



Project Summary

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Study

Self-conscious emotions are those that start to develop primarily after 18 months of life, and are based on the acquiring of self-consciousness and the moral training that goes with that development. Many studies have shown that such emotions—such as shame, guilt, empathy and pride—are key in understanding human behavior. This study focused on their relationships with intentions to commit a crime of shoplifting. The sample consisted of 217 college students who were surveyed about many questions about their personality, demographic info, and most importantly their intentions of committing a specific crime of shoplifting, as given in a scenario, in which a college student steals items from a store.

Findings

Several notable findings emerge from this sample of college students (see Table 1).

1. Proneness to feeling empathy and pride were associated with inclination to shoplift, in both the state (situational) and trait (personality) measures; empathy being negatively associated, pride being positively related to crime intentions.
2. Shame and guilt were also associated with intentions to shoplift, but they were inconsistent across state and trait measures. Specifically, shame traits (personality) had no significant effect, while shame states (for the given scenario) had a strong effect. Interestingly, it was vice-versa for the traits and states of guilt.

Table 1. Overall Findings Estimates from Multiple Regression Analysis of Reported Intentions to Offend (N = 217; R² = .52)

Variable	Beta	t	Sig.
Shame-proneness	.097	1.494	.137
Guilt-proneness	-.334	-4.947***	.000
Empathy-proneness	-.341	-4.078***	.000
Pride-proneness	.115	1.981*	.049
Shame state	-.209	-3.393***	.000
Guilt state	-.094	-1.603	.110
Empathy state	-.137	-2.391*	.018
Pride state	.181	3.189**	.002
Pleasure/thrill	.110	1.898	.059
Certainty/severity	-.038	-.627	.531

*p < .05, ** p < .01*** p < .001; two-tailed tests.

Implications

Findings support previous findings that both shame and guilt have a significant effect on individuals' intentions to engage in a specific criminal act given in a detailed scenario of theft, but both also show inconsistent effects across state versus trait measures. However, other self-conscious emotions which are largely neglected in the criminological literature—specifically empathy and pride—are likely to be even more consistent factors in individuals' predicted decisions to commit the crime, due to their significant association at both state-level and trait-level indicators. These findings also controlled for and accounted for influence of gender, age, GPA, and prior offending. More early intervention programs in helping parents develop better disciplinary and learning skills could aid in having their children acquire higher levels of self-conscious emotions, such as empathy and guilt, which would likely go a long way toward more prosocial dispositions and promote long-term crime prevention effects.