

Are We Ashamed by Anti-Arab Prejudice?

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The researchers examined whether Americans experienced vicarious shame (feelings of shame for acts committed by others) for acts of anti-Arab prejudice committed by other Americans after the September 11 attacks, and also wanted to test what role group identification as an American might play in this process.

Having already developed a model of vicarious shame, this model begins with the *essentiality of association*. That is, how strong is our connection to the people performing shameful acts (e.g., anti-Arab acts of prejudice)? If the connection is relatively strong, this then leads to *appraisal of image threat*. That is, do these shameful acts committed by others reflect poorly on my self-image? If a person determines that there may be an image threat, the person may then experience vicarious shame. *Vicarious shame* then leads to the person's *motivation to distance* him or herself from the wrongdoer and the emotion-eliciting event. The biggest question not included in the model of vicarious shame, however, is what role group identification plays in this process. Does group identification intensify feelings of vicarious shame? Or does stronger group identification inhibit feelings of shame due to in-group biases? The role of severity of the event in this model was also examined.

In testing this model with the events of September 11 and acts of anti-Arab prejudice, the researchers recruited 82 undergraduate American college students. They completed a self-report measure that assessed participants' strength of identification as an American, wrote about a specific anti-Arab prejudice incident that took place after September 11, rated the severity of that incidence, rated their emotional reactions to the incident, rated their appraisal of image threat that occurred after witnessing the incident, and rated their motivation to distance themselves.

What the researchers found was that, consistent with their model of vicarious shame, appraisal of image threat predicted vicarious shame, which in turn predicted the participants' motivation to distance themselves. In addition, they found that severity of the event moderated the relationship between group identification (as an American) and vicarious shame, where high identification led to greater vicarious shame if the severity of the event was high (for less severe instances of prejudice, American identification did not predict vicarious shame).

In conclusion, this study found that 1) Americans (at least participants in this sample) did feel ashamed for acts of anti-Arab prejudice committed by others after the September 11 attacks; 2) participants felt more ashamed to the extent that they were highly identified as an American, but only for more severe incidents; 3) image threat predicted feelings of shame, which predicted motivation to distance; and 4)

shame does not appear to be the emotional response that engages people into action.