

Two Faces of Shame

The Roles of Shame and Guilt in Predicting Recidivism

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Abstract

Psychological research using mostly cross-sectional methods calls into question the presumed function of shame as an inhibitor of immoral or illegal behavior. In a longitudinal study of 476 jail inmates, we assessed shame proneness, guilt proneness, and externalization of blame shortly after incarceration. We interviewed participants (N = 332) 1 year after release into the community, and we accessed official arrest records (N = 446). Guilt proneness negatively and directly predicted reoffense in the 1st year after release; shame proneness did not. Further mediational modeling showed that shame proneness positively predicted recidivism via its robust link to externalization of blame. There remained a direct effect of shame on recidivism: Unimpeded by defensive externalization of blame, shame inhibited recidivism. Items assessing a motivation to hide were primarily responsible for this pattern. Overall, our results suggest that the pain of shame may have two faces—one with destructive potential and the other with constructive potential.