

# Guilt is Solely Explained by Values, While Shame is Explained by Both Values and Personality Metatraits

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## ABSTRACT

Shame and guilt are unpleasant emotions that arise in circumstances of moral transgression. However, they are distinct emotions that are not only determined by the situation. Under the same circumstances, some people may feel shame while others may feel guilt. The aim of the current study was to find personality underpinnings (i.e., metatraits and values) of the tendency to feel shame or guilt. We examined 236 young adults aged 18-35 ( $M = 25.15$ ;  $SD = 4.44$ ). The tendency to experience shame and guilt was measured using the Test of Self-Conscious Affect-3 (TOSCA-3; Tangney et al., 2000). Values were measured using the Personal Values Questionnaire-RR (PVQ-RR; Schwartz & Cieciuch, 2022). Personality metatraits were measured using the Circumplex of Personality Metatraits Questionnaire – Short Form (CPM-Q-SF; Strus & Cieciuch, 2021). Shame was predicted by personality metatraits (24% of variance explained). After adding values to the model, the metatraits were still statistically significant and the explained variance increased to 40%. Guilt was also predicted by personality metatraits (20% of variance explained), but after adding values to the model, they remained the only statistically significant guilt predictors (44% of variance explained). Thus, we found that shame is predicted by both metatraits (mostly Disharmony) and values (Conservation), while guilt is only predicted by values (Conservation and Self-Transcendence).

## KEYWORDS

shame  
guilt  
personality metatraits  
values

## INTRODUCTION

Shame and guilt are moral self-conscious emotions that are important in interpersonal functioning (Baumeister, 1994), but they are also often related to psychological problems (Tangney et al., 1992a). Although these emotions are produced in situations where moral transgressions occur, people differ in their proneness to feeling guilt or shame. The aim of the current study was to explain this guilt and shame-proneness with basic personality metatraits and value preferences.

## Shame and Guilt

Shame and guilt are self-conscious emotions. To feel such emotions, one needs to be conscious of the Self. In this case, the Self is not only feeling emotions, but also producing them through self-reflection (Griffin, 1995). Shame and guilt are both unpleasant emotions that arise in similar circumstances of moral transgression, meaning a situation in which a person violates what they consider their moral norms (Tangney & Dearing, 2004).

Guilt arises as a consequence of conscious decisions. A person who feels guilt takes responsibility for their actions (Lewis, 1971) and is focused on the things they have done that evoked this feeling (Tangney & Dearing, 2004), using specific self-attributions (judging only part of themselves or only their actions) regarding the transgression (Lewis, 1995, 2008, 2019). Because of that, feeling guilt, though unpleasant, is

not threatening for the Self. People feeling guilt are able to think of the people they have hurt and understand what these people are feeling. Therefore, they are motivated to confess to them, apologize, and correct their behavior. Guilt is connected with empathy (Tangney, 1991).

People feeling shame are focused on themselves: on how they are inadequate as a whole (Lewis, 1971). They use global attributions (judging their whole self on the basis of one event) regarding their transgression (Lewis, 1995, 2008, 2019). This makes shame a more painful emotion than guilt because it is hard to believe in a possibility to change when one believes they are a bad person (Lewis, 1971). People feeling shame are only able to think about themselves. Therefore, they are motivated to hide, disappear, or shrink (Tangney & Dearing, 2004). Shame coexists with feelings of anger and mistrust, a tendency to hold grudges (Tangney et al., 1992b), and several psychological disorders (Tangney et al., 1992a).

Shame and guilt can be felt in the same situation by different people (Tangney et al., 1996; Tracy & Robins, 2007). Some studies and models (e.g., Fontaine, 2006) suggest that taking into account both the situa-

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tion and the person can explain the experience of shame and guilt. In our study, we focused on the person. Our aim was to explore whether personality (metatraits and values) can explain individual differences in the tendency to feel shame or guilt. We focused on personality metatraits conceptualized in the Circumplex of Personality Metatraits (Strus et al., 2014; Strus & Cieciuch, 2017, 2021) and value preferences conceptualized by Schwartz (Schwartz et al., 2012). On the one hand, by using metatraits, we captured the most general personality tendencies that underlie many or all behaviors. On the other hand, by using value preferences, we captured the most universal dimensions underlying decisions and mindful choices made by people.

## Values

Values are defined as trans-situational goals that serve as guiding principles in people's lives (Schwartz et al., 2012). Schwartz's theory locates values in a circular model, where values placed near each other can be realized during one action while values located opposite to each other rule each other out and cannot be realized during one behavior.

It is possible to distinguish four higher-order values: Self-Transcendence, Conservation, Self-Enhancement, and Openness to change. Self-Transcendence values focus on the welfare of others. Self-Transcendence values are located opposite, and thus are in conflict with, Self-Enhancement values, which focus on realizing one's own goals. Openness to change values are related to pursuit of independence, new experiences, and ideas. They contrast with Conservation values, related to avoiding change and adjustment to social norms (Schwartz et al., 2012). At a more detailed level, Schwartz et al. (2012) split the four higher order values into 19 more narrowly defined values. They are described in Table 1.

Some studies have already shown a relation between values and the tendency to feel guilt and shame. It has been shown that (a) proneness to feel guilt is positively correlated with Self-Transcendence values (Benevolence and Universalism) as well as Conservation values (Tradition and Conformity), and (b) is negatively correlated with Self-Enhancement values (Power and Hedonism) as well as Openness to change values (Stimulation and Self-Direction). Proneness to feel shame is positively correlated with Conservation and Self-Enhancement values (Silfver et al., 2008; Tarisa & Royanto, 2017).

## Personality Traits and Metatraits

The tendency to feel guilt or shame can also be determined by personality traits. Over the past decades, the Big Five model has been used to describe the five basic personality dimensions: extraversion, neuroticism, agreeableness, consciousness, and openness to experience (McCrae & Costa, 2003). There are also some empirical studies on the relations between the Big Five personality traits and feeling guilt and shame. For example, Einstein and Lanning (1998) showed that (a) shame is negatively related to openness to experience and positively related to neuroticism and agreeableness; (b) fearful guilt is negatively related to extraversion and positively related to neuroticism; and (c) empathetic guilt is positively related to agreeableness.

Currently, the Big Five is no longer treated as a model describing the basic personality dimensions. Some traits were systematically intercor-

related and led to the discovery of the two metatraits: Alpha/Stability and Beta/Plasticity (Digman, 1997; DeYoung et al., 2002). Recent psycholexical studies produced similar results, showing that only two general factors are cross-culturally replicable and stable (Saucier et al., 2014). These two general factors are usually called the Two Factor Model (Cieciuch & Strus, 2017). Building on the Two Factor Model of Personality, Strus et al. (2014) developed the Circumplex of Personality Metatraits (CPM) that integrates several models of personality. In the CPM, two additional dimensions were distinguished in addition to Alpha/Stability and Beta/Plasticity, namely, Delta and Gamma. Moreover, each pole of the four dimensions was defined, which resulted in eight basic personality metatraits that are systematically related to the Big Five (McCrae & Costa, 2003) as well as the HEXACO (Ashton & Lee, 2007) models. They are described in Table 2.

The CPM was used to describe the personality underpinnings of several personality phenomena, including narcissism (Rogoza et al., 2019), borderline personality disorder (Brud & Cieciuch, 2022), five dimensions of personality disorders (Strus et al., 2021), type C behavior (Rymarczyk et al., 2020), social inhibition (Kwiatkowska & Strus, 2021), and many others. In the current study, we used the CPM to describe personality underpinnings of the tendency to feel guilt or shame.

## The Current Study

As mentioned above, some studies have shown correlations between shame and guilt and personality traits (Einstein & Lanning, 1998) or values (Silfver et al., 2008; Tarisa & Royanto, 2017). However, no study has explored these relations simultaneously. We used the conceptualization of values proposed by Schwartz et al. (2012) and the conceptualization of basic personality dimensions proposed by Strus et al. (2014) in the CPM. Based on previous results and theoretical considerations we formulated the following hypotheses:

1. The tendency to feel guilt will be positively related to Self-Transcendence and Conservation values while tendency to feel shame will be positively related to Conservation and Self-Enhancement values.
2. The tendency to feel both guilt and shame will be positively related to Disinhibition/Gamma-Minus as the center of negative emotions. Two other metatraits will differentiate these emotions. Restraint/Delta-Plus as the center of conventionality and social adjustment will be more likely to be positively related to feeling shame while Stability/Alpha-Plus as the center of ethical attitude towards the world and others will be positively related to feeling guilt. Because Self-Transcendence values are located in Integration/Gamma-Plus, feeling guilt could be also positively related to Integration/Gamma-Plus, even if it is in opposition to Disinhibition/Gamma-Minus.

Moreover, we examined which set of variables (values or metatraits) will explain feeling guilt and shame when analyzed together. To this end, we ran a two-step regression analysis, where we first introduced metatraits, and then values as independent variables.

**TABLE 1.**

The Four Higher-Order Values and 19 More Narrowly Defined Values in The Refined Theory of Values (Adapted From Schwartz et al. 2012)

Four higher order values	19 more narrowly defined values
Self-transcendence	Benevolence-Dependability (BED) - Being a reliable and trustworthy member of the ingroup
	Benevolence-Caring (BEC) - Devotion to the welfare of ingroup members
	Universalism-Tolerance (UNT) - Acceptance and understanding of those who are different from oneself
	Universalism-Concern (UNC) - Commitment to equality, justice, and protection for all people
Conservation	Universalism-Nature (UNN) - Preservation of the natural environment
	Humility <sup>a</sup> (HUM) - Recognizing one's insignificance in the larger scheme of things
	Conformity-Interpersonal (COI) - Avoidance of upsetting or harming other people
	Conformity-Rules (COR) - Compliance with rules, laws, and formal obligations
Self-enhancement	Tradition (TR) - Maintaining and preserving cultural, family, or religious traditions
	Security-Societal (SES) - Safety and stability in the wider society
	Security-Personal (SEP) - Safety in one's immediate environment
	Face (FAC) - Security and power through maintaining one's public image and avoiding humiliation
Openness to change	Power-Resources (POR) - Power through control of material and social resources
	Power-Dominance (POD) - Power through exercising control over people
	Achievement (AC) - Personal success achieved in accordance with social standards by own competences
	Hedonism <sup>a</sup> (HE) - Pleasure, sensual satisfaction
	Stimulation (ST) - Novelty, variability, excitement
	Self-Direction-Action (SDA) - The freedom to determine one's own actions
	Self-Direction-Thought (SDT) - The freedom to cultivate one's own ideas and abilities

**TABLE 2.**

Description of the Eight Metatraits in the Circumplex of Personality Metatraits (Strus & Cieciuch, 2021)

Metatrait	Meaning
Restraint (Delta-Plus)	Low emotionality (both negative and positive), high behavioral and emotional control, meticulousness and perfectionistic tendencies, as well as modesty, conventionality, and rigid social adjustment.
Stability (Alpha-Plus)	Stability in the area of emotional, motivational, and social functioning expressed as a general social adaptation tendency, an ethical attitude toward the world, benevolence, and calmness, as well as the ability to delay gratification, and diligence and perseverance.
Integration (Gamma-Plus)	Well-being, a warm and prosocial attitude towards people, both intra- and interpersonal balance and harmony, serenity, openness to the world in all its richness as well as endurance and effectiveness in attaining important goals.
Plasticity (Beta-Plus)	Cognitive and behavioral openness to change and engagement with new experiences, a tendency to explore, self-confidence, initiative and invention in social relations, enthusiasm and orientation toward personal growth.
Sensation-Seeking (Delta-Minus)	Broadly defined impulsiveness, recklessness, emotional volatility, stimulation-seeking and risk-taking, self-enhancement and hedonistic tendencies as well as interpersonal dominance and expansiveness.
Disinhibition (Alpha-Minus)	High antisocial tendencies underpinned by unsustainability, low frustration tolerance, and egotism as well as aggression and antagonism towards people, social norms, and obligations.
Disharmony (Gamma-Minus)	Inaccessibility, coldness, and distrust in interpersonal relations, negative affectivity and low self-worth, depressiveness, pessimism, and proneness to suffering from psychological problems.
Passiveness (Beta-Minus)	Social avoidance and timidity along with submissiveness and dependency in close relationships, cognitive and behavioral passivity and inhibition, stagnation, apathy, and a tendency to anhedonia.

## METHODS

### Participants

Participants were 236 young adults from Poland aged 18-35 ( $M = 25.15$ ,  $SD = 4.44$ ); 80.9% of whom were women. Two percent of participants had a middle school education, 35% - a high school education, 27% - a bachelor's degree, 30% - a master's degree, and 6% had a PhD. Out of all participants, 12% lived in the countryside, 17% - in a city up

to 50,000 inhabitants, 8% - in a city between 50,000 and 100,000 inhabitants, and 63% lived in a city above 100,000 inhabitants. Participants were recruited online and completed the questionnaires online. They were asked to participate in a study that they were informed would explore emotions and personality. Participants were not remunerated. The Ethical Board for Scientific Research in Institute of Psychology, Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University in Warsaw gave a positive opinion regarding research described in this article.

## Measures

Proneness to experience shame and guilt was measured using the Test of Self-Conscious Affect-3 (TOSCA-3; Tangney et al, 2000; Polish adaptation by Strus & Żylicz, 2018). It is a self-report measure consisting of 16 scenarios describing everyday situations. After each scenario, possible reactions are listed (e.g., "You break something at work and then hide it. (a) You would think: "This is making me anxious. I need to either fix it or get someone else to." (b) You would think about quitting. (c) You would think: "A lot of things aren't made very well these days." (d) You would think: "It was only an accident.").

Participants rate the probability with which they would react with each item on a Likert scale. In the above example, Answer A is an indicator for guilt, B - shame, C - externalization, and D - detachment. The TOSCA-3 measures Shame-Proneness, Guilt-Proneness, Externalization, Detachment/Unconcern, Alpha Pride, and Beta Pride. In the current study, we used only the Shame-Proneness and Guilt-Proneness scales. Cronbach's  $\alpha$  for these scales in this study were .84 and .83, respectively.

Values were measured using the Personal Values Questionnaire-RR (PVQ-RR; Schwartz & Cieciuch, 2022). Participants respond to 57 items concerning values. Three items each measure each of the 19 values described in Table 1. Each item consists of one sentence that describes a different person in terms of the goals, aspirations, or wishes they consider important in life (e.g., "It is important to him to protect his public image" which measures Face, "It is important to him to avoid upsetting other people" which measures Conformity-Interpersonal, "It is important to him to take care of people he is close to" for Benevolence-Caring). Participants compare the person described to themselves and rate how similar the person is to them on a six-point Likert scale (1 = *not like me at all*, 6 = *very much like me*). Cronbach's  $\alpha$  for these scales in this study ranged from .60 (Humility) to .87 (Tradition).

Eight personality metatraits described in Table 2 were measured using the Circumplex of Personality Metatraits Questionnaire - Short Form (CPM-Q-SF; Strus & Cieciuch, 2021). It contains 72 items describing thoughts, behaviors, feelings, and attitudes. Participants answer to what extent these statements describe them using a five-point Likert scale (1 = *completely disagree*, 5 = *completely agree*). Cronbach's  $\alpha$  for these scales in this study ranged from .69 (Stability/Alpha-Plus) to .84 (Disharmony/Gamma-Minus).

## RESULTS

The descriptive statistics and correlations between variables are presented in the Appendix. To check to what extent personality metatraits and values can explain guilt and shame-proneness, we performed a stepwise regression analysis in which the first step included only personality metatraits and the second step also included values. The results are presented in Table 3.

As expected, the tendency to feel shame was predicted by Disharmony and Restraint as well as select Conservation values (Conformity-Interpersonal) and Self-Enhancement values (Face).

**TABLE 3.**

Stepwise Regression Analysis: Personality Metatraits and Values as Shame and Guilt Determinants

Predictor	$\beta$
<b>Shame</b>	
Step 1: metatraits (Adjusted $R^2 = .24$ )	
Gamma-Minus/Disharmony	.49**
Delta-Plus/Restraint	.12*
Step 2: metatraits and values (Adjusted $R^2 = .40$ )	
Gamma-Minus/Disharmony	.40**
ConformityInterpersonal	.19**
Universalism-Nature	.20**
Face	.17**
<b>Guilt</b>	
Step 1: metatraits (Adjusted $R^2 = .20$ )	
Alpha-Plus/Stability	.17*
Gamma-Minus/Disharmony	.38**
Gamma-Plus/Integration	.28**
Alpha-Minus/Disinhibition	-.21**
Step 2: metatraits and values (Adjusted $R^2 = .44$ )	
Universalism-Societal concern	.28**
Benevolence-Caring	.19**
Universalism-Nature	.18**
Conformity-Interpersonal	.18**
Power-Resources	-.14*

Moreover, Universalism-Nature was also statistically significant. After adding values to metatraits, Disharmony was still a significant predictor for feeling shame. Including both metatraits and values explained 40% of the variance in the tendency to feel shame (just metatraits explained only 24% of the variance).

As expected, the tendency to feel guilt was predicted by Disharmony, Integration, and Stability. Moreover, Disinhibition was statistically significant, which is in line with the CPM, because Disinhibition is an opposite variable to Stability. Regarding values, our hypothesis was partially confirmed: the tendency to feel guilt was predicted by select Self-Transcendence values (Universalism and Benevolence) and select Conservation values (Conformity). Power-Resources was also a statistically significant negative predictor, which is in line with theory, because Power-Resources as a Self-Enhancement value is opposed to Self-Transcendence values. Moreover, Universalism-Nature was also statistically significant, as in the case of shame. Metatraits explained 20% of the variance in the tendency to feel guilt. Adding values explained a total of 40% of the variance. Interestingly, adding values to the model made all metatraits not statistically significant as predictors of the tendency to feel guilt.

## DISCUSSION

The aim of the current study was to explore whether the tendency to feel shame and guilt can be explained by personality (metatraits and values). In line with our expectations, shame was predicted mostly by Disharmony/Gamma-Minus. Shame, as measured by the TOSCA-3,

is overwhelming, painful, and maladaptive. Disharmony represents the configuration of the most dysfunctional personality metatraits and is connected to low well-being and various psychological problems (Strus et al., 2014). Our expectation about which values are relevant for predicting the tendency to feel shame were also largely confirmed. The tendency to feel shame was explained by the value of Face, which represents the wish to keep and protect one's social status. When feeling shame, a person focuses strongly on the way they are viewed by others and how transgressions that lead to feeling shame can affect their social status (Gilbert, 1997). Shame is also explained by the Conformity-Interpersonal value, which stands for avoiding irritating and hurting other people (Schwartz et al., 2012). According to the evolutionary biopsychosocial model (Gilbert, 1998, 2007; Gilbert et al., 1994), shame is connected with submissive behavior (showing subordination to people with a higher social status, withholding actions which could be interpreted as challenging them) as a way to maintain one's social attractiveness.

In the case of guilt, the values we predicted would explain guilt were confirmed, but the Power-Resources value was also relevant. Both Power-Dominance and Power-Resources were negatively correlated with the tendency to feel guilt, but only Power-Resources was statistically significant in the regression analysis. One reason could be that Power-Resources contain the main negative aspects of power from the perspective of social and moral norms in Poland. This is because explicitly displaying wealth contradicts these social and moral norms that are generally related to feeling guilt. The tendency to feel shame was explained by Universalism-Nature and the tendency to feel guilt was explained by Universalism-Societal concern and Nature. These are facets of the Universalism values, which stand for understanding and regard for people and nature (Schwartz et al., 2012). They seem to fit with emotions that arise when a person recognizes they did something wrong, often causing harm to others or their environment (Tangney, 1991). It is worth noting that caring about the environment (Universalism-Nature) seems to be especially important in today's normative system in Poland: it is socially promoted and visible in social spaces. Other relevant values for guilt were Benevolence-Caring and Conformity-Interpersonal, which signify caring about other people. Feeling guilt allows an individual to concentrate on the well-being of the transgression's victim, which is in line with these values.

As expected, guilt is explained by personality metatraits (Disharmony/Gamma-Minus, Stability/Alpha-Plus, and Integration/Gamma-Minus), but when values were added to the regression analysis, the personality lost their statistical significance. This may be because, in contrast to shame, guilt is not as overwhelming. It allows a person to think about the consequences of their actions and why they were wrong. That means the person reflecting on their actions can identify which important values were not fulfilled. On the other hand, shame tends to lead to thinking about the Self as a whole, without pinpointing which moral values were broken (i.e., the whole Self is bad, Tangney & Dearing, 2004). The main worry is judgment by others (De Hooge, 2008; Gilbert, 1997; Keltner et al., 1997), which is closely related to some pathological personality dispositions. However,

guilt can be treated as a more moral emotion than shame: it is strongly connected to values and allows for reflection while having the other person in mind.

The current study was not free of limitations. Our sample was small relative to the number of variables and consisted mainly of women, so we cannot transfer our conclusions to the general population. Future studies should explore possible gender differences in the relations found in the current study. This can be done with a larger sample that is gender-balanced. The questionnaire we used to measure the tendency to feel shame and guilt captures shame as only maladaptive and guilt as only adaptive. The fact that shame and guilt cannot be seen as only "good" or "bad" has been noted in recent years (Gausel et al., 2015; Tignor & Colvin, 2019). Another aspect that might be considered problematic is that we used a questionnaire developed to measure shame and guilt in the USA in a different context, namely, Poland. Feeling and understanding shame and guilt is connected with the culture the person grew up in, and so, the questionnaire developed in one culture may not be suited to another one. Future research should overcome these methodological and conceptual limitations.

#### DATA AVAILABILITY

Data available upon request from the first author.

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## APPENDIX

**TABLE A1.**

Descriptive Statistics of Variables Measured in the Study

Scale	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	$\alpha$
Shame-Proneness	49.9	11.74	.84
Guilt-Proneness	65.0	8.98	.83
Restraint/Delta-Plus	3.22	0.61	.78
Stability/Alpha-Plus	3.66	0.51	.69
Integration/Gamma-Plus	3.72	0.62	.80
Plasticity/Beta-Plus	3.64	0.62	.79
Sensation-Seeking/Delta-Minus	2.73	0.66	.75
Disinhibition/Alpha-Minus	2.32	0.65	.76
Disharmony/Gamma-Minus	2.96	0.81	.84
Passiveness/Beta-Minus	2.55	0.59	.71
Achievement	4.61	1.03	.74
Hedonism	4.73	0.91	.72
Stimulation	3.58	1.19	.73
Self-direction-action	5.18	0.89	.80
Self-direction-thought	5.07	0.80	.63
Universalism-tolerance	4.96	0.98	.79
Universalism-concern	4.84	1.10	.84
Benevolence-caring	4.92	0.95	.79
Benevolence-dependability	5.11	0.92	.80
Humility	3.83	1.11	.60
Conformity-interpersonal	3.82	1.31	.85
Conformity-rules	3.87	1.29	.84
Tradition	3.28	1.46	.87
Security-societal	4.52	1.11	.80
Security-personal	4.59	0.91	.60
Face	4.61	1.08	.79
Power-resources	3.31	1.21	.81
Power-dominance	2.30	1.11	.78

**TABLE A2.**

Correlations Between the Shame, Guilt and Personality Metatraits

	Shame-Proneness	Guilt-Proneness
Restraint/Delta-plus	.07	.13*
Stability/Alpha-plus	.01	.35**
Integration/Gamma-plus	-.17*	.26**
Plasticity/Beta-plus	-.08	.19**
Sensation-Seeking/Delta-minus	-.06	-.06
Disinhibition/Alpha- minus	.19**	-.17**
Disharmony/Gamma-minus	.48**	.12
Passiveness/Beta-minus	.24**	.02

**TABLE A3.**

Correlations Between Shame and Guilt and Values

	Shame-Proneness	Guilt-Proneness
Achivement	.08	.05
Hedonism	.06	.05
Stimulation	-.08	-.01
Self-Direction-Action	.06	.18**
Self-Direction-Thought	.08	.18**
Universalism-Tolerance	.29**	.50**
Universalism-Nature	.28**	.37**
Universalism-Societal Concern	.35**	.56**
Benevolence-Caring	.12	.41**
Benevolence/Dependability	.12	.43**
Humility	.27**	.40**
Conformity-Interpersonal	.38**	.38**
Conformity-Rules	.27**	.32**
Tradition	.04	.15*
Security-Societal	.18**	.31**
Security-Personal	.17**	.22**
Face	.37**	.11
Power-Resources	.04	-.17**
Power-Dominance	-.03	-.18**