

Shame and Depression: The Mediating Role of God Attachment

Grace-Ann Gibby

Liberty University

Abstract

Researchers have shown associations between shame and depressive symptoms. The present research takes a step forward to explore God attachment as the mechanism that is influenced by shame and leads to depressive symptoms. The mediating role of God attachment is studied in a quantitative study on 279 adult respondents and the direct and indirect effects are discussed. Mediation analysis demonstrated that the subscale of God is loving somewhat mediated the relationship between shame and depression. There was no interaction based on God is cruel and God is distant. The implications for future research and mental health practitioners are discussed.

Keywords: Shame, Depression, God Attachment

Introduction

The author seeks to examine relations between shame and depressive symptoms, and the mediating role that God attachment has in causing depression. Depression has been categorized as the second leading cause of disability based on the World Health Organization standards (Rentala et al., 2017), and is scheduled to rank as number one by the year 2030 (Malhi et al., 2018). This poses an immense economic burden which requires stronger efforts to understand causal links or relationships of variables that lead to depression (Malhi et al., 2018).

Several studies have shown a strong link between shame and depression, with higher levels associated with generalized shame and depressive symptoms (Gambin et al., 2018). Oftentimes, the feelings of inferiority that surround shame are risk factors for development of depressive symptoms (Hook et al., 2005), and insecure attachment styles can often trace back to early experiences of shame (Kadir et al., 2017). Individuals who require a high need to be accepted and loved, and who worry about hurting others or offending them may be vulnerable to experience shame (Kadir et al., 2017). Generalized or trait shame is so powerful that even people who struggle with shame can receive positive feedback and still experience shame (van Schie et al., 2021).

To lessen the burden, the question must be asked: what are avenues for practitioners to explore? Many studies have shown that spirituality/religiosity has positive effects against depression (Rentala et al., 2017; Braam et al., 2019). However, one step further into the realm of spirituality is the image of God. How does an individual's image of God relate to their depression? There are three supported views of God; 1. God as cruel, 2. God as loving, and 3. God as distant. A small study determined that individuals who hold a critical image of God

displayed higher scores on the DASS-21 (Standford, 2021). Due to small effect sizes, it is recommended to replicate the study with a larger sample size. Results such as these indicate that practitioners may find that by focusing on who God is in the life of the client can inform the treatment plan (Standford, 2021), and may serve as a protective mechanism. If the image of God can aid in a client's reduction of suffering, perhaps it can be utilized as a preventative treatment.

God attachment was utilized from the attachment theory and proposed that God can be a psychological object for attachment (Njus et al., 2020). Studies have demonstrated that God can be a source of comfort during pain, heartbreaks and situations that are difficult to comprehend. There is increasing empirical evidence that a secure God attachment, similar to adult attachment is related to psychological well-being; and conversely an anxious attachment to God was positively related to depression (Njus et al., 2020)

Depression

Depression is a common illness that severely limits psychosocial functioning (Malhi et al., 2018). Symptoms are often categorized in three broad categories: emotional, neurovegetative, and cognitive and as depression commonly occurs with other psychiatric disorders, detection is a challenge ((Malhi et al., 2018). It is illustrated by a constant low mood that comes with low self-esteem and anhedonia (Nagi et al., 2018). Major Depressive Disorder is the most common diagnosis for depression which describes a significant cluster of symptoms for a specific duration (Edwards, 2021).

God Attachment

Recent literature posits the idea that there is some correlation between an individual's attachment style that originates from their parent-child attachment and their attachment style can

be considered similarly to God (Counted, 2015). Insecure images of God can influence a believer's emotional experience (Counted, 2015), and different representations of God can influence a person's affective state with research supporting the idea that clients with a negative representation of God are more distressed and experience depressive symptoms (Schaap – Yonker, et al., 2017).

Shame

Shame is often perceived as a complex emotion because it requires a distinction between self-awareness, the recognition of “I”, and self-representation – the ability to conceptualize ‘me’ (Walker, 2014). These differentiation make self-evaluation possible, and when self-evaluation is negative this results in shame (Walker, 2014). Walker et al. (2013), suggest that the potential for shame exists when people are faced with the difficulty of not being able to fulfill their individual expectations and those of the wider communities. It is a common, self-conscious emotion that is usually unwanted by most individuals and can be characterized as an intense, immediate affective reaction that is subsequent to exposure of some significant personal shortcoming (Gross et. al., 2000). Shame is not considered a basic emotion such as anger or fear, but rather a negative assessment of one's own self, and is experienced through feelings of smallness and powerlessness (Chase & Walker, 2012). Shame pertains to a painful focus on the self (Gambin et al., 2018). Within the context of these definitions, the relationship between emotionally charged entities such as shame and depression provide a strong framework for exploration.

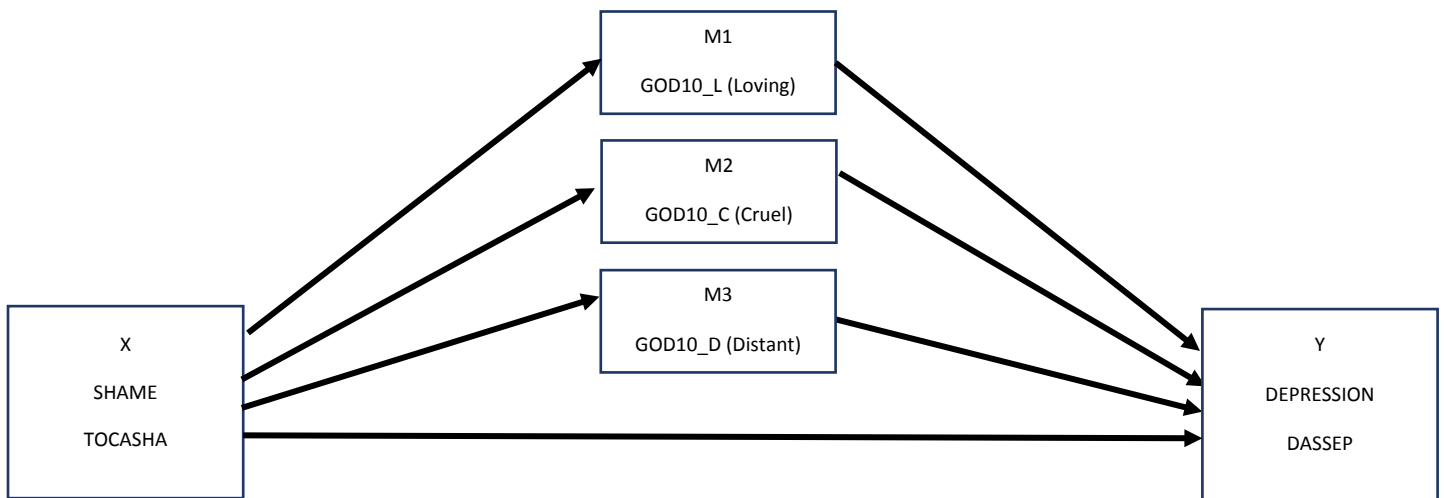
Current study

The aim of the current study was to explore the mediating effect of attachment to God on the relation between shame and depression. Literature has shown strong associations between shame

and depression, and shame influencing attachment. In this study we look at the God Attachment and seek to determine if there are notable mediating effects. The exploration of direct and indirect effects of shame on attachment, and shame on depression can further the understanding that underlies these mechanisms. The proposed theoretical model is shown in Fig. 1

Fig. 1

Proposed Theoretical Diagram



Method

Participants and Procedures

A sample of 279 adult respondents (male = 130, female = 145 and other = 4) was taken for the study. The age range of the participants was 19-73yrs. (M = 36.88 years, SD = 11.705), and marital status was 47.7% married, 44.1% single, 7.2% divorced and 1.1% widowed. Using Mechanical Turk, surveys were sent out through email. The dataset used in this design is dataset 4 which was collected in January 2017.

Measures

Depression was measured using the Dass-21 Scale. A well- established tool for assessing depression, anxiety and stress has 21 items with 7 items for each subscale. It is the short form for the original Dass scale which has 42 items (Henry et al., 2005). The Dass-21 is psychometrically sound with good reliability and validity (Oei et al., 2013).

Trait Shame was measured using the TOSCA Scale. The TOSCA Scale is a measurement that instructs participants to imagine a variety of everyday scenarios and asks them to indicate their reaction on a 5-point scale. The responses are added together to produce specific ratings of shame proneness (Woein, Ernst, Patock – Peckham, & Nagoshi, 2003). There are specifically 15 questions designed to measure trait shame (15 questions $\alpha = 0.77$) (Woein, et al. 2003).

Attachment to God was measured using the God-10 that has three subscales – God is Loving, God is cruel and God is distant. Questions generally start with...I imagine God as beingfollowed by 10 adjectives rated from 0 (not at all) to extremely (10) (Exline, 2015).

Statistical Analysis

All analyses were conducted using SPSS and Hayes' (2018) PROCESS macro. First, we computed bivariate correlations between all study variables and then we tested the mediation model with God attachment as mediators in the relationship between shame and depression. The bootstrap confidence intervals (with 5000 resampling) were used to determine whether or not the indirect effects were statistically significant.

Results

Bivariate Correlations

To test the associations among the variables, a correlation analysis was conducted including all variables from the current study (see Table 1). The results of this analysis showed that depression

had a positive relationship with shame ($r = 0.24$, $p < 0.01$), God is cruel ($r = 0.348$, $p < 0.01$), and God is distant ($r = 0.282$, $p < 0.01$). Depression had a negative relationship with God is loving ($r = -0.268$, $p < 0.01$). Shame had positive relationships with all variables, God is distant was the weakest association ($r = 0.016$, $p < 0.01$), and the strongest association was with depression as stated above. See Table 1 for correlation coefficients for all study variables.

Table 1 **Bivariate correlations between study variables**

Variables	1	2	3	4	5
1 Shame	1				
2 Depression	0.242	1			
3 God is Loving	0.04	-0.268	1		
4 God is Cruel	0.067	0.348	-0.56	1	
5 God is distant	0.016	0.282	-0.602	0.742	1
Mean	35.84	1.82	7.12	3.09	4.67
SD	7.84	1.03	3.27	2.83	3.44

Mediation Analysis

The mediation effect was not significant as the indirect effect of x on y was ($\beta = -.021$). A bias-corrected bootstrap confidence interval for the indirect effect based on 5,000 bootstrap sample was not significant as zero did not fall between the upper and lower confidence levels. The total effect of X on Y was ($\beta = .174$), and the total direct effect of X on Y was ($\beta = .195$).

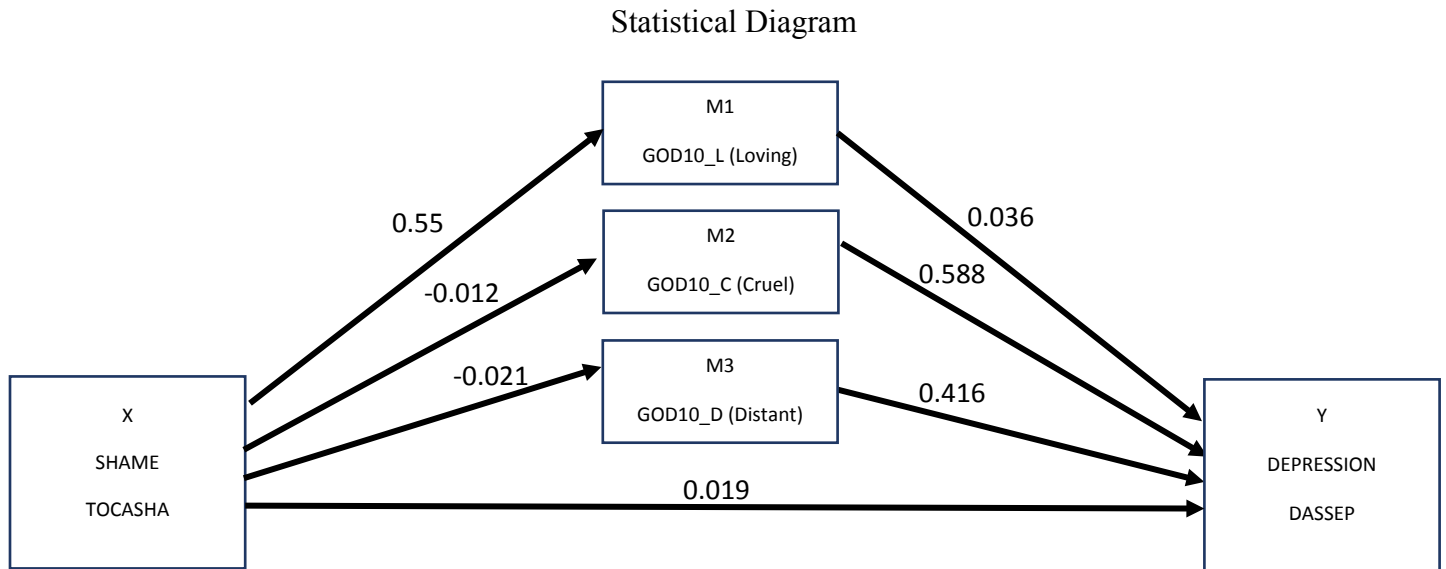


Figure 1

Discussion

The present research aimed to study the mediating role of God Attachment in the causal relationship between shame and depression. It was found that shame indirectly influences depression through one of the causal pathways. God is Loving was found to mediate the relationship between shame and depression. One of the reasons for this could be that an individual who is shame-prone may experience the intense disappointment of also letting God down. This Loving God becomes another object for whom the individual can not please which adds to the worthlessness and depressive symptoms are heightened. Given the nature of generalized or trait shame, it is reasonable to expect that individuals who view God as loving suffer with depression more than individuals who view God as cruel or God as distant.

The view of God is cruel and God is distant were not indirectly influenced by shame. This may be because if an individual already holds the position that God is cruel or distant, God

is not a significant participant in their life nor do they have a secure attachment to him.

Furthermore, it doesn't seem that shame influences areas where the individual already possesses a negative view within that relationship. Understanding the mechanisms by which shame impacts depression can stimulate future interventions that seek to improve depression.

Implications, Limitations and Future Scope

The present study helps establish the role of God attachment in the relationship between shame and depression. It provides clinicians and researchers perceptions into exploring the driving forces of shame. The views on spirituality and religions are receiving much attention in recent times in connection with psychological well-being and thus God attachment should be explored further as it relates to shame. Future researchers can examine generalizability of the findings across a religious population. Limitations of this study would be the sample size.

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