

SHAME AND STATUS SEEKING THE POOR

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ABSTRACT

We study whether people who feel ashamed of their financial situation are more interested in status (products). In correlational studies we find that income affects status consumption both positively (directly) and negatively (via financial shame).

In experimental studies we find no effect of induced shame on status seeking and status consumption.

INTRODUCTION

Even the poor spend money on status products (e.g., Brown, Bulte, & Zhang, 2011). Status seeking might be detrimental for the poor because spending money to attain status means spending less in other important domains.

Is this behavior motivated by shame? People in poverty often report feeling ashamed (Walker, 2014). We study the behavioral effects of this financial shame.

Shame could induce status seeking because people want to (1) hide their financial situation from others, and (2) repair a threatened self (De Hooze, Zeelenberg, & Breugelmans, 2010).

CONCLUSION

At the same income level, people who felt ashamed of their financial situation were more likely to be interested in status and status products. However, inducing feelings of financial shame did not lead to increased interest in status (products).

This could mean that shame only has a chronic influence on status seeking. Alternatively, our manipulation might not have induced strong feelings of shame. We are currently running experiments to further test this idea.

CORRELATIONAL STUDIES

Method

In two studies ($N_1 = 299$, $N_2 = 304$), MTurk workers answered questions on the following scales:

Subjective wealth *How would you describe your current financial situation?*

Financial shame *Do you feel ashamed of your financial situation?*

Status orientation *I think status is an important indicator of how people are doing in life*

Status consumption *Study 1: I would buy a product just because it has status*

Study 2: I buy products to impress others

All analyses use effective income: $\frac{\text{yearly household income}}{\sqrt{\text{household size}}}$

Results

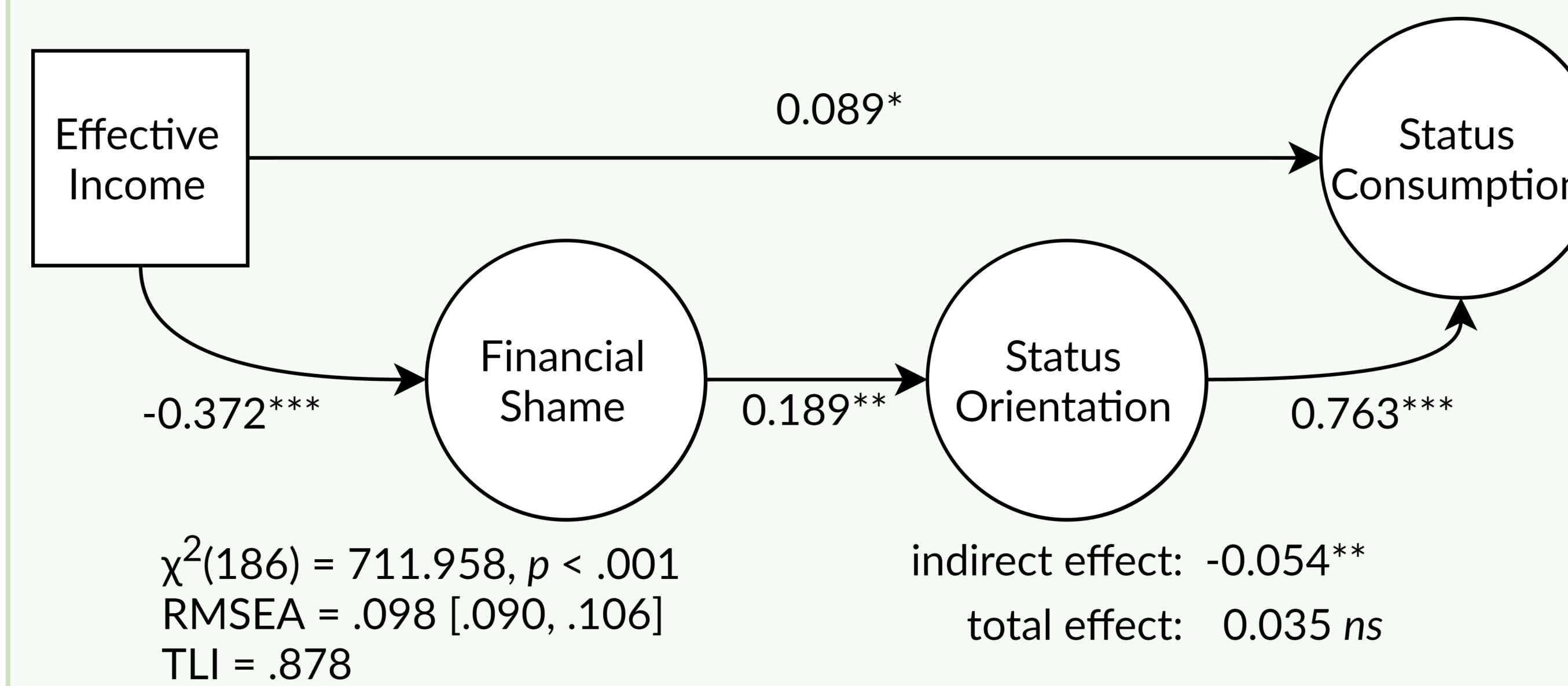


Figure 1: SEM for first correlational study (same pattern of results for second study). Latent variables have all scale items as indicators. *: $p < .05$, **: $p < .01$, ***: $p < .001$

Subjective wealth	-.69***	.07	.08	.48***
Financial shame		.15***	.05	-.37***
Status orientation			.47***	.04
Status consumption				.08*
Effective income				

Figure 2: Zero-order correlations for the two correlational studies.

EXPERIMENTAL STUDIES

Method

Students ($N = 156$) and MTurk workers ($N = 201$) recalled an experience in which they felt ashamed of their financial situation. They answered the same scales as in Study 1 either before the recall (control condition) or after the recall (shame condition). Data from participants who were not able to recall a situation were not analyzed ($N = 25$).

Results

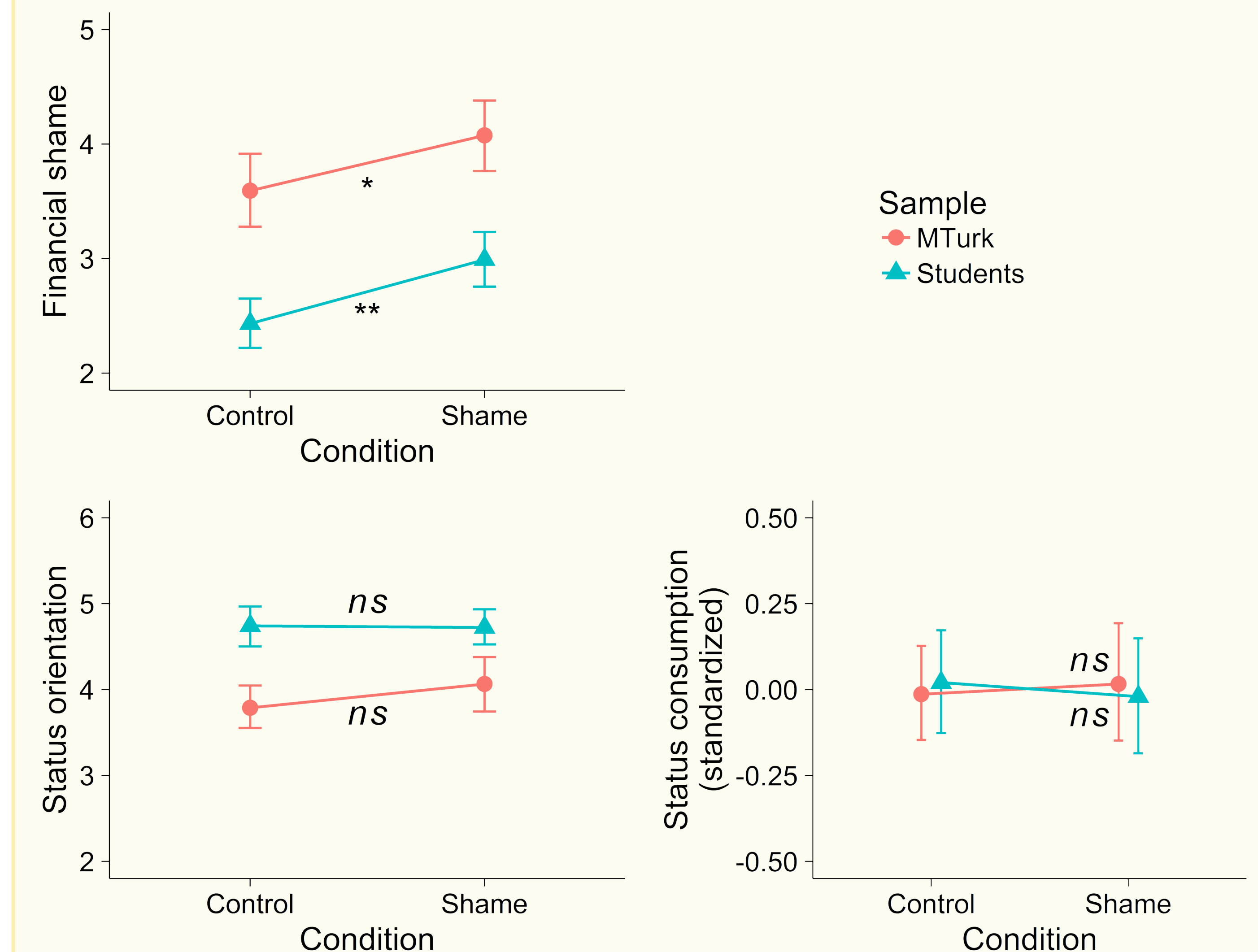


Figure 3: Means and 95% CIs for the experimental studies. ns: $p > .05$

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- Walker, R. (2014). *The shame of poverty*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.



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