



Encyclopedia of Sport and Exercise Psychology

Self-Conscious Emotions

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Shame, guilt, pride, and embarrassment are considered self-conscious emotions that are evoked by self-reflection and self-evaluation. They are founded in social relationships whereby people interact, evaluate, and judge themselves and others. As such, it not surprising that self-conscious emotional experiences are prevalent in sport and exercise settings. In fact, it has been argued that self-conscious emotions are central to motivating and regulating most of people's thoughts, feelings, and behaviors.

Self-Conscious Emotions Versus Basic Emotions

Basic or primary emotions (e.g., happiness, sadness, anger, fear, disgust, surprise) have been studied more frequently in sport and exercise psychology (SEP) research compared to self-conscious emotions. This imbalance of research focus may be due to the difficulty of assessing self-conscious emotions, the complexity of understanding these emotions, or the limited understanding of the distinction between basic and self-conscious emotions. The primary distinguishing feature of self-conscious emotions from basic emotions is that their elicitation requires self-awareness and self-representations. A second distinctive feature of self-conscious emotions is that they emerge later in childhood than basic emotions since they require the formation of stable representations and an awareness of socially appropriate standards that are used for evaluation. A third distinction between basic and self-conscious emotions is that the former is believed to promote survival goals (e.g., fear may cause an individual to avoid a large, angry opponent after a competitive match), whereas self-conscious emotions are thought to promote behaviors that increase the stability of social hierarchies and affirm status roles (e.g., team sport cooperation, dominance). Additionally, self-conscious emotions guide behaviors that are socially valued and acceptable and foster avoidance of behaviors that may lead to disapproval. A fourth distinguishing feature of self-conscious emotions is that they do not have unique, universally recognized facial expressions. Nonetheless, a growing body of evidence suggests that a few of the self-conscious emotions can be identified when specific body postures and head movements accompany the facial features of each expression (e.g., one look at the opponent's downcast, blushing facial expression and slouched body posture after missing the open net would likely portray embarrassment). Finally, self-conscious emotions are more cognitively complex compared with basic emotions. Although basic emotions involve relatively simple appraisals, the elicitation of self-conscious emotions requires individuals to form stable representations about who they are and to direct attention toward those representations. These capacities allow individuals to engage in various complex self-evaluative processes that elicit self-conscious emotions.

Given that the sport environment tends to exemplify conditions for the experience of self-conscious emotions (i.e., socially constructed, evaluative, public forum where the body and performances are on display and may be judged by oneself and others), it is likely that self-conscious emotions of shame, guilt, embarrassment, and pride are tied to sport participation experiences that foster sustain-ability or dropping out in sport.

Shame

Shame is an acutely painful emotion that individuals experience when they fail to meet internalized social standards. Shame implies the perceived or feared loss of social status and a failure to live up to one's own standards of excellence, with a focus on

deeply rooted global causes (e.g., I am not good at sports). Thus, shame involves negative feelings about the *self*. The phenomenological experiences that accompany shame include a sense of worthlessness, humility, and shrinking, and the desire to hide, or disappear. Generalized forms of this highly painful state are consistently linked to a host of maladaptive psychological, physical, and behavioral outcomes including increased depressive symptoms, anxiety, anger, cortisol dysregulation, cardiovascular reactivity, substance abuse, self-injurious behavior, decreased self-esteem, and adaptive personality characteristics like agreeableness and conscientiousness. Researchers targeting body-related shame also report unique correlates compared with generalized forms of shame including increased body monitoring, weight rumination, body concern, body image importance, internalization of the thin ideal, social physique anxiety (SPA) and also decreased global self-worth, physical self-perceptions, body self-acceptance, self-determined regulations, and physical activity (PA).

Guilt

Guilt is a negative emotion that involves a sense of tension, remorse, and regret over a “bad thing” done with a focus on a specific *behavior* that caused the experience (e.g., I didn't practice enough and missed the winning goal). Feelings of guilt are also frequently accompanied by a preoccupation with the transgression, rumination about the behavior, and thoughts of changing the current situation. As such, guilt motivates an act to repair the transgression instead of avoiding the situation in an attempt to protect the self. For example, an individual who feels guilty about eating junk food might engage in PA in an attempt to alleviate the transgression of eating poorly.

There is some question in the literature as to whether guilt is an adaptive or maladaptive emotion. The traditional view is that guilt plays a significant role in psychological and physical pathology. Frequent references are made to the maladaptive nature of guilt characterized by chronic self-blame and obsessive rumination over the transgressions. Feelings of guilt are also consistently and positively linked to depressive symptoms, anxiety, and low self-esteem. Body-related guilt is further associated with increased body monitoring, weight rumination, body concern, body image importance, internalization of the thin ideal, SPA, negative affect and decreased self-esteem, physical self-perceptions, positive affect, and body self-acceptance. However, more recent research has stressed the adaptive functions of guilt, particularly for prosocial behaviors such as motivation and PA. For example, an athlete who feels guilty for missing a practice may do extra training on his own time to make up for the lost practice.

While often confounded conceptually and statistically, recognizing that shame and guilt are distinct emotions may help clarify issues regarding the adaptability of guilt. Such a distinction is necessary given that shame and guilt emotional experiences often overlap, and the co-occurrence of guilt and shame may mask the adaptive functions. That is, an individual may start with off with a guilt experience (e.g., I can't believe I didn't exercise today) but then intensify and generalize the failure to the self (e.g., ... I'm such a bad person). This sequence of appraisals may lead to a loss of the advantages associated with guilt. In cases like this, not only is the exerciser presented with regret over a specific behavior that needs to be fixed but she is also burdened with feelings of disgrace for being an inadequate person. Thus, it is guilt accompanied with shame that most likely leads to the more negative outcomes (obsessive rumination and self-blame)

often associated with guilt experiences. One way to address this issue in SEP is to use measures that appropriately distinguish between shame and guilt and/or use statistical corrections to develop guilt-free shame and shame-free guilt scores.

Embarrassment

Embarrassment is a negative emotion that requires attributions to internal causes yet the experience of this emotion does not depend on cognitive appraisals (i.e., stability, globality, and controllability). That is, embarrassment can occur from events caused by stable, uncontrollable, and global aspects (e.g., being publicly exposed as an incompetent athlete) or by events caused by unstable, controllable, and specific attributions (e.g., tripping during a soccer game in front of spectators). Moreover, embarrassment occurs only when focus is placed on the *public self* (the self as perceived by real or imagined others) and activates corresponding public self-representations.

The phenomenological experiences that accompany embarrassment include a sense of blushing and wanting to hide. Embarrassment is also associated with several physiological reactions including steady increases in both systolic and diastolic blood pressure (BP), heart rate (HR), cortisol, and reddening of the face. When embarrassment is proportional to the eliciting event, it is a productive emotion that stimulates appeasing behavior, elicits favorable evaluations from others, and usually resolves social situations. On the contrary, excessive or unnecessary feelings of embarrassment over extended periods of time can lead to maladaptive behaviors including timidity, passivity, and antisociality.

Pride

One of the least studied self-conscious emotions in SEP is pride, which is a positive emotion that results from an individual engaging in valued behaviors or presenting with positive characteristics (e.g., exercising, being physically fit, participating in sport). Two facets of pride have been consistently identified in the literature: *hubristic* (or alpha) and *authentic* (or beta) pride. Hubristic pride is experienced as uncontrollable and global aspects of the self (e.g., I *have* a great body) typically involving feelings of personal grandiosity and superiority to others, whereas authentic pride is focused on specific, controllable achievements and behaviors (e.g., I *finished* the marathon I *trained for*). Thus, hubristic pride is more closely linked to stable attributions, abilities, and global positive traits such as inherent muscularity or athletic skill, whereas authentic pride is more closely linked to attributions of effort and specific goal attainment and accomplishments like successfully losing weight after following an exercise program, or performing well at an athletic event. Furthermore, hubristic pride is associated with phenomenological descriptions such as arrogant, snobbish, egotistical, and conceited, whereas authentic pride is associated with phenomenological ratings of being accomplished, achieving, confident, and successful. Thus, authentic pride is related to adaptive, prosocial, and achievement-motivated personality profiles (e.g., high self-esteem, who are extraverted, agreeable, and conscientious) compared to the maladaptive personality profiles (e.g., narcissistic, self-aggrandizing, disagreeable, and nonconscientious) related to hubristic pride.

Although hubristic pride is highly positive and emotionally rewarding, it is difficult to sustain since it is focused on the self and not a specific behavior. Furthermore, those

high in hubristic pride may have problems with interpersonal relations, since placing focus on themselves is likely to interfere with the needs and goals of other people. This may be problematic in team sports where collective goals are necessary for long-term success. In sport and exercise contexts, authentic pride is associated with feelings of achievement and motivation to engage in goal-directed behaviors such as PA and the accomplishment of sport-specific goals.

Sex Differences

Researchers have found that there are sex (and likely gender) differences in both the establishment of standards, rules, and goals and the evaluation process that is required for the elicitation self-conscious emotions. Women are more likely than men to make a global appraisal following failure, which leads to the elicitation of shame. Contrarily, men tend to endorse hubristic pride more than women do. Equivocal responses for men and women have been reported for authentic pride, guilt, and embarrassment. Differences in appraisals are most likely due to early socialization (in the classroom, home, on the field or court), yet additional research is needed to explore the reasons fostering the sex differences in the experience of self-conscious emotions and to explore such differences in various sport and PA participants.

Cultural Differences

Culture has an impact on the way individuals conceptualize the self. Individuals from collectivistic cultures (e.g., East Asian cultures) typically conceptualize the self as being interdependent with others in a larger social context. On the other hand, individuals from individualistic cultures (Western cultures) typically view the self as separate from others. Researchers indicate that self-conscious emotions that focus on the public self and others, such as shame and embarrassment, are more commonly experienced in individuals from collectivistic cultures. Such emotions tend to be valued and even viewed as an appropriate emotion in collectivist cultures because they reaffirm the individual's place and sense of belonging within the social group. However, since individuals do not view themselves as separate from their relationships with others, shame and guilt may be less distinct in collectivistic cultures. In contrast, those in individualistic cultures more commonly experience authentic pride. To date, cultural samples have been primarily restricted to North America and East Asia with a focus on generalized shame, guilt, and pride, limiting cross-cultural comparisons across a wide range of self-conscious emotions and within various sport and PA contexts.

- guilt
- guilt and shame
- embarrassment
- shame
- the self
- emotion
- collectivistic cultures

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See also

- [Basic Emotions in Sport](#)
- [Self-Compassion](#)

- [Social Comparative Emotions](#)
- [Social Physique Anxiety](#)

Further Readings

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