

## Is there a relation between sibling abuse and guilt and shame?

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### Abstract

The current study aims to investigate the relationship between the feelings of shame and guilt and sibling abuse role (victim or perpetrator). Two hundred and three university students from Gazi University participated in the study. A survey including Sibling Abuse Scale, Guilt and Shame Scale and the Life Events Checklist was given to the participants. Regression analysis results reveal going through negative experiences in life was associated with level of victimisation and perpetration in the case of sibling abuse. Perpetrator role in sibling abuse significantly predicted the feeling of guilt even after controlling for negative life experiences. When predicting the feeling of shame, after controlling for the negative life experiences, neither the level of perpetration nor the level of victimisation was found to be significant. The results of the study demonstrated that the more the individuals abuse their siblings in the early years, the less they feel guilt in the early adult years.

**Keywords:** Sibling abuse, guilt, shame, victim, perpetrator.

## 1. Introduction

In the literature, sibling abuse is considered as one of the most prevalent abuse types in a family context (Gelles, 1997). Frequencies of sibling abuse were changing according to results of previous research: results indicate that a one-third of children had experienced sibling victimisation in childhood and 13.85% in adolescents (Tucker, Finkelhor, Turner & Shattuck, 2014). The other studies indicated the frequency of respondents who identified themselves as being physically or emotionally abused by a sibling was approximately 16%–19.6%. These results indicated that the rate of physical aggression among siblings was high, with varying severity. Rates of sexual behaviour were lower (Hardy, 2001; Mackey, Fromuth & Kelly, 2010). Ninety-seven (47.8%) to 83.2% respondents reported that they had been victims of physical aggression (Hardy, 2001), verbal aggression was 78.2%, relational aggression was 45% (Akduman, 2010) by a sibling and 7.4% respondents (14 female and one male) reported some sexual behaviour between themselves and a sibling ranging from kissing and fondling to attempted intercourse (Hardy, 2001). Mackey et al. (2010) found that respondents perpetrated minor emotional abuse on the selected sibling, with 80% perpetrating severe emotional abuse on the selected sibling. Victimization by a sibling alone was more common in childhood than adolescents and predictor of peer victimisation (Tucker et al., 2014).

Sibling relationship plays an important role in an individual's development and mental health, and peer victimization (Mackey et al., 2010; Tucker et al., 2014). Many researchers have revealed that sibling abuse causes many adversities, negative life events (Akduman, 2010; Buist & Vermande, 2014; Mackey et al., 2010) and developmental problems, including emotional and behavioural ones such as low self-esteem and difficulty in social adaptation. Identifying oneself as physically abused was not related to anxiety, identifying oneself as being emotionally abused by the selected sibling was positively correlated with anxiety scores. The emotional context of the sibling relationship is important in the development of later psychological problems (i.e., depression and anxiety) (Mackey et al., 2010). Depression symptoms were high in middle childhood and, for girls, in middle adolescence (Kim, McHale, Crouter & Osgood, 2007). It predicts possible future anxiety disorders and psychological well-being and depression (Cater, Andershed & Andershed, 2014).

Sibling conflict predicted increases in children's anxiety, depressed mood and delinquent behaviour 2 years later. Moreover, earlier sibling conflict accounted for unique variance in young adolescents' later anxiety, depressed mood and delinquent behaviour above and beyond the variance explained by earlier maternal hostility and marital conflict. Results highlight the unique significance of the earlier sibling relationship for young adolescents' psychological adjustment (Stocker, Burwell & Briggs, 2002). Regarding this, existing literature proposes that feelings of shame and guilt can be considered as predictors of depression. Victims would not talk about abuse because of strong feelings of guilt. Strong moral codes cause shame and guilt feelings. The intense shame and guilt other than the incestuous acts might have contributed to their poor sense of self and suicidality (Tsun, 1999).

The current study aims to investigate the relationship between the feelings of shame and guilt and sibling abuse role (victim or perpetrator).

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Participants

Philosophy and sociology students from a large Turkish public university participated in the study. Two hundred and three participants (177 women, 26 men) provided both gender and age information. According to this information, the mean age for female and male participants was 21.64 years (SD = 1.43) and 22.14 years (SD = 1.24), respectively. The overall mean age for the sample was 21.72 years (SD = 1.40) for 135 participants where 19 was the minimum age.

## **2.2. Instruments**

Sibling Abuse Scale, Guilt and Shame Scale and the Life Events Checklist were given to the participants. The questionnaire battery was composed of three scales with a total of 72 items.

### **2.2.1. Sibling abuse scale**

The original scale is composed of 28 questions measuring both perpetration and victimisation in sibling abuse (14 questions for each subscale) developed by del Campo (2012). In order to apply this measure to a Turkish sample, the original scale was translated from English to Turkish, and then a back translation process was held. The final scale was presented on a five-point Likert-type scale ranging '1 = never' to '5 = often', where participants were asked to indicate how frequently they experienced each situation in the scale (e.g., 'Your sibling said things to make you feel worthless' 'You said things to make your sibling feel worthless'). The internal consistency was 0.90 for victimisation and 0.88 for perpetration measures in this study.

### **2.2.2. Guilt and shame scale**

Developed by Sahin and Sahin (1992), the scale is composed of 24 questions measuring the level of feelings of guilt and shame distinctly (12 questions for each). The scale included items asking respondents to state how intense they would feel uncomfortable in given situations (e.g., 'Not meeting your family's expectations'). Measurement was done on a five-point Likert-type questions '1 = this would never disturb me' to '5 = I would feel very uncomfortable'. The reliability coefficient for guilt measure was 0.92 and for shame measure was 0.86 in this study.

### **2.2.3. Life events checklist**

The Life Events List was developed by Sorias (1982) and adaptation to Turkish society is completed. There are 107 events in the full list. The list comprises items referring to events regarding economic, health, education, employment, family and relatives and friends, sexual life and deprivation. The events (items) can be selected or removed regarding the purpose of the study. For this study, 20 items were used in total. For each event, there are distress and adaptation points and the total point is calculated separately for each one.

## **2.3. Procedure**

After the approval of the ethical committee in the University, the study was announced during the class hours and students were offered two points for their psychology courses in return of their voluntary participation.

## **2.4. Statistical analyses**

Pearson's correlations are used to find the relationship between the feeling of shame and guilt levels, and level of abused experiences. Hierarchical regression analysis was done to reveal if any relationship exists between general feelings of shame and guilt and sibling abuse role while controlling for the negative life events.

## **3. Results**

In the present study, it was investigated the relationship between earlier sibling abuse experience, victimisation and perpetration, and general feelings about guilt and shame after controlling for negative life experiences. Descriptive statistics for measures were presented in Table 1. The prevalence rate of abuse experiences from the sibling (including both older and younger and female and male siblings) was 18.05% ( $n = 37$ ) and the prevalence rate of abusive attempts to the sibling (including both older and younger and female and male siblings) was 24.88% ( $n = 51$ ).

According to the correlations between the variables, individuals' general guilt levels were positively correlated with the level of feeling shame ( $r = 0.67, p < 0.001$ ) but negatively associated with the level of being the perpetrator in the experience of sibling abuse ( $r = -0.16, p < 0.05$ ). Experiencing negative experiences through the life was also associated with the level of victimisation ( $r = 0.31, p < 0.001$ ) and perpetration ( $r = 0.21, p < 0.01$ ) in the case of sibling abuse.

Lastly, the level of abused experiences (i.e., victimisation) and the level of abusive experiences (i.e., perpetration) were significantly correlated with each other ( $r = 0.81, p < 0.001$ ). The students who were abused by siblings were also be perpetrator (11.7%). The Pearson correlation coefficients between testing variables were shown in Table 2.

**Table 1. Descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviations) for variables**

	Mean	SD	N
1. Feelings of guilt	4.369	0.725	202
2. Feelings of shame	3.762	0.788	202
3. Life experiences	3.646	2.332	181
4. Victimisation	1.552	0.619	195
5. Perpetration	1.461	0.529	194

**Table 2. Pearson's correlations between variables**

	1	2	3	4	5
1. Feelings of guilt	1				
2. Feelings of shame	0.67***	1			
3. Life experiences	-0.02	-0.14	1		
4. Victimisation	-0.10	0.03	0.31***	1	
5. Perpetration	-0.16*	0.03	0.21**	0.81***	1

\* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

To assess the main hypotheses of the study, we run four hierarchical regression analyses. In predicting general feelings of guilt and shame, we formed two regression equations for each outcome as a function of being a victim or being a perpetrator. Results indicated that the perpetrator role in sibling abuse experiences significantly predicted the feeling of guilt even after controlling for the negative life experiences ( $F_{(2,167)} = 3.708, p < 0.05$ , adjusted  $R^2 = 0.043$ ;  $\beta = -0.212, p < 0.01$ ). That is the perpetrator role was related to the low level of feelings of guilt.

The results about the level of victimisation also provided marginal significance for the feeling of guilt after controlling for experiencing negative life events ( $F_{(2,168)} = 3.620, ns$ , adjusted  $R^2 = 0.022$ ;  $\beta = -0.153, p < 0.059$ ). Victimisation role was related to the low level of feelings of guilt. When predicting the feeling of shame, after controlling for the negative life experiences, neither the level of perpetration nor the level of victimisation was found to be significant.

#### 4. Discussion

The results of this study demonstrated that the more the individuals abuse their siblings in the early years, the less they feel guilt in the early adult years. Also, individuals who were exposed to higher level of earlier abusive behaviours from their siblings were less likely to feel guilt as abused individuals. Previous study conducted by Wiehe (1997) among adult respondents did not support current study results: victim of sibling abuse had continuous self-blame and repetition of the victim role in other relationships. This study findings can be interpreted firstly that sibling abuse generally less likely to be recognised as harmful for the other sibling (Kiselica & Morrill-Richards, 2007). Therefore, victim and perpetrator do not feel a high level of guilt. Secondly, according to social learning theory, individuals learn ways of interacting with family members, and siblings are generalised to experiences with the other sibling(s) (Tucker et al., 2014). Actually, sibling

maltreatment might be the most common form of intrafamily abuse (Kiselica & Morrill-Richards, 2007). Origin of abused sibling family was described as dysfunctional in child-rearing practices and less satisfaction with their family relationships (Cyr, Wright, McDuff & Perron, 2002; Laviola, 1992).

Families do not pay attention to sibling abuse. Generally, they are unable to make the distinction between normal sibling rivalry and sibling abuse (Green, 1984). They react to abusive behaviour with minimising or ignoring. Therefore, sibling abuse behaviours are normalised by parents. Children see the world of adults as the spectacle. As a result, both of victim and perpetrator do not feel a high level of guilt. Moreover, the severity and frequency of abuse between siblings increase. Parents may perceive sibling abuse behaviour as a form of release or ventilation of anger and also, parents may blame the victim. As a matter of fact, sibling abuse is an inappropriate expression of anger from one sibling toward another. Therefore, maladaptive parental behaviours play a key role in the sibling abuse. Results of sibling abuse constitute a risk for depression and anxiety, which has been shown to be correlated with sibling abuse (Mackey et al., 2010). Sibling relationship plays an important role in individual's development and mental health and peer victimization (Mackey et al., 2010; Tucker et al., 2014). In this study, mental health of sibling abuse was not investigated, which is a limitation of this study.

According to this study result, it can be said that feelings of shame are not an important factor for sibling abuse. Also, both of the victim and perpetrator do not differentiate according to feelings of shame. One study about sibling abuse stated that as many as 53 out of every 100 children are perpetrators of sibling abuse (Kiselica & Morrill-Richards, 2007). For the feelings of shame, there is a positive relation with perpetration. Namely, the students who were abused by siblings were also the perpetrator. The results of this study support once more previous study results. The abusers made use of identification with the aggressor as a prominent mechanism of defence (Green, 1984).

Families and society dismiss abuse among brothers and sisters as normal sibling rivalry. When sibling abuse is disclosed, parents often take inappropriately, which may encourage the abuse to continue. As a result of a violent family environment, the cycle of violence can be repeated throughout life and across generations (Kiselica & Morrill-Richards, 2007). Therefore, parent education programmes about sibling relationships and sibling abuse should be provided. Educationists and health providers have a responsibility for public education. Sibling abuse and abusive behaviour should be taught to residents and educationists, health providers and parents providing primary care to children (Akduman, 2010). Counsellors enhance intrafamily relationships through direct and indirect means. Also, counsellors must learn how to advocate for education and support considering the issues of sibling abuse, which is an essential step in redefining societal norms about sibling maltreatment (Wiehe, 1997).

The use of retrospective reporting is a limitation of this study.

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