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## FlashReport

# When stepping outside the self is not enough: A self-distanced perspective reduces the experience of basic but not of self-conscious emotions



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## HIGHLIGHTS

- We test how self-distancing affects basic vs. self-conscious emotions
- Self-distancing attenuated the intensity of anger and sadness
- Self-distancing did not affect the intensity of guilt and shame
- The type of emotion should be considered when applying an emotion regulation strategy

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## ABSTRACT

Despite recent increased interest in self-conscious emotions, few studies have investigated their regulation. The current research examines the effectiveness of self-perspective in regulating negative self-conscious (guilt, shame) versus basic (anger, sadness) emotions. We predict that adopting a distanced perspective on the self would attenuate the experience of anger and sadness, as previous research has shown (e.g., [Kross et al., 2005](#)). However, because the experience of self-conscious emotions involves self-evaluation as well as the evaluation of the self from the perspective of others, a self-distanced perspective may enable these emotions and fail to attenuate the experience of shame and guilt. As predicted, a self-distanced perspective attenuated feelings of sadness and anger, but not of shame and guilt. These findings suggest the appraisal of the experienced emotion (i.e., whether it involves self-evaluations and/or the perspective of others) may influence the effectiveness of emotion-regulation strategies.

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## Introduction

People often reflect on past events during which they felt bad, and when they do so, they may be motivated to repair the unpleasant emotion that follows in order to feel good ([Gross, 1998](#); [Larsen, 2000](#)). Extensive research on emotion regulation has focused on strategies people use to regulate unpleasant feelings, mostly of basic emotions, such as anger, sadness, and fear (e.g., [Ray, Wilhelm, & Gross, 2008](#); [Sheppes & Meiran, 2007](#)). Consequently, conclusions regarding the effectiveness of emotion-regulation strategies have ignored possible differences between basic emotions and other types of emotions. In this paper, we test the effectiveness of self-distancing as a strategy for regulating basic versus self-conscious emotions.

Self-conscious emotions play an important role in regulating people's thoughts and behaviors ([Tracy & Robins, 2004](#)). Emotions

such as guilt, shame, and pride motivate people to achieve ([Weiner, 1985](#)) and to behave in socially appropriate ways ([Tangney, Stuewig, & Mashek, 2007](#)). Research has suggested that the experience of self-conscious emotions requires self-awareness and self-evaluation ([Tracy & Robins, 2004](#)), as well as awareness of how one is evaluated by others ([Baldwin & Baccus, 2004](#); [Leary, 2007](#)). We therefore suggest that these emotions may respond differently than basic emotions to self-distancing, an emotion-regulation strategy that enables self-evaluation and social-perspective processes.

## Regulating emotions through self-perspective

Recent research suggests self-distancing as a strategy for adaptively analyzing negative experiences. Self-distancing is achieved when individuals adopt an external perspective and thus think about themselves as an object of attention. The efficiency of self-distancing in regulating emotions is often examined in relation to a self-immersed perspective. Recalling and analyzing an experience of anger or sadness from a self-distanced perspective reduces the intensity of the emotional response

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more than a self-immersed perspective (Kross & Ayduk, 2008; Kross, Ayduk, & Mischel, 2005). Similar effects have been demonstrated for stress (McIsaac & Eich, 2004) and general affect (Robinson & Swanson, 1993). Using self-distancing without analyzing the reasons underlying the emotion may result in no effect of self-distancing (Kross et al., 2005) or increased emotional reactivity (e.g., Hung & Mukhopadhyay, 2012 for guilt from succumbing to temptations).

According to Kross et al. (2005), analyzing the reasons for negative experiences from a self-immersed perspective directs people to selectively focus on “hot” features of their experiences (e.g., specific chain of events) and therefore to “relive” the negative experience. The high emotional arousal that results from this perspective does not allow for an adaptive emotional processing of the event. A self-distanced perspective, on the other hand, directs people to focus on “cool,” less emotional features of the experience, and this reconstrual of the event makes it less painful (Kross et al., 2005). Additionally, this perspective may induce more psychological distance, which is negatively correlated with emotional intensity (Van Boven, Kane, McGraw, & Dale, 2010).

We suggest that analyzing autobiographical memories from a self-distanced perspective may not be effective in attenuating all negative emotions. In particular, it may not attenuate the experience of self-conscious emotions.

### Self-conscious emotions and self-distancing

Some researchers define self-conscious emotions as social emotions, arguing that their elicitation involves real or imagined interactions with others and awareness of how others perceive and evaluate the individual (Baldwin & Baccus, 2004; Cooley, 1902; Leary, 2007). For example, people experience guilt and shame when they consider others' possible objections to their violation of social norms (Barrett, 1995). Others suggest that the elicitation of self-conscious emotions involves self-awareness and self-evaluation (Tangney, 2003; Tracy & Robins, 2004). For example, people experience guilt or shame when they feel they have failed to live up to ideal self-representations.

Although basic emotions such as anger and sadness may involve the consideration of others as well as self-evaluation, their experience does not necessitate such appraisals. Instead, basic emotions arise from the evaluation of one's stand in relation to survival goals that serve hedonic and appetitive needs (Baldwin & Baccus, 2004; Tracy & Robins, 2004).

We propose that a self-distanced perspective will not attenuate the experience of self-conscious emotions because it facilitates processes involved in the elicitation of these emotions. A self-distanced perspective highlights the way others perceive the individual (Leary, 2007). It may also draw people's attention to the self (Duval & Wicklund, 1972) thereby increasing self-evaluative processes (Tangney, 2003; Tracy & Robins, 2004).

We tested this prediction in two studies that manipulated participants' perspective (self-immersed vs. self-distanced) while analyzing the reasons for experiencing a negative self-conscious versus basic emotion, and measured emotion reactivity. Participants in Experiment 1 analyzed an experience of guilt or anger, and participants in Experiment 2 analyzed an experience of shame or sadness. We chose emotions that are extensively studied prototypes of self-conscious or basic emotions. We predicted that a self-distanced perspective would attenuate anger and sadness but not guilt and shame.

### Experiment 1

#### Method

Two hundred and forty-eight undergraduate students (152 women) from Ben Gurion University in Israel completed the experiment individually, guided by prerecorded audio instructions adapted from Kross

et al. (2005). We excluded four participants who did not follow instructions and listed a different emotion than requested, and three participants who reported extremely low emotion reactivity ( $>2.5$  SDs from their group's mean).<sup>1</sup> We used a 2 (emotion: anger, guilt)  $\times$  2 (perspective: self-immersed, self-distanced) between-subjects design. To manipulate emotion, we instructed participants to recall an interpersonal conflict in which they felt overwhelming anger or guilt, while focusing on reasons underlying their feelings. To manipulate perspective, we had participants adopt a self-immersed perspective by trying to relive the situation as if it were happening again, or a self-distanced perspective by taking an observer's perspective and watching the experience unfold as if it were happening again to the “distant you.” Participants then described the experience in writing. As in Kross et al. (2005), participants also indicated whether the conflict was resolved. A two-way logistic regression indicated participants recalled more unresolved conflicts involving anger (48%) than guilt (33%), Wald  $\chi^2_{(1)} = 5.40$ ,  $p = .02$ , but conflict was not influenced by perspective or by an emotion  $\times$  perspective interaction, Wald  $\chi^2_{(1)} < 1$ .

Participants rated the extent and intensity of re-experiencing the emotion on two 9-point scales (1 = not at all, not intense at all, 9 = a lot, very intense). We averaged these two ratings to form the reactivity index ( $\alpha = .84$ ). Participants also rated the extent to which recalling the experience was difficult (1 = not at all; 6 = very). Finally, to repair participants' feelings, we had them recall a positive event.

### Results

#### Emotional reactivity

An emotion  $\times$  perspective ANOVA on emotional reactivity, with conflict as a covariate, yielded a main effect for conflict. Emotional reactivity was higher for unresolved experiences ( $M = 6.81$ ,  $SD = 1.41$ ) than for resolved experiences ( $M = 5.82$ ,  $SD = 1.10$ ),  $F(1, 236) = 24.66$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $r = .31$ . The analysis yielded a marginal main effect for emotion,  $F(1, 236) = 2.92$ ,  $p = .08$ ,  $r = .11$ , indicating higher reactivity for guilt ( $M = 6.32$ ,  $SD = 1.60$ ) compared with anger ( $M = 6.12$ ,  $SD = 1.74$ ), but no main effect for perspective,  $F < 1$ . More important, the analysis yielded the predicted emotion  $\times$  perspective interaction,  $F(1, 236) = 4.56$ ,  $p = .03$ ,  $r = .14$  (Fig. 1A). Replicating previous findings by Kross et al. (2005), participants reported lower levels of anger from a self-distanced perspective than from a self-immersed perspective,  $F(1, 239) = 4.41$ ,  $p = .04$ ,  $r = .14$ . However, levels of guilt were not different from a self-immersed than from a self-distanced perspective,  $F < 1$ . Thus, self-distancing is effective in reducing the intensity of a basic emotion but not of a self-conscious emotion.<sup>2</sup>

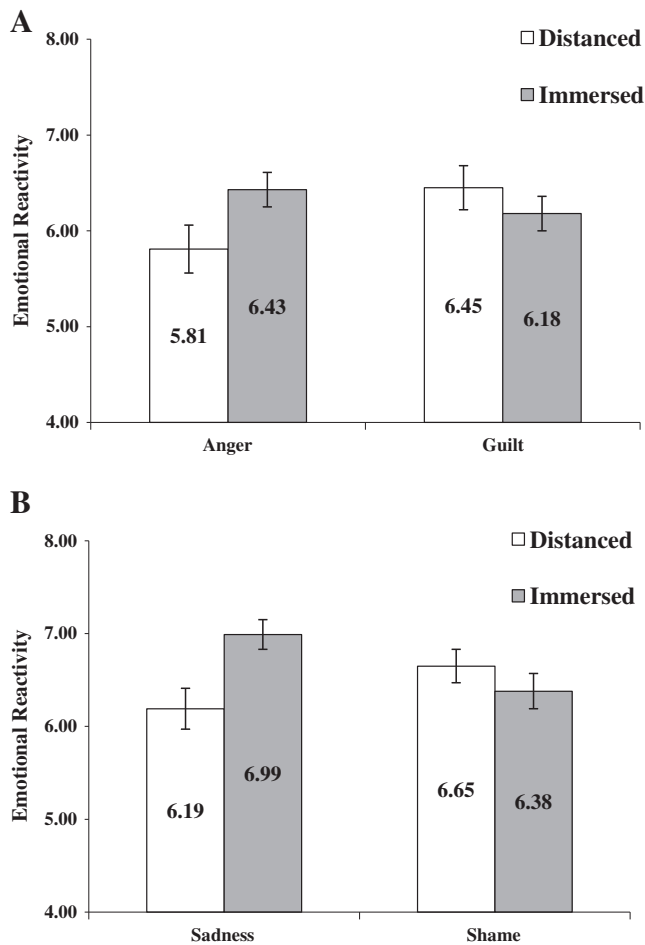
#### Coding of essays

Two independent coders coded the essays on dimensions related to others' evaluations of self (Baldwin & Baccus, 2004; Leary, 2007), as well as self-representations and self-evaluations (Tangney, 2003; Tracy & Robins, 2004). Reliability  $r$ 's based on 50 narratives in each experiment exceeded 0.70 in all dimensions.

Table 1 lists the different dimensions with their definitions and relevant statistics. It shows that essays of guilt experiences referred to self-evaluations more than essays of anger experiences ( $ps < .001$ ).

<sup>1</sup> Participants were excluded from all conditions (Experiment 1: 3 guilt-distant, 1 guilt-near, 2 anger-distant, and 1 anger-near; Experiment 2: 2 shame-distant, 4 sadness-distant, and 7 sadness-near). When all participants are included, the interaction in both experiments remains significant.

<sup>2</sup> Difficulty of recalling the events cannot account for the differential effect of perspective on emotional reactivity. In both experiments, an ANOVA of emotion  $\times$  perspective on difficulty of recalling the emotional experience did not reveal a significant interaction. The analysis revealed a main effect for perspective in Experiment 1,  $F(1, 236) = 19.76$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $r = .28$  and in Experiment 2,  $F(1, 249) = 5.47$ ,  $p = .02$ ,  $r = .15$ , indicating that analyzing an event from a self-immersed perspective is easier than analyzing an event from a self-distanced perspective.



**Fig. 1.** Emotional reactivity as a function of emotion (A: anger vs. guilt; B: sadness vs. shame) and perspective (distanced vs. immersed). Error bars represent standard errors.

Emotion did not interact with perspective for any of the dimensions. Thus, the content of essays does not show that evaluations by self and others mediate the effect of self-distance on the experience of anger versus guilt.

## Experiment 2

Experiment 2 repeated the same procedure to examine whether the results of Experiment 1 would replicate when comparing shame (a self-conscious emotion) and sadness (a basic emotion).

### Method

Two hundred and sixty-seven undergraduates (150 women) from Ben-Gurion University in Israel participated in the experiment. We excluded nine participants who listed a different emotion than requested, and four participants who reported extremely low emotion reactivity ( $>2.5$  SDs from their group's mean).<sup>1</sup>

We used a procedure identical to that in Experiment 1 except for the manipulated emotions: participants analyzed a past experience of sadness or shame. Fifty-eight percent of the recalled experiences were unresolved, and perspective, emotion, or their interaction did not affect this variable, Wald  $\chi^2_{(1)} < 1$ .

### Results

#### Emotional reactivity

An emotion  $\times$  perspective ANOVA on the average of the two emotional reactivity questions ( $\alpha = .83$ ), with experience as a covariate,

**Table 1**

Essays coding (on a 3-point scale: 0 = not at all, 2 = a lot) on each of the three scales (coding for self-representations was on a 2-point scale: 0 = no, 1 = yes), as a function of emotions (Experiment 1: anger vs. guilt; Experiment 2: sadness vs. shame).

Experiment 1				
	Mean anger	Mean guilt	F	p
<b>a. Others' evaluations</b>	0.17	0.16	<1	–
The extent to which the essay refers to the perception of the individual by another person. (e.g., "I saw she was disappointed in me").				
<b>b. Self-evaluations</b>	0.07	0.69	78.40	0.001
The extent to which the essay mentions evaluations of the self (e.g., "It was ungrateful of me").				
	% Anger	% Guilt	Wald $\chi^2$	p
<b>c. Self-representations</b>	13%	17%	<1	–
Whether the essay refers to self-representations (e.g., "I'm known as the spoiled child in the family, but this was too much even for me").				
Experiment 2				
	Mean sadness	Mean shame	F	p
<b>a. Others' evaluations</b>	0.04	0.72	82.15	0.001
The extent to which the essay refers to the perception of the individual by another person (e.g., "I saw she was disappointed in me").				
<b>b. Self-evaluations</b>	0.15	0.82	77.82	0.001
The extent to which the essay mentions evaluations of the self (e.g., "It was ungrateful of me").				
	% Sadness	% Shame	Wald $\chi^2$	p
<b>c. Self-representations</b>	6%	23%	15.41	0.001
Whether the essay refers to self-representations (e.g., "I'm known as the spoiled child in the family, but this was too much even for me").				

did not yield main effects,  $F_s < 1$ . The predicted perspective  $\times$  emotion interaction was significant,  $F(1, 249) = 8.03$ ,  $p = .005$ ,  $r = .18$  (see Fig. 1B). Participants reported lower levels of sadness from a self-distanced perspective than from a self-immersed perspective,  $F(1, 249) = 8.78$ ,  $p = .003$ ,  $r = .18$ . However, there was no difference in reported reactivity of shame experience from a self-immersed or a self-distanced perspective,  $F = 1$ . Similar Experiment 1, a self-distanced perspective attenuated reactivity of a basic emotion but not of a self-conscious emotion.<sup>3</sup>

#### Coding of essays

We followed the same procedure as in Experiment 1. Essays of shame experiences referred to others' evaluations and self-evaluations more than essays of sadness experiences ( $ps < .001$ ). Emotion did not interact with perspective for any of the dimensions (Table 1).

### General discussion

Two experiments replicated past findings showing that a self-distanced perspective is more beneficial than a self-immersed perspective in attenuating the experience of anger and sadness (Kross & Ayduk, 2008; Kross et al., 2005). However, self-distance is not beneficial in regulating



feelings of guilt and shame. These findings are important because they point to a boundary condition for distant self-reflection as an emotion-regulation strategy, suggesting it may not be effective for all emotions. We expect the current findings to generalize to other negative self-conscious and basic emotions. For example, we expect a self-distanced perspective to reduce feelings of fear (e.g., when walking alone at night), but not feelings of embarrassment (e.g., when going out on a first date).

Some researchers suggest self-conscious emotions emerge only when one considers how a real (Kemeny, Gruenewald, & Dickerson, 2004) or imagined (Baldwin & Baccus, 2004; Leary, 2007) audience perceives and evaluates the self. Other researchers suggest that the elicitation of self-conscious emotions requires focusing attention on the self, which activates self-representations and self-evaluation (Tracy & Robins, 2004). We find the experience of self-conscious emotions involves the activation of self-evaluation to a greater extent than the experience of basic emotions. In addition, self-conscious emotions (mainly shame) involve more attributions of thoughts and feelings to others. Whereas the former supports the involvement of self-focused attention in the experience of self-conscious emotions, the latter supports the notion that others play a role in self-conscious emotions. Although our results cannot determine which process is more prominent in defining self-conscious emotions, they provide support for the involvement of these processes in their experience.

Given that self-distancing may facilitate processes involved in the experience of self-conscious emotions, one would expect it to increase their reactivity. However, in both experiments, the small increase in the experience of self-conscious emotions when adopting a self-distanced compared to a self-immersed perspective did not reach significance. We instructed participants to *analyze* their memories (in contrast to merely recalling them), a procedure found to reduce arousal and attenuate emotional intensity (Ayduk & Kross, 2010). Analyzing memories of guilt and shame might have counteracted the possible increase in self-conscious emotions facilitated by an observer's perspective. Also, the mediation analyses did not find support for our hypothesis that distancing fails to down-regulate emotional reaction to guilt and shame because it increases self-evaluation and thinking of others' evaluations of the self. These results may reflect the limitations of subjective analyses of autobiographical memories. Future research may provide a more reliable test of this hypothesis by manipulating the hypothesized mediating evaluation processes or by measuring them more directly.

The literature has given much attention to comparing the effectiveness of different emotion-regulation strategies (e.g., reappraisal vs. distraction, Sheppes & Meiran, 2007). We believe that studying the effectiveness (and ineffectiveness) of a single strategy in regulating different types of emotions is also valuable. The current research shows that self-distancing is not effective in regulating guilt and shame. Identifying strategies that *fail* to regulate self-conscious emotions is important because these emotions are linked to various psychological problems such as PTSD, depression and aggression (e.g., Stapleton, Taylor, & Asmundson, 2006; Tangney, Burgrgraf, & Wagner, 1995). A challenge for future research is identifying effective strategies for regulating self-conscious emotions. Because these emotions involve self-evaluation, strategies that divert attention from the self, such as repressive coping and distraction, might be successful in attenuating their experience, at least in the short run. Other strategies, such as expressive writing, meditation, or mindfulness, might also attenuate self-conscious emotions as they redirect the focus of attention from the self to the eliciting event (see Koole, 2009, for a review). Reappraisal techniques that focus on changing the meaning of self-evaluations (e.g., reframing the belief “no one likes me” by thinking “this is only a thought, not a fact”) and are successful in regulating social anxiety (Goldin, Manber-Ball, Werner, Heimberg, & Gross, 2009) might also be effective in regulating self-conscious emotions as they change the way people think about the self.

In sum, despite the uniqueness of self-conscious emotions in terms of the appraisals underlying their experience and their involvement in domains such as social interactions, achievement, and moral behavior (e.g., Tangney et al., 2007; Tracy & Robins, 2004), their regulation has been understudied. We find that self-distancing, a strategy adaptive for regulating basic emotions, may not be effective in regulating self-conscious emotions. Our findings suggest taking into account the unique characteristics of an emotion in order to apply a suitable strategy for its regulation.

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