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Turning shame into creativity: The importance of exposure to creative team environments

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ABSTRACT

We draw on the functionalist perspective of emotions (Keltner & Gross, 1999) in order to propose that ashamed employees engage in creative activity as a way to restore their positive self-image. We also propose that the shame–creativity relation is strongest if employees expose themselves via expressive suppression to a team environment that encourages creativity. We test these propositions with data from two Colombian field studies. Overall, we find mixed support for a main effect of shame on creativity but consistent support for the moderating effect of exposure to creative team environments on the link between shame and creativity. A scenario experiment confirmed restore motivation as one central mediating mechanism explaining the main and interactive effects of shame on creativity. We discuss implications for the literatures on creativity, shame, and exposure to creative team environments.

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Introduction

Suppose that your boss tells you in front of your colleagues that you made a serious mistake in a report you just prepared, and you feel terribly ashamed. Would you withdraw from the situation and try to make yourself "invisible", wishing the working day would end so that you can go back home? Or would you engage in developing a novel and more useful report to correct your mistake and recover your standing within your team? One of the key motivators of individuals is the desire to have a positive self-image (e.g., Schlenker & Leary, 1982; Taylor & Brown, 1988), and it is this self-image that is threatened when individuals experience shame. We argue in this paper that employees experiencing shame may engage in creative activity as a result of their motivation to restore their positive self-image (i.e., their motivation to engage in activities to recover their positive self-view; De Hooge, Zeelenberg, & Breugelmans, 2010), and that the shame–creativity relation is augmented if ashamed employees expose themselves to social environments supportive of creativity.

Creativity—the generation of novel and useful ideas (Amabile, 1988, 1996)—is a valuable employee outcome associated with organizational sustainability and innovation (George, 2007). Although prior studies have examined the relationship between shame and organizational outcomes such as performance (e.g., Bagozzi, Verbeke, & Gavino, 2003), we are not aware of research on the relationship between shame and creativity. Given that shame is a negative emotion with unclear social functions (De Hooge, Breugelmans, & Zeelenberg, 2008), establishing the link between shame and creativity would contribute to our understanding of the positive consequences of shame. Moreover, it would shed light on the unclear relationship between negative affective experiences and creativity (e.g., Amabile, Barsade, Mueller, & Staw, 2005; Davis, 2009).

In order to develop the link between shame and creativity, we draw from the functionalist perspective of emotions (Frijda, 1986; Keltner & Gross, 1999; Keltner & Haidt, 1999) important ideas concerning the creative potential of shame. Specifically, we argue that ashamed employees engage in creative activity in order to restore their positive self-image, and that the shame–creativity relation is strongest if employees expose themselves to creative team environments via suppressing their shame expressions (i.e., via suppressing the avoidance and withdrawal tendencies associated with shame).

We contribute to the emotions literature by providing insights into how to translate one of the most intense negative emotions into a valuable organizational outcome—creativity. Although shame is an emotion commonly experienced in the workplace (Bagozzi et al., 2003), researchers have not yet fully examined its social functions (De Hooge et al., 2008). Thus, our work counterpoints research that has predominantly focused on the negative consequences of shame (e.g., Behrendt & Ben-Ari, 2012; Tangney,

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Miller, Flicker, & Barrow, 1996; Tangney, Wagner, Fletcher, & Gramzow, 1992; for exceptions, see De Hooge, Zeelenberg, & Breugelmans, 2011; De Hooge et al., 2008, 2010) by offering a fresh perspective that points to its positive outcomes.

We also contribute to research on negative affect and creativity in various ways. By explicitly focusing on shame, we respond to the call for examination of discrete negative emotions with creative potential in order to elucidate the unclear negative affect–creativity relationship (Amabile et al., 2005; Davis, 2009). Likewise, through examining the interplay of employees' shame experiences with their social context for employee creativity, we contribute to the emerging interactionist perspective on creativity (Zhou & Hoever, 2014). Finally, we illuminate the processes through which shame affects creativity by examining restore motivation as one central mediating mechanism.

Theoretical background

Shame is an overwhelming and unpleasant emotion (i.e., a typically discrete and intense but short-lived affective experience in reaction to a stimulus; Elfenbein, 2007; Smith & Ellsworth, 1985) that occurs in response to a self-attributed failure in meeting the expectations of others (Bagozzi et al., 2003; Brown, González, Zagefka, Manzi, & Čehajić, 2008; Lewis, 1992; Smith & Ellsworth, 1985). In other words, shame arises when individuals encounter differences between what they actually do (actual self) and what they are expected to do (ought self; Ghorbani, Liao, Çayköylü, & Chand, 2013; Higgins, 1987). In organizational settings, experiences of shame may be triggered by failure to meet obligations, committing a mistake in a report or presentation, being criticized by a peer or supervisor, or failing to meet performance standards (Bagozzi et al., 2003; Smith & Ellsworth, 1985). Shame experiences make individuals feel and fear negative evaluations from others (Agrawal, Han, & Duhachek, 2013; De Hooge et al., 2010), and it is this social scrutiny that motivates them to protect the self from further damage (De Hooge et al., 2010, 2011; Ferguson, 2005). As such, coping with a damaged self-image is a central concern for ashamed employees (De Hooge et al., 2010, 2011).

In order to elude negative evaluations from others, individuals typically *express* shame in the form of withdrawal and avoidance tendencies (including avoidance of eye contact, a hunched posture, and withdrawing from contact with others by hiding in one's office or remaining silent in meetings; Bagozzi et al., 2003; Fischer & Tangney, 1995). By means of withdrawal from, or avoidance of situations related to the shame experience, individuals aim to protect the self from further damage.

In light of the unpleasantness of shame experiences, it is not surprising that prior research has predominantly examined their negative effects, including low self-efficacy and self-esteem, social anxiety, and depression (e.g., Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Leary & Kowalsky, 1995; Tangney et al., 1996; for exceptions, see Bagozzi et al., 2003; De Hooge et al., 2010).

Overview of studies

Based on the idea that emotions are functional and can motivate behavior that is beneficial for the individual and the community, we examine in this paper whether shame may positively affect individual creativity. By drawing on the time-sampling methodology, study 1 adopts a longitudinal and fine-grained approach to examine main and interactive effects of daily shame experiences on creativity in four Colombian organizations. Study 2 draws on a cross-sectional survey design to examine whether the findings of study 1 extend to the personal level, as well as to different types of creativity (i.e., incremental versus radical creativity). Study 3 draws on a scenario experiment to examine the motivational mechanisms that drive the main and interactive effects of shame on creativity.

Study 1

Shame and creativity

The functionalist perspective of emotions (Frijda, 1986; Keltner & Gross, 1999; Keltner & Haidt, 1999) suggests that negative emotions motivate behavior intended to deal with a threatened goal or concern. According to this perspective, shame researchers have recently suggested that the natural behavioral reaction following shame is reparative action (De Hooge et al., 2011). In support of this view, recent studies have found that (to the extent that it is possible and not too risky) shame motivates individuals to engage in activities directed at restoring their positive self-image (Bagozzi et al., 2003; De Hooge et al., 2010).

One such activity, overlooked by prior research, may be creativity (cf. De Hooge et al., 2011). The motivation to restore the damaged self-image likely requires that ashamed individuals deviate from previous behavior in ways that others evaluate as different and positive. Coming up with ideas that are novel and useful may therefore present a suitable measure for ashamed individuals to restore their positive self-image. Thus, we expect ashamed employees to engage in creativity as a way to deal with their threatened self-image and therefore as a means to restore their positive self-view and recover their position within their team.

Hypothesis 1. There is a positive effect of shame on creativity.

Although we expect shame to spur creativity, ashamed individuals may find it difficult to come up with novel and useful ideas if their most proximal social environment does not encourage creativity. Shame is a 'social' emotion that results from interactions with others (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1995; Fischer & Tangney, 1995; Gilbert, 1997), and the experience of shame makes individuals feel concerned about social evaluations (Behrendt & Ben-Ari, 2012; cf. Agrawal et al., 2013). Ashamed individuals may therefore be particularly receptive to influences from their social environment, as well as willing to adjust their behavior in interpersonal relationships (Agrawal et al., 2013; Frank, 1988) in order to meet the standards that the social environment signals as desirable in an attempt to restore their self-image.

In contemporary organizations, the proximal work group or team represents an almost ubiquitous social context within which employee creativity is enacted (Hirst, van Knippenberg, Chen, & Sacramento, 2011; Hirst, van Knippenberg, & Zhou, 2009). Therefore, team environments that support and encourage creativity (i.e., team environments "in which members encourage each other to engage in creative activities and to employ creative work processes" Gilson, Mathieu, Shalley, & Ruddy, 2005, p. 522) may provide contextual cues (Mischel, 1977) to direct the efforts of ashamed employees towards the generation of novel and useful ideas. In other words, such team environments set expectations and standards that creative activity is desirable.

In addition, creative team environments also represent a social resource from which the creativity of ashamed employees may benefit. Not only may co-workers serve as creative role models (Zhou, 2003), but employees may similarly benefit from ideas, advice, and creativity-related support provided by colleagues (Baer, 2010; Cattani & Ferriani, 2008; Perry-Smith, 2006; Zhou, Shin, Brass, Choi, & Zhang, 2009). Moreover, teams promoting the generation of new ideas may provide confidence to employees experiencing shame by showing willingness to try new things even if they are risky (cf. Gilson et al., 2005). Thus, creative team

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