

Abstract

Aversion to the Self: Contextual and Dispositional Determinants of Self-Focus Avoidance

Objective self-awareness theory (Duval & Wicklund, 1972) posits that directing attention toward the self should lead to a self-evaluation process, resulting in feelings of falling short of one's standards. Consequently, self-awareness could be an unpleasant activity that one would be motivated to avoid. The present work focuses on affective and cognitive consequences of self-awareness on the one hand, and self-focus avoidance following failure on the other hand. In a first series of five studies, saliency of the self (manipulated through mirror exposure and name priming) appeared associated to higher self-reported shame scores, and greater escape- and failure-concepts accessibility. These effects were moderated by self-reported self-esteem and feelings of defeat and entrapment. In a second series of four studies, by combining the use of an eye-tracker with a reflexive screen, we observed that individuals tended to avoid directing their attention toward their screen-reflected face following failure. This self-focus avoidance following failure was moderated by guilt proneness scores and the tendency to use internal attributions.

These studies question the conceptual and empirical distinctions between shame and guilt, as well as the clinical and organisational consequences of self-awareness. Notably, this work cautions that self-awareness and personal responsibility, although often described as desirable, might constitute factors enabling negative reflexive emotions such as shame and self-avoidant behaviors.

Keywords: Self-Awareness; Shame; Guilt; Failure; Self-Avoidance