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EXAMINING SHAME FROM A
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Dedication

I would like to dedicate this work to my daughter, Claire. Though I have at times wondered how I might encourage her to have the strength and courage that I do not, I have faith that through continued work like this one this feat will be less challenging. My wish for her is that she always know her worth and how very much she is loved. May she never live in shame.

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Abstract

Previous studies have examined the construct of shame, but little research has been conducted to explore its relation to some of the underlying assumptions of Relational Cultural Theory. The purpose of this study was to explore the relationship between internalized shame and connectedness, with empowerment as a mediating variable. The hypothesis that connectedness would be significantly related to internalized shame was supported in this study; however, empowerment was not found to have a mediating influence. An alternative model of these relations subsequently was examined. Collectively, these results seem to point to the need for more complex conceptualizations of the relationships among these important variables. This research contributes to our understanding of how shame impacts the lives of women and the exploration of assumptions central to Relational Cultural Theory.

Examining Shame from a Relational-Cultural Perspective

Introduction

When the term shame is broken down, it literally means “to cover, to veil, to hide” (Wurmsser, 1981, p. 29). Most often, shame is experienced as a feeling of vulnerability from which one is unable to hide, no matter how hard one tries. Shame has been defined as the “intensely painful feeling or experience of believing we are flawed and therefore unworthy of acceptance and belonging” (Brown, 2007, p. 30). It is more than a sense of loneliness; rather it is the feeling of being “locked out of the possibility of human connection and of being powerless to change the situation” (Miller & Stiver, 1997, p. 72). It is an intense negative emotion that seeps into the very core of one’s existence. Despite the tremendous power of this emotion, little is known regarding how shame affects one’s feelings, thoughts, behaviors and, perhaps most importantly, relationships. The more mysterious shame remains, the more likely the emotion will continue to be quite debilitating in the lives of individuals who experience it regularly.

A significant aspect of the process of defining shame has consisted of distinguishing it from other related emotions, such as embarrassment, humiliation, self-esteem, and guilt. Embarrassment, rightly thought of as a self-conscious emotion, is usually considered a less intense emotion than shame and is derived from a different set of events. Moments of embarrassment are often easier to admit and are not generally as difficult to share with others. Individuals do not feel as compelled to conceal or hide feelings of embarrassment in the same way they do in the case of shame (Morrison, 1996). Researchers have speculated that the difference between shame and embarrassment resides in the fact that embarrassment usually results from relatively

trivial social transgressions, whereas shame follows more serious failures and moral transgressions (Buss, 1980).

Humiliation, on the other hand, is generally considered a more intense emotional reaction and is qualitatively different from both embarrassment and shame. When one feels humiliated, the experience is usually associated with being put down or insulted in some way (Morrison, 1996). If someone is insulted in front of others, for example, the person may feel negatively about him or herself but know the insult was unfair and undeserved. It is when the perpetrator of the humiliation is given credibility that the insult is perceived to be true, leading to feelings of shame (Klein, 1991).

Another question to consider is how shame might differ from low self-esteem. Though feelings of shame can have an impact on self-esteem, these two constructs are quite different. Self-esteem generally refers to an evaluation of oneself or self-concept. The process tends to be more cognitive in nature, whereby one appraises his or her known strengths and weaknesses across situations over time. Shame involves a more emotional process. Individuals *feel* shame, while they *think* about their self-esteem. Although there is a link between the two constructs, and someone who is inclined to experience shame is likely to have low self-esteem, this is not a one-to-one relationship. In fact, the magnitude of the relationship between trait-like shame and self-esteem is on average $r = -.42$ for adults. Thus, these constructs are modestly related to one another but are still quite distinct (Tangney & Dearing, 2002b).

Guilt is the emotion most often confused with shame. Helen Block Lewis (1971), one of the first researchers to extensively discuss the difference between shame and guilt, noted that guilt involves a sense of tension, remorse, and regret for some bad

thing someone has *done*. Shame, however, is more likely to be described as an awareness by an individual that he or she is wrong and *flawed* in some fundamental way. Tangney and Dearing's research (2002b) likewise demonstrated that fundamental differences exist between shame and guilt. They hypothesized that because guilt focuses on a specific transgression, rather than condemning the self, feelings of guilt actually serve an adaptive function in one's life. Shame, on the other hand, is maladaptive and detrimental to psychological health. Studies of both children and adults have shown that proneness toward *shame-free* guilt is largely unrelated to psychological difficulties, while proneness toward experiencing shame is linked to a wide range of psychological problems (Gramzow & Tangney, 1992; Tangney, 1994; Tangney, Burggraf, & Wagner, 1995; Tangney, Wagner, Burggraf, Gramzow, & Fletcher, 1991; Tangney, Wagner, & Gramzow, 1992). Although many people still have difficulty differentiating the concepts, empirical research has demonstrated that these two emotions are distinctly different in definition and psychological impact.

Shame can be experienced as an acute, momentary feeling, often in relation to a specific situation, termed *state shame*, or it can be more trait-like and take the form of *internalized shame*. Cook (1987) and Kaufman (1989) referred to internalized shame as an enduring, chronic feeling of shame that becomes an internalized aspect of one's identity, characterized by a deep sense of inferiority, inadequacy, or deficiency. Like most other emotions that become internalized, shame stops functioning in the manner of an emotion and becomes a characterological style (Bradshaw, 1988). The term *shame-proneness* has also been used to describe a person who experiences trait-like shame, looking primarily at a person's propensity toward experiencing shame (Tangney,

1995a). Shame-prone individuals are more susceptible to feelings of shame and are more likely to attribute negative experiences to the suspicion that there is something fundamentally wrong with them, instead of attributing it to their behavior (which would be defined as guilt-proneness). For the purposes of this study, the notion of trait-like shame, or more specifically internalized shame, will be utilized and explored further.

Gender Differences in Shame

Significant gender differences have been found in the prevalence of shame. Numerous studies have examined gender difference in shame experiences and revealed that women were generally more likely to experience shame and were more susceptible to shame than their male counterparts (Ferguson & Crowley, 1997; Gross & Hansen, 2000; Harvey, Gore, Frank, & Batres, 1997; Lewis, 1971; Lutwak & Ferrari, 1996; Tangney, 1990). Tangney and Dearing (2002a) likewise observed a significant gender difference in reported shame. Among the more than 3,000 participants they have studied over the years, including children, adolescents, college students, parents, and grandparents, women have consistently reported a greater propensity for shame than men.

Gross and Hansen (2000) concluded that differences in experience based on gender could be explained by the different roles that interpersonal relationships play in men's and women's lives. Similar to previous studies, these researchers found apparent gender differences between men and women in their experience of shame. They determined however, that any difference in shame between genders disappeared once the effects of the variable *investment in relatedness* were partialled out (from 5% shared variance to 1%). Therefore, differences in shame scores based on gender may be

mediated by valuing of emotional closeness. This finding is consistent with Lewis' (1971) contention that aspects of gender role socialization may make women more inclined to experience shame. In order to preserve relationships and because women are often burdened with culturally enforced roles of caring for others, Lewis theorized that women were more likely to direct hostility toward themselves, thus resulting in greater shame.

Relational Cultural Theory and Shame

Early approaches to defining shame were based on traditional psychological theories that viewed the self as the basic unit of study and emphasized self-sufficiency (Jordan, 1989). Critics of this individualistic perspective argued that individuals are not destined as human beings to grow to greater and greater autonomy and independence; rather, the natural pathway of growth is toward greater mutuality and interdependence. Psychology has often been too limiting in this emphasis on independence and separation, including its overemphasis on the *separate self*, making it challenging for people to embrace the necessary interdependence needed for growth.

Relational-Cultural Theory (RCT) moved away from this separate self emphasis, instead viewing *disconnection* from others as the source of most psychological difficulties (Miller & Stiver, 1997). According to RCT, disconnection is experienced when individuals feel cut off from those with whom they share a relationship. Disconnection is defined as “a psychological experience of rupture that occurs whenever a child or adult is prevented from participating in a mutually empathic and mutually empowering interaction” (Miller & Stiver, 1997, p. 65). Someone who experiences serious disconnection from others likely feels unable to act constructively

in many aspects of their life, and their decreased sense of worth often prompts them to turn away from relationships in general (Comstock, Hammer, Strentzsch, Cannon, Parsons, & Salazar, 2008; Jordan & Dooley, 2000).

Relational Cultural Theory postulates that shame is “a felt sense of unworthiness to be in connection, a deep sense of unlovability, with the ongoing awareness of how very much one wants to connect with others” (Jordan, 1997, p. 147). This perspective attempts to portray the true essence of shame by capturing its relational quality. The experience of shame involves not only a disconnection from others, but also the belief that one is personally to blame for relational failures (Jordan, 1997). Accordingly, RCT views chronic disconnection as the source of shame and hypothesizes that shame leads individuals to engage in adaptive strategies to limit further rejection and hurt. From this perspective, not only will disconnections contribute to shame, but so, too, will *threats* of disconnection. Ultimately, shame may be viewed more generally as a fear of disconnection.

According to the Relational Cultural perspective, transforming disconnection into connection (or reconnection) is the ultimate goal in diminishing shame and restoring one’s sense of self-worth and psychological well-being. Connection is thought to occur when mutual empathy, the process in which the two people within a relationship are *fully* engaged and responsive to each other, leads to feelings of mutual empowerment. This process of mutual empathy toward mutual empowerment is thought to lead to connection (or reconnection) and can best be described through the following five components: 1) feelings of energy related to being connected with that person; 2) feeling empowered to act in the moment; 3) becoming more knowledgeable about self

and relationships; 4) feelings of worthiness due to meaningful engagement with another; and 5) a greater sense of desire for connection (Miller, 1986; Miller & Stiver, 1997). RCT asserts that, through mutual empowerment, healing can take place in the context of mutually empathic, growth-producing relationships. Identifying and deconstructing obstacles to mutuality is the main objective in helping to create empowering relationships (Comstock et. al., 2008).

Further Relational Cultural Factors to Examine

As noted, shame has been conceptualized as the feeling of being “locked out of the possibility of human connection and of being powerless to change the situation” (Miller & Stiver, 1997, p. 72). Upon examination this relational description of shame could be broken down into two components. Connection, or more specifically the fear of disconnection, makes up the first component, while feeling disempowered and limited in ability to impact the situation/relationship makes up the second component. This description of shame is highly congruent with the Relational Cultural model, though there is currently little empirical evidence that directly links the constructs of connectedness and empowerment to shame. What support there is for the seemingly implied relationship between these constructs will now be examined.

Connectedness

People are relational beings and thrive on being connected with one another (Jordan, 1997; Lee & Robbins, 2000). Because they are *wired* for connection, people have an inherent need to feel accepted and as though they belong (Brown, 2007). Having a sense of connectedness has long been considered an important factor in human development and psychology (Granello & Beamish, 1998) and has been found

to be associated with stronger psychological resilience (Townsend & McWhirter, 2005). Gender differences in the importance of connection in relationships have been reported. Scholars have suggested that women and men engage in relationships differently and that the central organizing principle in women's development is a sense of connection to others (Miller, 1986; Miller & Stiver, 1991). Women's sense of self-worth is often based on their ability to cultivate and maintain relationships (Miller & Stiver, 1997).

Disconnection, experienced as a distancing within a relationship, causes individuals to retract in one way or another and, ultimately, move away from authentic connection. To be authentic means individuals fully represent their true experience within relationships, to essentially let others see them completely. The chance to make and keep connections with others is diminished substantially if individuals are not able to truly represent themselves in relationships (Miller & Stiver, 1997). Being able to portray themselves completely, though, takes courage. Brown (2007) described this process specifically as "original courage" or to "speak one's mind by telling one's heart" (p. xxii). Finding such courage can be challenging, but not being authentic in relationships reduces the chances of connecting with others and using relationships to foster growth-producing change (Miller & Stiver, 1997).

Ironically, many people will often work to make and preserve connections with others by staying out of authentic connection. They are likely adopting the approach that any connection, even if artificial, is better than no connection. Disconnection can often serve as a strategy for survival, working to ward off violation or further wounding. People will do almost anything to escape the feelings of condemned isolation and powerlessness. While these strategies are adaptive and serve to protect in some ways

(Miller & Stiver, 1997), they can also keep individuals from engaging with others in ways that fulfill their fundamental need to connect (Jordan, 1997; Lee & Robbins, 2000).

Although periods of disconnection can be a natural occurrence within relational interactions, it can become problematic when disconnection cannot be repaired or when it becomes a pervasive pattern in a person's relationships so that very little connectedness is ever experienced (Miller & Stiver, 1997). This is the point where chronic disconnection can start to be experienced as internalized shame. Jordan (1997) contended that shame is more than a loss of self-respect but more importantly represents "a felt sense of unworthiness to be in connection, a deep sense of unlovability, with the ongoing awareness of how very much one wants to connect to others" (p. 147). She further suggested that shame is experienced as relational longingness that remains unfulfilled, not because one has done something wrong, but because one feels defective and flawed in some essential way. Nathanson (1987) noted as well that shame is not just feeling shorn, but actually feeling shorn from *all possible* others. In a qualitative study by Van Vliet (2008), participants indicated that shame was an emotion that attacked their sense of self by undermining their self-concept, damaging their connections with others, and diminishing their sense of power and control. Shame was described by participants as a painful sense of social isolation and as "feeling completely lost, like there was no one to turn to" (p. 237).

Brown (2007) conceptualized shame as a fear of disconnection. She asserted that individuals experiencing shame are likely to feel afraid of being ridiculed, diminished, or ultimately seen as flawed. Such persons may believe they have exposed a part of

themselves that will jeopardize their connections or, more importantly, their worthiness for connection. Brown argued that the number of expectations placed on women, and the limited ways available to meet these unrealistic expectations, is a major source of shame. To cope with this dilemma, women will often act in ways that are inconsistent with who they are or who they would like to be. Again, such individuals attempt to connect by not truly connecting, perpetuating fears of disconnection and not being accepted (Brown, 2007).

Connectedness has often been equated with dependency, which is defined as the reliance on someone or something else for emotional fulfillment. Equating these constructs is somewhat problematic in light of the negative connotation dependency carries in our culture and the risk that connectedness will likewise be pathologized (Granello & Beamish, 1998; Townsend & McWhirter, 2005). Stiver (1991) called for dependency to be viewed in a different light. She pointed out that dependency is normal and growth-producing and is “the process of counting on other people to provide help in coping physically and emotionally with the experiences and tasks encountered in the world” (p. 160). Ultimately, the more one feels one can count on others and be heard, understood, and validated, the more one can feel worthy of connection.

As previously mentioned, Gross and Hansen (2000) found gender differences between women’s and men’s shame scores to be mediated by investment in relatedness, or the valuing of emotional closeness. This construct, introduced by Blatt (1990), has been found to be related to depression (Blatt et al., 1995). The relationship of shame and interpersonal relatedness was examined by Gross and Hansen (2000), who found that individuals who placed a greater personal importance on interpersonal connections (i.e.,

investment in relatedness) had higher shame scores. They found, in fact, that investment in relatedness accounted for nearly 18% of the shared variance. Investment in relatedness appears to be a potentially important correlate of shame.

Empowerment

Feeling powerless to change the situation and repair disconnection is the second part of the relational definition of shame mentioned earlier. Shame not only leaves a person feeling locked out of the possibility of connection, but even worse, involves a fear that there is nothing the person can do to make it any different (Van Vliet, 2008). Shame often leads the individual to pull away from relationships as a means of self-protection that often has the undesired effect of locking him or her further into shame (Jordan, 1997). The person often wants nothing more than to hide, yet the urge to escape may be frustrated by an overwhelming sense of powerlessness (Van Vliet, 2008).

Empowerment, on the other hand, is defined as “the process of increasing personal, interpersonal, or political power so that individuals can take action to improve their life situations” (Gutiérrez, 1990, p. 149). Surrey (1991) defined personal empowerment as “the motivation, freedom, and capacity to act purposefully, with the mobilization of the energies, resources, strengths, or powers of each person through a mutual, relational process” (p. 164). To feel empowered is to experience power, which is the capacity to produce change through connection. Relational cultural theorists view empowerment as a *mutual* process in that mutual empowerment occurs when both individuals engage in the relationship so that both feel they could impact the relationship. When each person experiences the other as willing to be impacted, they are

likely to engage more fully in the relationship and to allow themselves to be impacted (Surrey, 1991). Mutual empowerment allows both persons within the relationship to feel responded to and heard (Surrey, 1991), leading to an increase in energy and an increased likelihood toward connection (Miller, 1986).

In order for there to be movement from disconnection to reconnection, feelings of empowerment must occur, including one person being able to take some action within the relationship to make one's experience known, while the other person in the relationship responds in a way that leads toward a new and better connection (Miller & Stiver, 1997). The process of moving from disconnection into a new enhanced connection is referred to as *relational movement*, and someone who is aware of how relationships move through this process is said to have *relational awareness*. The ability to use relational awareness to recognize disconnections within relationships is essential in identifying, deconstructing, and resisting disconnections. When individuals are able to recognize disconnections within their relationships more accurately, they are more likely to be able to repair the connection in a way that leads to a stronger, more resilient relationship (Comstock et al., 2008). Through relational awareness and the experience of empowerment within the relationship, movement from disconnection to reconnection is made possible (Miller & Stiver, 1997).

Certain experiences are believed to characterize authentic relational connections with others, which Miller (1986) referred to as the "five good things" (p. 3). These experiences are:

1. Each person feels a greater sense of zest (vitality, energy),
2. Each person feels more able to act and does act in the world,

3. Each person has a more accurate picture of her/himself and the other person(s),
4. Each person feels a greater sense of worth,
5. Each person feels more connected to other persons and exhibits a greater motivation to connect with other people beyond those in one's primary relationships (p. 2).

It is often the lack of these positive emotions and feelings of mutual empowerment that reminds individuals of the true benefit that relationships can have in their lives. A person who feels they lack the possibility of genuine connections with other people is likely to feel disempowered and is more likely to experience shame, fear, frustration, humiliation, and self-blame (Comstock et al., 2008).

The awareness that human relationships are repairable and the knowledge that one can restore the interpersonal bridge with another, however late it may be, are believed to mediate the potentially debilitating effects of shame (Kaufman, 1974). Researchers have hypothesized that feeling empowered is associated with greater resilience in the face of current and future stressors (Worell, 2001; Worell & Remer, 2003). For example, it has been argued that empowerment, or *re-empowering*, is an important component in interventions with victims of domestic violence. By allowing victims the opportunity to make choices for themselves, they feel empowered to make changes in their lives (Dutton, 1992). Likewise, Davenport (1991) called for empowerment to be included as an emphasis in work with victims of trauma, hypothesizing that helping people acknowledge their anger may help them to move from shame and helplessness to self-affirmation and empowerment. When individuals

believe they can impact their relationships, they are less likely to feel trapped by their shame and more likely to feel more capable of making positive changes within their relationships (Miller & Stiver, 1997; Surrey, 1991).

The Current Study

Previous studies have examined the construct of shame, but little research has been conducted to explore its relation to some of the underlying assumptions of Relational Cultural Theory, including feelings of connectedness and empowerment. The theory advocates for the conceptualization of shame as a relational construct and considers shame to be a primary barrier to feelings of mutual empowerment, which RCT asserts is the mechanism by which psychological well-being occurs (Jordan, 1997). With the recent call by the American Psychological Association for evidence-based practice and the use of best available research evidence (American Psychological Association, Presidential Task Force on Evidence-Based Practice, 2006), it is essential that the theories guiding research and clinical practice be empirically examined. The purpose of this study was to explore the relationship between shame and connectedness, with empowerment as a mediating variable, in an attempt to explore the relationship between these variables postulated in RCT. Exploring the potential role of empowerment in the relationship of shame and connectedness has important implications for future theory development, research, and practice. Understanding these relationships will not only lead to a more complete understanding of the construct of shame, but may also provide meaningful guidance for clinicians in helping clients cultivate more resiliency against the potentially debilitating impact of shame.

Method

Participants

The initial sample consisted of 154 women between the ages of 18 and 64 years. However, due to substantial amounts of missing information for some participants (missing items ≥ 30), 19 participants' data were removed from the database and analysis was completed on the remaining 135 participants. The final sample ranged in age from 19 to 63 years, with a mean age of 37.15 and a standard deviation of 12.3. The ethnic backgrounds represented were as follows: 84% Caucasian, 6% American Indian, 4% Biracial or Multiracial, 3% Hispanic or Latina, 2% Asian or Asian American, and 1% African or African American. While 58% of participants sampled were from Oklahoma, the remaining 42% of participants represented 21 other states (no more than 5% from any one state), and 2 participants were from the United Kingdom. Ninety percent of participants reported their sexual orientation as heterosexual, 5% reported being lesbian or gay, and 4% reported being bisexual. Each participant reported their relationship status as being one of the following: married (54%), long-term relationship (19%), single (16%), short-term relationship (5%), divorced (2%), partnered (2%), widowed (1%), and recently separated (1%). In retrospect, these categories were treated as mutually exclusive in the survey, possibly forcing some respondents to oversimplify their relational status. For example, while it is possible that someone may be divorced *and* in a short-term relationship, the categories as presented in the survey forced respondents to select a single descriptor of their relational status. Forty-five percent of participants indicated they had 4-6 friends, 39% had 1-3 friends, 13% had 7-9 friends, and 4% reported having 10 or more friends. Regarding participants' highest level of

education, participants reported the following: bachelor's degree (39%), master's degree (28%), some college (10%), doctoral degree (8%), vocational training (6%), associate's degree (4%), graduated high school (4%), and professional degree (1%). Approximately one third (38%) of respondents reported an annual income equal to or greater than \$75,000.

Measures

The Internalized Shame Scale (ISS; Cook, 1987, 1994, 2001; see Appendix A), the Social Connectedness Scale Revised (SCS-R; Lee, Draper, & Lee, 2001; Lee & Robbins, 1995; see Appendix B), the Relational Based Empowerment Scale (REBM; Evans, 2002; see Appendix C), and a demographic questionnaire (Appendix D) were administered.

Internalized Shame Scale (ISS; Cook, 1987, 1996, 2001). Cook (1987) developed this 30-item self-report inventory designed to measure trait shame in adolescents and adults. Currently in its fifth revision, the ISS is made up of two subscales: a) a 24-item scale measuring internalized shame, and b) a 6-item self-esteem scale. A "Total Shame" score is determined by adding the 24-items making up the internalized shame subscale. Prior analyses indicated high internal consistency for the ISS, with alphas ranging from .95 - .97 across multiple samples (del Rosario & White, 2006; Rybak & Brown, 1996). In the present study, coefficient alpha for the internalized shame items was .94.

Social Connectedness Scale Revised (SCS-R). The Social Connectedness Scale Revised (Lee, Draper, & Lee, 2001; Lee & Robbins, 1995) contains 20 items constructed to measure "the degree of interpersonal closeness that is experienced

between an individual and his or her social world (e.g., friends, peers, society) as well as the degree of difficulty in maintaining this sense of closeness” (Lee & Robbins, 1998, p. 339). Higher scores on the SCS-R reflect a stronger sense of social connectedness (Lee, Draper, & Lee, 2001). Reported internal consistency reliabilities for the SCS-R have been in the .90’s (Lee, Draper, & Lee, 2001). In the present study, coefficient alpha was found to be .92.

Relational Based Empowerment Measure (RBEM). The Relational Based Empowerment Measure (RBEM; Evans, 2002) is a 58 item self-report measure used to assess a person’s experience of empowerment within a specific relationship. This instrument was developed by Evans (2002) in an effort to measure the “five good things,” the dimensions thought to be a part of relational empowerment (i.e., zest, action, knowledge, sense of worth, and desire for connection). Items were constructed based on personal communication with the leading theorists and researchers of RCT (i.e. K. Fraser, Linda Hartling, Yvonne M. Jenkins; Jean Baker Miler, Mary Tantillo, C. Wolfson). Internal inconsistency was assessed using Cronbach’s alpha and was found to be .95 and .96. For the current sample, coefficient alpha was found to be .97.

Procedure

A snowball sampling method was used in recruiting research participants (Minke & Haynes, 2003). Data were collected by utilizing a web-survey (i.e., Survey Monkey). Women known by the researcher and who met the inclusion criteria were sent a recruitment email with the link to the web-survey included. In addition, postcards that contained the study link were sent to other mental health professionals known by the researcher with access to women who might be willing to participate in the study. Those

women who chose to participate were first taken to an online informed consent page, where they were given the opportunity to consent to participate in the study. Participants completed the demographic questionnaire and the other three instruments, which they were informed would take approximately 20 minutes to complete. Participants were allowed to exit the survey at any time if they decided they would like to withdraw from the study. Upon completion of the instruments, participants were asked to forward the survey on to at least four women they knew. Those participants who completed the surveys were offered an opportunity to be entered into a drawing for a \$50 gift card. The drawing required participants to enter identifying information (email address and mailing address), which was kept in a separate database and was not connected to survey responses in order to maintain confidentiality. The drawing occurred after data collection was terminated, and the winner was notified via email, at which time their award was mailed to them.

Results

A recursive (unidirectional) path analysis model was used to test theoretical assumptions within Relational Cultural Theory regarding the effects of connectedness and empowerment (predictor variables) on internalized shame (criterion variable). More specifically, path analysis was used to examine the effect of connectedness on internalized shame and the potential roll of empowerment in mediating this relationship. Means, standard deviations, and correlations among the three variables used in the path analysis are presented in Table 1. Path coefficients were determined by running a single regression analysis and examining the beta weights for the different paths within the

model. Figure 1 presents the model examined in this study, and illustrates the direct effect, indirect effect, and total effect of connectedness on internalized shame.

In predicting internalized shame, the direct effect of connectedness was found to be statistically significant (standardized coefficient, $\beta = -.591$, $p = .000$), which has been consistently demonstrated in previous studies that have examined this relationship (Gross & Hansen, 2000). Connectedness was also found to have a statistically significant impact on empowerment ($\beta = .330$, $p = .000$). The mediating variable, empowerment, however, was not found to have a statistically significant direct effect on internalized shame ($\beta = .078$, $p = .303$). Sobel's method (1982) was used to test whether the mediator carried the influence of the predictor variable on the criterion.

Connectedness was not found to have an indirect effect on internalized shame (indirect effect = $.026$, $p = 0.927$). Thus, empowerment did not mediate the relationship between connectedness and internalized shame in the present model. The total effect for internalized shame (combined direct effects and indirect effects through empowerment) was $-.565$ ($p = .000$).

When conducting path analysis, it is common to employ alternative models in an effort to determine the conceivability of other possible influences on the criterion variable. Because this study's intention was to explore assumptions regarding Relational-Cultural Theory, connectedness was designated as the mediating variable in a second analysis. This second model investigated whether feeling empowered might instead lead to feelings of connectedness and explored the relationships of these variables to internalized shame. This model is presented in Figure 2. Empowerment was found to be significantly related to connectedness ($\beta = .330$, $p = .000$), and

connectedness significantly related to internalized shame ($\beta = -.591, p = .000$). The direct effect of empowerment, however, was not found to be statistically significant ($\beta = .078, p = .303$). Sobel's method (1982) was used again to test the influence of the mediator, connectedness, on the relationship between empowerment and internalized shame. Connectedness was not found to have a significant indirect effect ($-.195, p = .752$). The total effect was found to be $-.117$ with the inclusion of connectedness as a mediator; however, it was not found to be statistically significant ($p = .089$).

Discussion

In this study, the two characteristics of shame, feelings of diminished connection and a sense of powerlessness, were examined in an effort to explore assumptions within Relational Cultural Theory. More specifically, this study set out to explore the association between connectedness, empowerment, and internalized shame in an attempt to determine if a causal relationship might exist between these variables. While some of the results of this study are consistent with the hypotheses proposed, other predicted relationships were not observed.

Results indicate that feelings of social connectedness are significantly and negatively related to internalized shame. This finding is consistent with prior research that has examined these two constructs (Gross & Hansen, 2000) and supports the first research question hypothesized in this study, i.e., the more connected individuals feel toward others, the less likely they are to experience internalized shame. Connectedness was also found to be significantly and positively related to feelings of empowerment. Thus, individuals who felt a greater sense of social connectedness were more likely to feel they had at least one empowering relationship.

In this study, empowerment was not found to be significantly related to internalized shame. Therefore, the hypothesized mediational role of empowerment in the relationship of connectedness and shame was not supported. At this point, it is important to speculate why, despite the significant relationship between connectedness and empowerment, the construct of empowerment was not found to be significantly related to internalized shame.

First, it might be useful to examine the instruments utilized in this study. The Relational Based Empowerment Measure (RBEM), the instrument used to measure empowerment, asked participants to consider their feelings of empowerment experienced in one particular relationship. The other two measures, Social Connectedness Scale (SCS) and the Internalized Shame Scale (ISS), tapped their respective constructs on a more global level, asking respondents to indicate their *overall* sense of connectedness and internalized shame. The scope of the RBEM is more specific and thus may not be consistent with the other measures. The observed relationships may have been different if a more global measure of empowerment had been used or if feelings of connectedness specific to a single relationship had been assessed. Future research examining these constructs may benefit from measuring the variables with instruments more comparable on this dimension.

It is also possible that social desirability may have influenced respondents' answers to RBEM items. Participants may have actually rated their feelings regarding the *quality of their friendship* rather than their actual experience of empowerment in the relationship. For example, an individual may have rated each of the RBEM questions highly, because they considered the person to be a *good friend* rather than because of

specific empowering features of the relationships. Thus, social desirability may have influenced participants' responses on the RBEM and reduced the variability for this construct. Future studies designed to examine the role of social desirability with such measures are recommended.

Third, the relationships between the variables in this study were hypothesized to be linear in nature, meaning that the analysis conducted sought to explore unidirectional relationships between the variables. It is highly conceivable that relationships among the variables may be reciprocal and interactive in nature rather than linear. It seems highly plausible that while feelings of connectedness and empowerment may reduce feelings of shame, the experience of shame may likewise impede connectedness and empowerment within a relationship. This study may have been too ambitious in attempting to determine causality among the constructs and it may have been more practical to have instead explored the directionality and strength of the relationships between the variables.

Relatedly, empowerment alone may not be sufficient to explain the relationship between connectedness and internalized shame. More complex models with additional variables may be required to account for more variance. For example, it seems plausible that the number of empowering relationships one has and the centrality of these relationships to the individual might also have an impact on internalized shame. More complex models hypothesizing more complex patterns of relationship among variables should be developed and tested in future research.

As previously mentioned, a second model was introduced in the analysis of these data in an effort to more fully explore the relationships among the variables. In the

second model, the effect of connectedness on the relationship between empowerment and internalized shame was investigated. Examining the mediating effect of connectedness allowed for the exploration that perhaps feelings of empowerment led to the experience of connectedness and thus, have an impact on shame. While the variables within the model were found to be related to one another, the effect of the mediating variable was not large enough to conclude that it had a significant impact on the relationship between the predictor and criterion variables.

Limitations of the study

While the data collected in this study lead to some interesting conclusions, there were some limitations of the study that should be considered. To begin with, the instruments utilized were all self-report in nature. This is not an inherent problem, given that it is the subjective experience of the participant that should to be considered and not something than can be quantified by an outside source. As previously mentioned however, it is difficult to determine the influence that social desirability may have had in this study as it relates to reporting the level of empowerment in their relationship. Another limitation of this study relates to the sample of participants used to collect this information. A large majority of participants within this study were reportedly Caucasian, heterosexual, college educated, and had a household income of \$54,999 or higher. Thus, the generalizability of the findings of this study beyond this particular subset of women's experiences has yet to be demonstrated. Furthermore, participants were primarily recruited utilizing email, and data collection took place through a web-based survey system. Though other methods were used to recruit participants and the chance that individuals have access to internet these days is greater than ever, it is still

important to consider the influence that using this method of data collection may have played in the sample of participants. One can only speculate how a more diverse and economically representative sample might have influenced the information gathered. Nevertheless, the average age of the participant in this study was 37.15. This gives some hope that participants with a broader range of life experiences were sampled for this study, which adds to the richness of the information collected and allows us to generalize with more confidence to the experience of real women.

Areas for future research

Future research should consider a few key points before examining the relationship among these constructs any further. First, as previously mentioned, a more global measure of empowerment should be employed. Second, in future research it may be useful to consider the influence of early relationships on peoples' continued experience of internalized shame. Because internalized shame is likely to be rooted in early relational messages and interactions, it seems plausible that examining these relationships might shed light on the influences of internalized shame. This is merely a hypothesis at this point, but one that warrants further inquiry. Last, it may also be useful to examine individuals currently in therapy and their experience of empowerment as it relates to their therapist. In Relational Cultural Theory, it is assumed that the therapist can provide a corrective emotional experience. Because the therapist plays a central role in the life of the individual, this experience can generalize to relationships outside the therapy room. In determining how connectedness helps to alleviate internalized shame, it would be quite helpful to examine the role the therapist can take in this mission.

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Appendix A

Internalized Shame Scale

Sample Items:

	Never		Almost Always	
(Inferiority) Compared to other people, I feel like I somehow never measure up.	1	2	3	4
(Fragility/Exposed) I would like to shrink away when I make a mistake.	1	2	3	4
(Empty/Lonely) I have this painful gap within me that I have not been able to fill.	1	2	3	4

Appendix B

Social Connectedness Scale—Revised

Directions: Following are a number of statements that reflect various ways in which we view ourselves. Rate the degree to which you agree or disagree with each statement using the following scale (1 = Strongly Disagree and 6 = Strongly Agree). There is no right or wrong answer. Do not spend too much time with any one statement and do not leave any unanswered.

Strongly Disagree 1	Disagree 2	Mildly Disagree 3	Mildly Agree 4	Agree 5	Strongly Agree 6
1. I feel comfortable in the presence of strangers.....					1 2 3 4 5 6
2. I am in tune with the world.....					1 2 3 4 5 6
3. Even among my friends, there is no sense of brother/sisterhood.....					1 2 3 4 5 6
4. I fit in well in new situations.....					1 2 3 4 5 6
5. I feel close to people.....					1 2 3 4 5 6
6. I feel disconnected from the world around me.....					1 2 3 4 5 6
7. Even around people I know, I don't feel that I really belong.....					1 2 3 4 5 6
8. I see people as friendly and approachable.....					1 2 3 4 5 6
9. I feel like an outsider.....					1 2 3 4 5 6
10. I feel understood by the people I know.....					1 2 3 4 5 6
11. I feel distant from people.....					1 2 3 4 5 6
12. I am able to relate to my peers.....					1 2 3 4 5 6
13. I have little sense of togetherness with my peers.....					1 2 3 4 5 6
14. I find myself actively involved in people's lives.....					1 2 3 4 5 6
15. I catch myself losing a sense of connectedness with society.....					1 2 3 4 5 6
16. I am able to connect with other people.....					1 2 3 4 5 6
17. I see myself as a loner.....					1 2 3 4 5 6
18. I don't feel related to most people.....					1 2 3 4 5 6
19. My friends feel like family.....					1 2 3 4 5 6
20. I don't feel I participate with anyone or any group.....					1 2 3 4 5 6

Appendix C

Relationally Based Empowerment Measure

Please think of a particular relationship. This should be a relationship with someone you have known for at least three months but preferably longer. With this relationship in mind please answer the questions below by choosing the number from the scale that most closely represents your experience in this relationship overall within the last three to six months. Note: For convenience, the questionnaire uses the word “friend” for the relationship you have chosen; if you have chosen a person from another category (e.g., significant other, family member, ect) simply substitute the word “friend”, with the appropriate relational title when reading the question. (reversed-scored)

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Mildly Disagree	Mildly Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
1	2	3	4	5	6

1. I have more energy to do things I need to do when we are really connecting.
2. Our relationship has helped my friend deepen his/her other relationships.
3. Our relationship has helped me to see my strengths as a person.
4. Interacting with my friend helps me clarify my thought and feelings.
5. Being with my friend is so rewarding that I find I want to spend more time together.
6. My friend cannot come to me with difficult or sensitive issues in their life(reversed-scored).
7. Our relationship has enabled me to take on challenges I didn't think I could handle.
8. Our relationship has helped my friend to understand himself/herself more clearly.
9. I do not share my thoughts and feelings with my friend (reversed-scored).
10. Our friendship enhances my sense of worth most of the time.
11. I value the type of relationship we have and would like to develop more relationships like this one.
12. I can talk about things I am not sure of and try them out with my friend.
13. After we talk I do not have a clearer sense of how best to connect with my friend (reversed-scored).
14. Our friendship has been strengthened by our willingness to work through our conflicts.
15. After interacting with my friend I feel vitalized.
16. I feel I have a positive impact on my friend.
17. Because of our relationship I regard myself more positively.
18. Our relationship has contributed to a greater understanding of myself.
19. Our friendship helps me to take action in other aspects of my life.
20. My friend does not feel more worthwhile as a person because of our relationship (reversed-scored).
21. These types of relationships are one of the best things in my life.
22. I often feel more enthusiastic after we talk.

23. We have not been able to address conflicts in our relationship (reversed-scored).
24. Our relationship has enabled my friend to handle challenges in other relationships or in other aspects of their life more confidently and effectively.
25. Interacting with my friend helps me to feel better about who I am.
26. Addressing conflicts in our relationship is a good thing.
27. When my friend and I really connect I have a better understanding of who she/he is and how she/he feels and thinks.
28. I feel more confident about other social situations because of my relationship with my friend.
29. My friend helps me to recognize my contributions to our relationship.
30. Our relationship has not helped me to clarify my relational goals and desires (reversed-scored).
31. My friend feels enriched and energized by our relationship.
32. Within our relationship I am comfortable most of the time communicating my thoughts and feelings.
33. My friend desires connection with me and seeks out my company.
34. Our friendship has not helped me to accept myself more fully (reversed-scored).
35. Most of the time I can talk about the difficult and confusing things in my life with him/her.
36. This relationship has helped me to make positive changes in my other relationships.
37. Within our relationship I can express my thoughts and feelings (both positive and negative) as they arise in the moment.
38. I feel valued and appreciated by my friend and that makes me feel good about myself.
39. Because of our connection I am less afraid.
40. In talking with my friend I feel more confidence in my responses and perceptions to situations.
41. It is good to know that he/she is there.
42. Spending time with my friend does not renew my energy (reversed-scored).
43. Connecting with my friend helps me to state my thoughts and feelings directly.
44. This relationship helps me to understand relationships in general.
45. Connecting with my friend and sharing my thoughts and feelings has helped me to let go of negative images of myself.
46. I really care about my friend and am concerned about her/his well-being.
47. My friend can talk openly about with me about our relationship and can freely express their feelings.
48. Communicating with my friend has not helped me to understand our relationship (reversed-scored).
49. I want our relationship to grow even deeper.
50. I find myself seeking out more opportunities to connect with others.
51. My friend has helped me to recognize my relational skills.
52. I do not do many things that strengthen the good things in our relationship (reversed-scored).
53. Because of our relationship I feel more zest for life in general.
54. After interacting with my friend I feel more able to be myself.

55. The world would be very different (or a lot worse) without her/him.
56. Because of our connection I can address difficult issues within our relationship with my friend.
57. After we talk we have a clearer sense of how best to communicate with each other.
58. My friend has helped me to grow in positive ways.

Appendix D

Demographic Questionnaire

In order to successfully complete this study, I would like to know more about you. The information you provide will not be used to identify you in any way.

1. Age: _____
2. Gender: a. Female b. Male c. Other _____
3. State in which you live: _____
4. Ethnicity: a. African or African-American
 b. American Indian/Native American
 c. Asian or Asian-American
 d. Biracial or Multiracial
 e. Caucasian
 f. Hispanic/Latina
 g. Other _____
5. How do you describe your sexual identity/orientation?
 - a. Bisexual
 - b. Heterosexual
 - c. Lesbian or Gay
 - d. Transgendered
 - e. Other: _____
6. What is your current romantic relationship status?
 - a. Involved in a short-term relationship (i.e., less than 1 yr)
 - b. Involved in long-term relationship (i.e., more than 1 yr)
 - c. Civil union
 - d. Divorced
 - e. Married
 - f. Partnered
 - g. Single
 - h. Other: _____
7. How many children under the age of 18 do you have in the home?
 - a. None
 - b. 1-2
 - c. 3-4
 - d. 5 or more

8. What is the highest level of educational you have completed?
- a. Junior High/Middle school
 - b. High school
 - c. Some college
 - d. Vocational training
 - e. Associate's degree
 - f. Bachelor's degree
 - g. Master's degree
 - h. Doctorate degree
 - i. Professional degree
 - j. Other: _____
9. Do you currently work outside the home?
- a. No
 - b. Yes, part-time
 - c. Yes, full-time
10. Household Income:
- a. Less than \$24,999
 - b. \$25,000 – \$34,999
 - c. \$35,000 – \$44,999
 - d. \$45,000 – \$54,999
 - e. \$55,000 – \$64,999
 - f. \$65,000 – \$74,999
 - g. \$75,000 – \$84,999
 - h. \$85,000 – \$94,999
 - i. \$95,000 – \$104,999
 - j. \$105,000 – \$114,999
 - k. \$115,000 – \$124,999
 - l. Over \$125,000
11. How many friends do you consider to be in your close female circle of friends?
- a. 1-3
 - b. 4-6
 - c. 7-9
 - d. 10 or more

Table 1

Intercorrelations, Means, and Standard Deviations Among Variables in Path Analysis

Variable	1	2	3
1. Internalized Shame	—		
2. Connectedness	-.565*	—	
3. Empowerment	-.117	.330*	—
M	53.48	92.86	279.73
SD	13.39	11.83	27.12

* $p < .001$

Figure Caption

Figure 1: Path model for the relationship between connectedness and internalized shame, with empowerment as a mediating variable. Overall total effect = $-.565$, $p = .000$.

Figure 2: Path model for the relationship between empowerment and internalized shame, with connectedness as a mediating variable. Overall total effect = $-.117$, $p = .089$.



