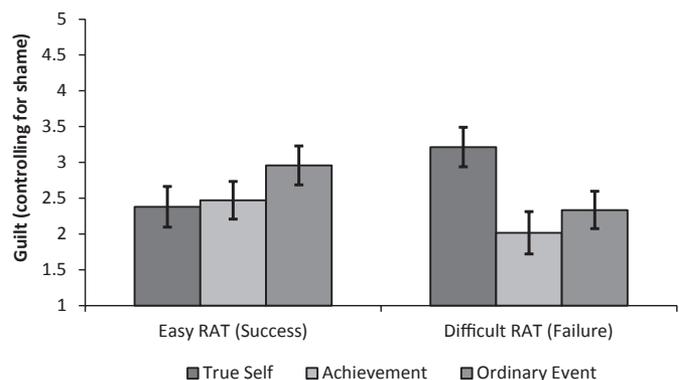


Figure 2 RAT \times Self-Concept interaction on state shame-free guilt. Error bars represent ± 1 standard error.

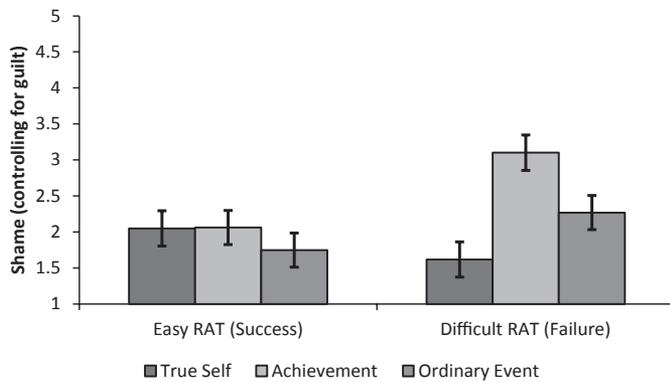


Figure 3 RAT × Self-Concept interaction on state guilt-free shame. Error bars represent ± 1 standard error.

$\eta_p^2 = .05$, and a significant main effect of self-concept condition, $F(2, 68) = 5.25$, $p = .008$, $\eta_p^2 = .13$. These effects were qualified by the Self-Concept × RAT interaction, $F(2, 68) = 4.73$, $p = .012$, $\eta_p^2 = .12$. As seen in Figure 3, there were no differences in guilt-free shame among participants in the easy RAT condition ($ps > .358$). Within the difficult RAT condition, however, reflecting on true self-conceptions produced less guilt-free shame than reflecting on an accomplishment ($p < .001$) and marginally less guilt-free shame than reflecting on a neutral event ($p = .061$). Participants in the accomplishment condition also experienced greater shame-free guilt than those in the ordinary event condition ($p = .018$).

Ancillary Analyses

State Guilt (Not Controlling for State Shame). A 2 (self-concept) × 2 (RAT) ANOVA on state guilt returned no significant effects ($ps > .176$).

State Shame (Not Controlling for State Guilt). A parallel ANOVA on state shame returned a significant Self-Concept × RAT interaction, $F(2, 69) = 4.10$, $p = .021$. There were no differences in shame among participants in the easy RAT condition ($ps > .725$). Within the difficult RAT condition, however, reflecting on an accomplishment produced more shame than reflecting on true self-attributes ($p < .001$) and a neutral event ($p = .009$). There was no difference in shame between true self and ordinary event participants ($p = .391$).

Discussion

Consistent with Studies 1–3, the activation of true self-conceptions influenced participants' affective reactions to a negative evaluative event. The primary analyses indicated that participants who wrote about true self-attributes evidenced greater shame-free guilt than participants who wrote about an accomplishment and ordinary event. Participants in the true self condition also evidenced less guilt-free shame than participants who wrote about an accomplishment and marginally

less guilt-free shame than participants who wrote about an ordinary event. This pattern of results suggests that the effects observed in Studies 1–3 are driven by the activation of true self-conceptions and are likely not due to the heightened positivity of those self-conceptions.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

Four convergent studies tested the hypothesis that true self-conceptions would promote feelings of shame-free guilt and mitigate feelings of guilt-free shame in response to personal shortcomings. A consistent effect of true self-conceptions on shame-free guilt emerged. Differences in the frequent expression of true self-conceptions positively predicted shame-free guilt among participants who thought about hurting someone's feelings (Study 1), and inducing participants to think about true self-characteristics (vs. other-determined characteristics and achievements) elevated shame-free guilt following reminders of shortcomings and negative performance evaluations (Studies 2–4). In contrast, there was a general tendency for true self-conceptions to attenuate guilt-free shame following negative evaluative experiences, but these effects did not reach statistical significance in all studies. This may suggest that the effects of true self-conceptions on guilt-free shame are generally less robust than the effects on shame-free guilt and may require more powerful operationalizations to consistently detect them. It is also important to note that the observed effects were specific to the nonoverlapping variances of shame and guilt (i.e., shame-free guilt and guilt-free shame). The effects of true self-conceptions on shame and guilt were inconsistent when their shared variance was not statistically controlled. Nevertheless, the current research provides initial evidence that true self-conceptions do play a role in shaping the nature of people's affective reactions to personal shortcomings.

Such evidence extends the growing literature on the importance of true self-conceptions for psychological well-being. Much research has shown that the activation or operation of true self-conceptions can promote a less defensive orientation to self-relevant threats. For example, affirming the true self reduces defensive self-handicapping (Arndt et al., 2002), and individual differences in authenticity negatively predict defensive distortions of past negative behaviors (Lahey et al., 2008). This previous work potentially casts true self-conceptions as critical buffering agents against the negativity associated with threatening evaluations. While they certainly mitigate the need for defensive responding, the present research suggests that true self-conceptions do not buffer people from *all types* of negativity. Rather, true self-conceptions seem to promote a response to shortcomings characterized by negative feelings about a specific behavior that are decoupled from global self-evaluations (i.e., shame-free guilt).

The present research also helps inform when negative evaluative events will trigger shame-free guilt or guilt-free shame. Early work on the nature of guilt and shame cast doubt on general speculations that shame was fueled by public

shortcomings and guilt was fueled by private ones (Tangney et al., 1996). Taking a different approach, Higgins (1987) argued that certain types of self-discrepancies would be differentially related to shame and guilt. A discrepancy between attributes that a person believes he or she actually possesses and the attributes that other people want him or her to *ideally* possess was theorized to elicit shame, whereas a discrepancy between attributes that a person believes he or she actually possesses and the attributes that other people believe he or she *ought* to possess was theorized to elicit guilt. The link between these *actual*, *ideal*, and *ought* self-discrepancies has received limited support, however, with some research actually finding that all types of self-discrepancies are exclusively linked to shame (Tangney, Niedenthal, Covert, & Barlow, 1998). The current research noticeably departs from these earlier approaches by focusing on the activation of true self-conceptions, aspects of the self that are theoretically distinct from the actual, ideal, and ought selves emphasized in self-discrepancy theory (cf. Bargh et al., 2002). Our findings suggest that true self-conceptions play an active role in determining people's affective experiences following personal shortcomings. Given the dynamic implications of shame-free guilt and guilt-free shame for aspects of well-being (e.g., Tangney & Tracy, 2012), the current studies may offer a promising foundation for future efforts to understand affective antecedents of psychological health.

The robust associations between true self-conceptions and positive psychological functioning (e.g., Kernis & Goldman, 2006) may also inspire speculation that the affective outcomes targeted in the current research could account for those relationships. There is indeed a fairly long history of conceptualizing shame as a purely maladaptive emotion and guilt as a more adaptive one. When conceptualized in this way, the suggestion that shame-free guilt and guilt-free shame might account for the trajectories of true self-conceptions on well-being seems reasonable. However, emerging theory and research have begun to cast some doubt on this relatively simplistic view of these emotions, suggesting that both maladaptive forms of guilt and adaptive forms of shame exist (e.g., Luyten, Fontaine, & Corveleyn, 2002). Future research should thus consider this possibility and elucidate whether true self-conceptions can inform both positive and negative aspects of shame and guilt.

Of course, the current findings also raise an important question about why true self-conceptions have the potential to enhance shame-free guilt and attenuate guilt-free shame following personal shortcomings. This research was primarily focused on the initial question of whether these self-conceptions give rise to distinct affective responses and was therefore not positioned to elucidate the more fine-grained processes involved. Nevertheless, existing views on self-conscious emotions suggest that true self-conceptions likely influence these affective states by shaping the cognitive responses that people have to their shortcomings. For example, there is evidence that true self-conceptions promote upward-

counterfactual cognitions (Schimel et al., 2001), which in turn have been linked to heightened feelings of guilt (Mandel & Dhami, 2005). Future research should certainly look to uncover the mechanisms underlying the current effects and determine whether self-conscious emotions play a mediating role in other outcomes associated with true self-conceptions. In addition, while age did not moderate any of the results noted above, future considerations of the developmental processes that contribute to the associations between true self-conceptions and self-relevant emotions are needed.

CONCLUSION

In sum, the current research extends what is known about the ways that true self-conceptions affect people's reactions to threatening events. While previous research has indicated that true self-conceptions reduce defensiveness and enhance well-being, the current findings demonstrate that they also promote a unique pattern of affective responses to personal shortcomings. The expression and activation of who one believes one truly is set the stage for a negative affective state that is decoupled from generally negative evaluations of the self.

Notes

1. There were no significant effects involving age for any of the analyses below.
2. In all studies, we identified outliers based on studentized deleted residuals (McClelland, 2000). We excluded any case that was greater than $|3.00|$. All excluded cases exceeded the critical t -value when $p < .01$. One outlier was excluded from the current study (studentized deleted residual = 4.06), but including this case in the analyses does not substantially alter the results. The self-conception effect on guilt (controlling for shame) remains significant ($p = .041$), whereas the self-conception effect on shame (controlling for guilt) is slightly attenuated ($p = .065$).
3. Two outliers were excluded from both sets of analyses for this study (studentized deleted residuals $> |3.00|$). When these cases are included in the analyses, the Self-Aspect \times Event Reflection interaction effect on both guilt ($p = .036$) and shame ($p = .040$) remains significant.
4. Two outliers were excluded from these analyses (studentized deleted residuals $> |3.00|$). When these cases are included, the Self-Concept \times RAT interaction is attenuated ($p = .081$), but the simple self-conception effect within the difficult RAT condition remains significant ($p = .05$); intrinsic self participants reported more shame-free guilt than both extrinsic self ($p = .02$) and ordinary event ($p = .052$) participants.

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