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# Positive and negative perfectionism and the shame/guilt distinction: adaptive and maladaptive characteristics

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## Abstract

This study examined relationships among guilt, shame, pride, and perfectionism, with a college sample ( $N = 230$ ). Research has linked shame and guilt to perfectionism, typically viewed as maladaptive. Some theories suggest guilt may be adaptive. The present study draws a distinction between two different kinds of perfectionism, positive and negative. Using Terry-Short, Owens, Slade, and Dewey's (1995). PNP scale to measure positive (PP) and negative (NP) perfectionism, our results support the utility of distinguishing between positive and negative perfectionism. NP correlated positively with state-shame, state-guilt, and shame-proneness. PP demonstrated a positive correlation with pride and negative correlations to state shame and anxiety. These results imply that shame and guilt may differ; though guilt may not always be adaptive.

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*Keywords:* Positive and Negative Perfectionism; Perfectionism; Shame; Guilt; Pride; Anxiety; Hostility

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## 1. Distinguishing shame and guilt

Shame and guilt are similar emotions, but they are commonly distinguished. One way of describing the distinction is the view that shame focuses on the self, while guilt focuses on a

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specific action (Lewis, 1971; Lewis, 1992; Miller, 1996; Lutwak & Ferrari, 1996; Tangney & Dearing, 2002; Pattison, 2000). After bumping into someone, a guilt-prone person is more likely to say, “sorry, doing that was stupid” while a shame-prone person would say, “I did that because *I*’m stupid.” The guilty wrongdoer feels upset about the action, and then he or she acknowledges that the action has violated or hurt another person, motivating reparative action (Tangney & Dearing, 2002; Lutwak & Ferrari, 1996), like confessing, apologizing, or making-up for the act with compensatory actions. Shame, in contrast, is narcissistic, in that the wrongdoer is mostly concerned about his or her own feelings, rather than those of the person that has been violated (Tangney & Dearing, 2002; Lutwak & Ferrari, 1996). The transgressor becomes more concerned with hiding his or her defective self from others. In this view, guilt may be more adaptive than shame.

It was once believed that shame was experienced only when one’s transgressions were made public, whereas guilt was experienced in private. However, shame and guilt can both be experienced in either public or private (Tangney & Dearing, 2002). Although shamed people may feel more exposed; they do so even when they are the only ones aware of their wrongdoing.

Although Kaufman (1996) suggests a relationship between shame and maladaptive traits, he proposes that guilt is a component of shame. However, some research suggests that guilt may be unrelated to psychological maladjustment, and it may even be an adaptive emotion (Tangney & Dearing, 2002; Kohki, 2001). Guilt is related to factors like empathy that relate to maintaining strong interpersonal bonds. When a guilt-prone person breaches an interpersonal bond, the focus is on reparation (Mascolo, 1995; Tangney & Dearing, 2002). Guilt-prone people are less likely to engage in “destructive, impulsive, and/or criminal activities” (Tangney & Dearing, 2002) than those who are shame-prone. Research indicates that guilt-prone people are also more likely, than shame-prone people to “drive responsibly, apply to college, and to actively contribute to the community” (Tangney & Dearing, 2002). In another study guilt-proneness was not related to intimacy fears or to blaming others for one’s actions, while shame-proneness was positively correlated with behavioral and characterological self-blame, as well as blame of others and self-derogation (Lutwak, Panish, & Ferrari, 2003).

Shame conjures feelings of inadequacy, self-contempt, embarrassment, self-exposure, and indignity (Tangney & Dearing, 2002; Kaufman, 1996; Pattison, 2000). To minimize these encounters that induce such feeling, shame-prone people use defensive strategies or defensive scripts (Kaufman, 1996; Pattison, 2000). Kaufman (1996) suggests that these strategies include rage, contempt, striving for perfection, transfer of blame, and denial; Pattison (2000) adds the scripts of withdrawal, attacking the self, avoidance, and attacking others. These self-defeating strategies are used to cope with a self-defeating emotion, and they also provide the frame for interpreting the relationship between shame and other maladaptive tendencies, such as perfectionism.

## 2. Perfectionism

The perfectionism construct has long been conceptualized as a pathology-causing personality trait (Pacht, 1984; Flett, Hewitt, & Dyck, 1989; Frost, Marten, Lahart, & Rosenblate, 1990; Hewitt & Flett, 1991; Flett, Hewitt, & DeRosa, 1996); it has been positively correlated with depression (Hewitt & Flett, 1991, 1993), personality disorders (Hewitt, Flett, & Turnbull, 1992), eating

disorders (Brouwers & Wiggum, 1993), sexual dysfunction (Quadland, 1980), and lower levels of self-esteem for maladaptive perfectionists (Ashby & Rice, 2002). Blankstein, Flett, Hewitt, and Eng (1993) found that dimensions of perfectionism were associated with specific fears about failure, losing control, making mistakes, and feeling angry. Perfectionists often have difficulties with relationships and problems with anxiety and procrastination (Slaney & Ashby, 1996). Perfectionism has been positively linked with cynicism, higher levels of stress at home and at work, and a decreased sense of overall satisfaction with one's self and one's life (Mitchelson & Burns, 1998).

Various measures assess perfectionism. The most commonly used measure is The Multi-dimensional Perfectionism Scale (Hewitt & Flett, 1991), which measures the personal and interpersonal dimensions of self-oriented perfectionism, socially prescribed perfectionism, and other oriented perfectionism. Each of these dimensions has been related to several types of pathology, under the assumption that perfectionism is only a negative trait. This is true of other perfectionism scales as well (Terry-Short et al., 1995; Enns & Cox, 2002). However, other research demonstrates that perfectionism can be either negative or positive, depending on how perfectionists perceive their work. In the Terry-Short et al. (1995) study, differences between clinical and non-clinical groups indicated that perfectionism may not always be maladaptive. If negative perfectionism is more highly correlated with clinical populations while positive perfectionism is more highly correlated with non-clinical populations, then perfectionism may be an adaptive trait. Negative and positive forms of perfectionism must be distinguished to study fully their relationships to shame and guilt.

The Positive and Negative Perfectionism Scale (Terry-Short et al., 1995), or PNP, (see also Slade & Owens, 1998) is a multidimensional measure that has two subscales, that distinguish between positive and negative perfectionist traits. The theory underlying this scale derives from Hamachek's (1978) earlier model of normal and neurotic perfectionism. A positive perfectionist is driven by positive reinforcements, such as heightened self-esteem and self-satisfaction; such people set realistic expectations. From a behaviorist perspective, their perfectionist behaviors are positively reinforced, through praise, recognition, or the feeling of accomplishment. Intense effort is put into achievement, but failure results in adaptive behavior, such as changing standards, working harder, or simply by "taking it on the chin" (Hamachek, 1978). In contrast, a negative perfectionist is driven by a fear of failure (Terry-Short et al., 1995; Frost et al., 1990; Hamachek, 1978). From a behaviorist perspective, negative perfectionist behaviors are negatively reinforced through elimination of aversive stimuli, such as criticism, ridicule, self-contempt, or shame. Negative perfectionists strive for unrealistically high goals and set unrealistic standards. Striving for such unrealistic achievements is bound to end up in failure, leading to negative feelings such as anxiety, depression, feelings of inadequacy, and avoidance behavior (Hamachek, 1978; Terry-Short et al., 1995; Burns, Dittmann, Nguyen, & Mitchelson, 2000).

Recent research has reinforced the distinction between positive and negative perfectionism. Positive perfectionists were more likely to take steps to engage their problems actively and to distract themselves in emotionally healthy ways, instead of ruminating about their problems or misfortunes (Burns & Fedewa, 2005). Negative perfectionists reacted to stress in neurotic ways, and they were not accepting of themselves or others because they felt that their 'failures' reflected upon themselves (Burns & Fedewa, 2005). Instead of actively engaging problems, they tended to avoid them. The main strategy of negative perfectionists for coping with depression was rumination, and

they were also more likely to engage in dangerous activities (Burns & Fedewa, 2005). Negative perfectionism correlated significantly with categorical thinking, the tendency to view the world in black-or-white terms, and it also correlated with being intolerant and distrusting of others (Burns & Fedewa, 2005). These maladaptive traits are commonly reported in the perfectionism literature (Frost et al., 1990; Flett, Hewitt, Endler, & Tassone, 1995; Flett et al., 1989).

### **3. Shame, guilt, and perfectionism**

Tangney (2002) views perfectionists as strict self-evaluators who broaden the range of outcomes that would be perceived as a failure. Failure leads perfectionists to feelings of shame. Miller (1996) argues that shame is a motivator of perfectionism in Obsessive–Compulsive Disorder. When a negative perfectionist fails in an endeavor, he or she interprets this as a failure of the person (shame) rather than a failure of performance (guilt) (Tangney, 2002). Perfection is never achieved, so the perfectionist always fails and, thus, feels ashamed. Perfectionism may be a means to resolve shame, a way to compensate for feeling defective (Kaufman, 1996; Pattison, 2000). In a study by Lutwak and Ferrari (1996) using the Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale (Hewitt & Flett, 1991), all three dimensions of perfectionism were loaded with guilt for men, while socially-prescribed perfectionism loaded with shame and with guilt for women.

Shame and perfectionism may also be related to hostility and anxiety. Research conducted by Tagney, Wagner, Fletcher, and Gramzow (1992) found that shame-proneness correlated with indirect expressions of hostility. Tangney and Dearing (2002) demonstrated that males in shame situations displayed aggression and hostility toward their girlfriends, while the females displaced aggression and hostility inward. There was also a correlation between male batterers, shame, and hostility. Several of Kaufman's (1996) proposed defending scripts link shame to rage, contempt, striving for power, and transfer of blame (all of which might be dimensions of hostility). Studies in Japan found that "guilt-free" shame was a positive predictor of anxiety (Kohki, 2001). Hostility and anxiety are also related to socially prescribed perfectionism (Hewitt & Flett, 1991; Ferrari, 1995). Negative perfectionism and socially prescribed perfectionism may be related, given that the scales have items in common (Terry-Short et al., 1995).

Positive perfectionism has been linked to adaptive behavior and is unrelated to anxiety and hostility, and we predict it is also unrelated to shame. Positive perfectionists are motivated to set high standards by the benefits reaped from doing so, not by the fear of negative evaluation or failure (Hamachek, 1978; Mitzman, Slade, & Dewey, 1994). Since positive perfectionists may have higher standards than non-perfectionists, they may experience self-evaluative emotions, guilt in particular, more than non-perfectionists. If positive perfectionists fail to perform at a certain level, they may feel guilty that their effort fell short, but this should not reflect their evaluation of their core being. Instead of focusing on perceived shortcomings the way a negative perfectionist would, the positive perfectionist may act to prepare for another attempt or he or she may readjust standards. Thus, positive perfectionists are more flexible than negative perfectionists (Burns & Fedewa, 2005).

Instead of focusing on a job gone wrong, a positive perfectionist will focus on a job done well. Kaufman (1996) states that pride results from "enjoyment affect" that results from one's accomplishments. Such pride is experienced when one can affirm one's own accomplishments and when

one receives affirmation from others of importance. Kaufman (1996) suggests that individuals whose accomplishments have resulted in shaming by important figures will not experience pride, but rather shame. Research by Tangney (2002) revealed a positive correlation between shame and perfectionism. However it did not show a significant relationship between perfectionism and pride. However, previous research with perfectionism has focused on maladaptive tendencies, and lacked measures to detect the positive aspects of perfectionism.

State shame and state guilt refer to experiencing the emotions “in the moment” (Tangney & Dearing, 2002). Kugler and Jones (1992) referred to state guilt as, “a transitory affective state reflecting the immediate psychological consequences of violating moral standards.” In this study, we also examine shame and guilt as transitory affective states, to see if people who exhibit positive or negative perfectionism but lack the other will report more shame or guilt-proneness if they have recently transgressed. Also, the state measures allow us to determine whether shame-proneness and guilt-proneness are affected by feeling state-shame or state-guilt.

One purpose of this study is to determine the relationship between positive and negative perfectionism and adaptive and maladaptive traits. It is predicted that negative perfectionism will correlate positively with shame, hostility, and anxiety, but negatively with pride. It is also hypothesized that positive perfectionism will correlate positively with pride and perhaps with guilt-proneness, but negatively with shame, hostility, and anxiety. Shame and negative perfectionism have both been linked to anxiety and hostility, while guilt has had no significant relationship with psychopathology, but rather to constructive behavior. The fact that shame-prone people define themselves by their transgressions and focus on themselves rather than others indicates that high shame-proneness is not related to guilt-proneness. However, guilt-prone people can experience shame because they can view themselves negatively for committing an act that they feel guilty about. People may experience both shame and guilt concurrently (Tangney & Dearing, 2002). Negative perfectionism may be uniquely associated with psychopathologies, such as anxiety and hostility, while guilt relates to these other pathologies only when associated with shame (Tangney & Dearing, 2002). To further explore this supposition, we utilized partial correlations of guilt-free shame and shame-free guilt.

## 4. Method

### 4.1. Participants

Participants were 174 female and 56 male undergraduate students from a mid-sized Midwestern university. Mean age was 19.8 (SD = 3.1). The racial/ethnic composition of our sample was reported to be 87.4% Caucasian, 6.5% African American, 2.2% Asian American, 2.7% Hispanic, and 1.2% not provided.

### 4.2. Procedure

Distribution of materials was arranged through Introductory Psychology courses. Informed consent was obtained, and all participants were offered credit. Upon completion all participants were debriefed and thanked for their participation.

*T* tests for gender revealed differences only for trait-shame and trait-guilt. When split by gender correlation patterns varied minimally and remained statistically consistent with the combined sample. Therefore all analyses were conducted on the combined sample.

#### 4.3. Measures

The Positive and Negative Perfectionism Scale (Terry-Short et al., 1995), or PNP, assesses perfectionism from a functional or behaviorist perspective. Two subscales that represent the different types of reinforcers a person could experience, with positive perfectionism (PP) treated as resulting from linking positive reinforcements with antecedent perfectionistic behaviors, while Negative Perfectionism (NP) is linked to negative reinforcements. The PNP consists of 40 Likert scale questions, with responses ranging from “strongly disagree”—1, to “strongly agree”—5. Scores were obtained by summing responses to the 18 questions representing positive perfectionism and the 22 questions depicting negative perfectionism. Cronbach’s alphas for the Positive and Negative Perfectionism Scale have been reported as 0.85 and 0.86 respectively (Burns & Fedewa, 2005).

The Test of Self-Conscious Affect-3 (Tangney, Dearing, Wagner, & Gramzow, 2000), or TOSCA-3, measures shame, guilt, pride, and embarrassment. The TOSCA-3 consists of 16 scenarios followed by four corresponding questions regarding the scenarios. We retained the shame, guilt, and pride questions as these were central to our hypotheses. The responses to these questions are from 1 or not likely to 5, or very likely. We summed the responses to relevant items. The reliabilities of the shame, guilt, and pride subscales have been reported as 0.88, 0.86, and 0.72, respectively (Tangney & Dearing, 2002).

The State Shame and Guilt Scale (Marschall, Saftner, & Tangney, 1994), or SSGS, is a self-reporting scale of state feelings of shame, guilt, and pride. Fifteen items (five for each of the three subscales) are rated on a 5-point Likert scale. Inter-item reliabilities for the shame, guilt, and pride scales have been reported as 0.89, 0.82, and 0.87, respectively (Tangney & Dearing, 2002).

The Aggression Questionnaire—Hostility Subscale (Buss & Perry, 1992), or AGG, is an 8-item measure about consistent feelings associated with hostility, with responses that range from 1 (very little) to 5 (very much). All items are positive, and scores are obtained by summing the responses. Internal consistency for this subscale has been reported as 0.77 and with a test–retest reliability of 0.72 (Buss & Perry, 1992).

The State-Trait Anxiety Inventory—Trait Subscale (Spielberger, 1983), or STAI, is a 20-item measure of anxiety as a trait. Responses range from 1 (almost never) to 4 (almost always). Eleven of the twenty items are negative and scored in reverse, and the remaining nine items are considered positive. The alpha for this measure has been reported as 0.92 (Spielberger, 1983).

## 5. Results

All zero-order correlations, partial correlations, means, and alphas are reported in Table 1.

As predicted, strong positive correlations were found between NP and shame-proneness ( $r = 0.52$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) and state shame ( $r = 0.39$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). When partialing trait-guilt from trait-shame, an even stronger positive correlation appeared between NP and trait-shame

Table 1

Means, Cronbach alphas, and correlations between perfectionism, shame and guilt-proneness, Guilt free shame and shame free guilt, State shame and guilt, hostility, anxiety, and pride

Criterion	SShame	SGuilt	TShame	PrTShame	TGuilt	PrTGuilt	Pos_P	Neg_P	STAI	AGG	SPride
SShame	[0.81]										
SGuilt	0.62***	[0.84]									
TShame	0.29***	0.19**	[0.77]								
PrTShame	0.30***	0.19**	1.00								
TGuilt	0.06	0.05	0.44***	0.00	[0.77]						
PrTGuilt	-0.08	-0.04	0.00	0.00	1.00						
Pos_P	-0.15*	-0.11	0.10	0.04	0.13*	0.10	[0.89]				
Neg_P	0.39***	0.36***	0.52***	0.52***	0.16*	-0.10	0.17**	[0.89]			
STAI	0.58***	0.49***	0.47***	0.48***	0.13*	-0.11	-0.14*	0.58***	[0.89]		
AGG	0.51***	0.44***	0.37***	0.42***	-0.003	-0.20**	-0.03	0.52***	0.66***	[0.80]	
SPride	-0.48***	-0.40***	-0.31***	-0.33***	-0.04	0.12	0.38***	-0.42***	-0.66***	-0.41***	[0.84]
Means	7.5	9.6	31.0		44.0		68.7	61.0	41.2	17.9	17.5
SD	3.2	4.4	7.5		5.8		8.3	13.3	9.1	5.7	4.0

Notes: All scales have  $N = 230$ ; SShame = State shame; SGuilt = State guilt; TShame = Trait shame; PrTShame = Guilt free shame; TGuilt = Trait guilt; PrTGuilt = Shame free guilt; Pos\_P = Positive perfectionism; Neg\_P = Negative perfectionism; STAI = State anxiety; AGG = Aggression/hostility; Spride = State pride.

- \*  $p < 0.05$ .
- \*\*  $p < 0.01$ .
- \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ .

( $r = 0.52, p < 0.001$ ). Also, in accordance to our hypotheses, NP shared strong positive correlations with the maladaptive constructs of hostility ( $r = 0.52, p < 0.001$ ) and anxiety ( $r = 0.58, p < 0.001$ ), while demonstrating a negative correlation with the adaptive emotion of pride ( $r = -0.42, p < 0.001$ ).

Positive perfectionism was expected to have negative correlations with shame-proneness, state shame, hostility, and anxiety. Our results did not confirm significant relationships between PP and shame-proneness or hostility. However, negative correlations between PP and state-shame ( $r = -0.15, p < 0.05$ ) and anxiety ( $r = -0.14, p < 0.05$ ) did emerge. Positive perfectionism also correlated positively with state pride ( $r = 0.38, p < 0.001$ ), as expected.

Assuming guilt to be more adaptive than shame, positive perfectionists should be guilt-prone and exhibit state guilt. However no significant relationship was found between PP and state guilt and there was only a small correlation between PP and trait-guilt ( $r = 0.13, p < 0.05$ ). However, when trait-shame is partialled out, this correlation is no longer significant. State guilt correlated positively with state shame ( $r = 0.62, p < 0.001$ ), hostility ( $r = 0.44, p < 0.001$ ), anxiety ( $r = 0.49, p < 0.001$ ) and also with NP ( $r = 0.36, p < 0.001$ ). State guilt was also negatively correlated with pride ( $r = -0.40, p < 0.001$ ), while trait-guilt showed no significant relationship with pride.

## 6. Discussion

One purpose of this study was to explore the relationships between positive perfectionism and adaptive traits, and between negative perfectionism and maladaptive traits. Positive perfectionism

was correlated with pride and negatively (with moderate correlations) with state shame and anxiety. Pride's negative correlations with anxiety, hostility, shame-proneness, and negative perfectionism support the notion that it is an adaptive emotion. Negative perfectionism was significantly related to anxiety, hostility, state shame, and shame-proneness. In a previous study by [Lutwak and Ferrari \(1996\)](#) using the Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale ([Hewitt & Flett, 1991](#)), all dimensions of perfectionism loaded with guilt, while socially-prescribed perfectionism loaded with both shame and guilt. By using a measure of perfectionism that distinguishes between adaptive and maladaptive perfectionistic behaviors, our results support the view that shame is solely associated with negative perfectionism, a clearly maladaptive trait.

We also anticipated a positive relationship to emerge between positive perfectionism and guilt. However, in our study guilt did not prove to be adaptive, as suggested by [Tangney and Dearing \(2002\)](#), as it had no relationship with pride or positive perfectionism. State shame correlated positively with negative perfectionism, and, surprisingly, so did state guilt. As expected, shame-proneness was related to anxiety, hostility, and negative perfectionism; it did not exhibit a correlation with positive perfectionism and exhibited a negative correlation with pride. Guilt-proneness was significantly related to shame-proneness, with negligible relationships with anxiety and negative perfectionism. Trait guilt does not seem to be harmful when trait-shame is partialled out of the equation.

There have been questions about measures that purport to distinguish shame and guilt. [Kugler and Jones \(1992\)](#), used a wide variety of shame and guilt measures finding no strong empirical evidence supporting the conceptual distinction. [Tangney and Dearing \(2002\)](#) have attempted to minimize confounding through the TOSCA-3 by using scenarios that do not require the subject to understand the difference between shame and guilt, by using phenomenological descriptions of each experience and by "avoiding clearly controversial behaviors." Guilt-proneness failed to show strong relationships to anxiety and hostility, while shame-proneness did show these relationships. State guilt, on the other hand, shared the same relationship with hostility and anxiety as state shame and shame-proneness, in accordance with our results. State shame and guilt both had low to moderate correlations with shame-proneness and guilt-proneness, implying that they do, indeed, measure two different constructs. The subjects' state responses appeared to have little effect on their proneness responses. [Tangney and Dearing \(2002\)](#) state that "'pure' guilt, uncomplicated by shame does not lead to psychological symptoms." They argue that guilt only appears to be maladaptive when fused with shame, but that "It is the shame component that creates the problem." We found a positive correlation between state-shame and state-guilt and negative perfectionism, while only shame-proneness, not guilt-proneness, had a strong relationship with negative perfectionism. Tangney and Dearing's argument could account for the relationship between shame-proneness and guilt-proneness.

[Kaufman \(1996\)](#), however, argues, "The target of shame can be either the self or the self's actions, just as one can feel guilty about deeds or else feel essentially guilt-ridden as a person," which challenges Tangney and Dearing's model. Kaufman describes shame and guilt as deriving from the same or similar affect, but differing in their activators, targets, and reducers. Guilt is activated by transgressions that warrant self-judgment, whereas "shame becomes activated whenever fundamental expectations (imagined scenes of interpersonal need) or those equally fundamental expectations of oneself (imagined scenes of accomplishment or purpose) are suddenly exposed

as wrong or are thwarted” (Kaufman, 1996). Similarities between guilt and shame could also explain why both relate to negative perfectionism. Questions from Tangney and Dearing’s State Shame and Guilt Scale (Tangney & Dearing, 2002), such as, “I want to sink into the floor”, and “I feel tension about something I have done” (the former is a shame item, the latter a guilt item) could have been attributed to a similar feeling, even though one statement is self-centered and the other is about an action (Kaufman, 1996). This could also explain the high positive correlation between state shame and state guilt.

This study is limited in that it is strictly correlational, and the college sample is a limited one. Another limitation is that pride was measured as a state and not a general disposition, so the effect of trait-pride on responses to the other scales is unknown.

Despite these limitations, this study clearly demonstrates the utility of distinguishing between positive and negative perfectionism. There appear to be two distinct forms of perfectionism, one adaptive and the other maladaptive. The variables that lead to each type of perfectionism are being discovered, and these may enhance understanding of which factors could be emphasized for healthy development or in clinical interventions.

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