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# Gender differences in experiencing shame

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## Introduction

The literature is sparse regarding gender differences in experiencing shame. While not fully empirically tested, males and females appear to experience shame in different situations.

Females have more shame regarding physical appearance (Efthim, Kenny, & Mahalik, 2001) and relational failures (Lewis, 1992). Additionally, females tend to have negative attitudes about their abilities in math (Gutbezahl, 1995), blame themselves for academic failures (Lewis, 1992) and display a "lower mathematic self-concept" (Hyde, Fennema, Ryan, Frost and Hopp, 1990) which perpetuates poor self-esteem – a construct related to shame.

Research on situational self-esteem difficulties suggests that males have higher self-esteem in sports (Eccles, Wigfield, Harold, & Blumenfeld, 1993) and believe they are more athletically competent (Bosacki, 2003) than females. Failure in sports might, then, lead to shame.

This study sought to further explore differences in how males and females experience and cope with shame.

## Method

### Participants

166 adults

- Females (N=66)
- Males (N=100)

### Measure

The Thurston Cradock Test of Shame (TCTS; Thurston & Cradock O'Leary, 2009) is a card-based projective measure for which subjects provide a story with a beginning, a middle, and an end, including what the characters are thinking and feeling. Stories are recorded verbatim, and behavioral observations are noted. Each story is rated for the presence of shame, type of resolution, response style to the testing experience, and types of shame defenses utilized.

### Procedure

Double-blind

### Hypotheses

1. Females (N=66) would have higher shame scores for TCTS cards with themes of appearance (card 1), school (card 2), and relationships (card 7).
2. Males (N=100) were expected to have more shame for cards depicting athletic failure (cards 3 and 8).

### Analyses

Analyses of variance were conducted using SPSS.

## Results

Contrary to prediction, no gender differences were found on shame scores for TCTS cards 1, 2, 3, 7, or 8.

However, further examination revealed that on these cards, female participants' stories had significantly higher scores ( $p \leq .002$ ) for both time to tell each story and the number of words used per story.

Additionally, females' stories had significantly more highly adaptive resolutions, while males had borderline to significantly more unresolved or ambivalent resolutions.



On card 1:

- Males had more unresolved/ambivalent resolutions ( $F_{(1, 164)} = 12.15, p \leq .001$ )
- Males had more maladaptive resolutions ( $F_{(1, 164)} = 7.85, p \leq .001$ )



On card 2:

- Females had significantly more highly adaptive resolutions ( $F_{(1, 164)} = 8.30, p \leq .004$ )
- Males trended toward more unresolved/ambivalent resolutions ( $F_{(1, 164)} = 3.00, p \leq .085$ )
- Females trended toward more severely maladaptive resolutions ( $F_{(1, 164)} = 3.09, p \leq .081$ )



On card 3:

- Females had significantly more highly adaptive resolutions ( $F_{(1, 164)} = 4.42, p \leq .037$ )
- Males had significantly more unresolved/ambivalent resolutions ( $F_{(1, 164)} = 4.88, p \leq .029$ )
- Females had more severely maladaptive resolutions ( $F_{(1, 164)} = 5.03, p \leq .026$ )



On card 7:

- There was a non-significant trend for women to have more maladaptive resolutions.



On card 8:

- Results were not significant.

## Conclusions

This study did not find differences for TCTS shame scores for cards depicting scenarios that may pull for shame according to gender. Perhaps individual differences are greater than gender differences. Alternatively, these cards may not elicit gender differences. Finally, state shame related to specific situations may be less important than internalized trait shame, which would be elicited across all stories.

Males had significantly more unresolved/ambivalent resolutions to Cards 1, 2 and 3 and more maladaptive resolutions to Card 1. Females had more highly resolved resolutions to Cards 2 and 3 and significantly more severely maladaptive resolutions to Card 3 with a trend in that direction for Card 2. These results suggest a tendency toward more extreme responses for females, with some resolving some forms of shame very well and others doing so very poorly in comparison with men. A cluster analysis may shed more light on this pattern, which suggests polarization among female participants.

Based on these data, it is unclear why females tended to resolve stories more adaptively than males.

More research is needed to better understand shame and how it is experienced by both males and females. Future research should:

- (1) explore individual vs. gender vs. cultural differences in experiencing shame,
- (2) include additional measures to evaluate state vs. trait shame,
- (3) further clarify this study's results regarding story resolution, and
- (4) control for TCTS word count and time.

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