A Cross-cultural Study of the Experience of Shame and Guilt in Mainland China and Canada

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Importance of studying shame and guilt

- Shame and guilt are self-conscious, universal and painful emotions (Casimir & Schnegg, 2003; Ho, Fu & Ng. 2004)

- They result from violating the moral values, social expectations and social norms (Fischer & Tangney, 1995)

- Shame and guilt can motivate people to self-examination and to adapt to the moral standard of the society (Fischer & Tangney, 1995; Fung & Chen, 2002; Tangney, 1994)
  - They therefore play an important role in social and moral behaviour
Three dimensions differences of shame and guilt

- **“Public vs. private”** context
  - Shame may be more influenced by audience than guilt (Li, Wang, & Fischer, 2004)

- Focus on blaming **“self vs. action”**
  - Shame focused on blaming self, guilt focused on blaming action (Lewis, 1987)

- Respond with **“withdrawal vs. repairing behaviours”**
  - Shame leads to social withdrawal, guilt leads to corrective behaviours (Tangney & Fischer, 1995)
Shame and guilt in Chinese Culture

- Although shame and guilt are universal emotions, some research suggests that there may be cultural differences in how shame and guilt are experienced and expressed.

- Shame is an important emotion in Confucian societies, because it is connected to morality (Babcock & Sabini, 1990).

- Reflecting this importance, shame in Chinese culture is highly elaborated:
  - Chinese shame and guilt terms broad and rich
  - English shame and guilt terms narrow and extreme (Bedford, 1994; 2004; Li et al., 2004)

Ren, Yi, Li, Zhi & Xin Chinese moral norm

Confucian
Chinese terms for *shame*

- Have identified 5 terms for shame (Bedford, 2004; Frank, Harvey & Verdun, 2000)
  - *diu lian*: lose face
  - *can kui*: failure to obtain personal ideal
  - *xiu chi*: very deep shame
  - *xiu kui*: personal failure and hurt others
  - *nan wei qing*: embarrassment
Chinese terms for guilt

- Have identified 4 terms for guilt (Bedford, 2004; Frank, Harvey & Verdun, 2000)
  - *nei jiu*₁: harm to others
  - *nei jiu*₂: trust violation
  - *zui e gan*: moral transgression
  - *fan zui gan*: law/rules transgression
Overview of study

• Examined three dimensions of guilt and shame in Chinese and Euro-Canadian participants
  • Using the full range of Chinese shame (5 types) and guilt (4 types) concepts

• Research Questions
  • Are European-Canadians capable of experiencing the same range of shame and guilt emotions as Chinese participants?
  • Do shame and guilt differ in the same ways in both cultures?
Methods

Participants

- **39 native mainland Chinese** (18 women, 18 men, 3 unknown)
  - Aged 20-45 years, $M = 27.08$, $SD = 7.46$
- **34 Euro-Canadian adults in Canada** (19 women, 15 men)
  - Aged 19-44 years, $M = 28.21$, $SD = 9.58$
Materials and Procedure

- A brief demographic questionnaire
- A survey with the definitions of the 5 types of shame and 4 types of guilt (Bedford, 2004; Frank et al., 2000)
- Participants completed materials in their own language
- They read a description of each term
- Asked to write one example for each term based on a time when they felt the emotion described
Scenarios

- 343 stories from Chinese participants
  - 192 shame; 151 guilt
- 289 stories from Euro-Canadian participants
  - 170 shame; 132 guilt stories

- All the scenarios were coded by 2 bilingual coders (Mandarin-English)

  *The inter-rater reliability across dimensions:*
  - Chinese shame 0.89; Chinese guilt 0.88; Euro-Canadian shame 0.92; Euro-Canadian guilt 0.90
Coding: *public vs. private*

- **Public**—transgressor, victim and other people
  - E.g., “...I did not arrive on time for my sister’s wedding. I was late, and that caused the wedding to start late. I felt very guilty for not upholding my obligation to be on time for such an important event.”

- **Public**—transgressor, victim
  - E.g., “when I do not help out a family member when they ask for help from me at times.”

- **Private**
  - E.g., “I did not meet the expectations of my parents.”

- **Unknown**
  - E.g., “when I lie.”
Coding: self vs. Action

- Self
  - E.g., “I feel very selfish.”
- Action
  - E.g., “Caught for spitting on the bus.”
- Unknown
  - E.g., “My lies were exposed.”
Coding: withdrawal vs. repairing action

- Withdrawal
  - E.g., “..now I hardly talk to my friend because I feel guilty.”

- Repairing action
  - E.g., “..I apologized profusely.”

- Unknown
  - E.g., “I said bad words behind somebody’s back, but later he knew what I said.”
Data Analysis

- **Chi-square statistics** to compare the frequencies within each dimension
- **Within cultures**
  - Between five types of shame
  - Between four types of guilt
  - Between type of each dimension and overall emotion type (shame vs. guilt)
Within culture: public vs. private dimension of shame in Chinese and Euro-Canadian Participants

**Chinese private:** $X^2(4, N=39) = 48.64, p < .05$

**Euro-Canadian private:** $X^2(4, N=34) = 92.60, p < .05$
Public vs. private dimension of guilt in Chinese and Euro-Canadian Participants

**Chinese private:** $X^2(3, N=39) = 25.15, p < .05$

**Euro-Canadian private,** $X^2(3, N=34) = 14.26, p < .05$
Interaction between context (public vs. private) and emotions (shame vs. guilt) in Chinese and Euro-Canadian Participants

Interaction in Chinese,
$X^2(1, \ N=39) = 12.75, \ p<.05$

Interaction in Euro-Canadian,
$X^2(1, \ N=34) = 7.52, \ p<.05$
Self vs. action dimension of shame in Chinese and Euro-Canadian Participants

**Chinese action:** $X^2(4, N=39) = 5.78, \text{ ns.}$

**Euro-Canadian action:** $X^2(4, N=34) = 8.97, \text{ ns.}$
Self vs. action dimension of guilt in Chinese and Euro-Canadian Participants

Chinese action, $X^2(3, N=39) = 1.44, ns.$

Euro-Canadian action, $X^2(3, N=34) = 4.09, ns.$
Interaction between focus (self vs. action) and emotions (shame vs. guilt) in Chinese and Euro-Canadian Participants

Interaction in Chinese, $X^2(1, N=39) = 22.31$, $p<.05$

Interaction in Euro-Canadian, $X^2(1, N=34) = 2.54$, ns.
Withdrawal vs. repairing action responses to shame in Chinese and Euro-Canadian Participants

**Chinese response**, $X^2(4, N=39) = 6.12, ns.$

**Euro-Canadian response**, $X^2(4, N=34) = 30.30, p<.05.$
Withdrawal vs. repairing action responses to guilt in Chinese and Euro-Canadian Participants

Chinese repairing, $X^2(4, N=39) = 9.92, p<.05$.

Euro-Canadian repairing, $X^2(3, N=34) = 11.80, p<.05$. 
Interaction between response (withdrawal vs. repairing action) and emotion (shame vs. guilt) in Chinese and Euro-Canadian Participants

Interaction in Chinese, \(X^2(1, N=39) = 2.21, \text{ ns.}\)

Interaction in Euro-Canadian, \(X^2(1, N=34) = 40.07, p<.05\)
Discussion

- Although English lacks equivalent terms for all the categories, European Canadians also distinguished between the different types of shame and guilt.

- Distinctions are not identical.
Shame and guilt can be experienced in public and private in both cultures.

For European Canadians, public and private are unequally frequent in guilt scenarios.

For both cultures, public is always more frequent in shame scenarios.
Self versus Action

- Participants in both cultures blamed their actions more than themselves in guilt situations.
  - However, Chinese people in shame situations focused on both self and actions when experiencing shame.
  - Euro-Canadians focused more on actions in both shame and guilt scenarios.
Withdrawal versus Repair

*Participants in both cultures focused more on repairing actions in guilt scenarios*  

- However, Euro-Canadians focused on withdrawal more than repairing in shame scenarios  
- Chinese participants focused on repairing actions in both shame and guilt scenarios
Conclusion

- Euro-Canadian seemed to recognize the breadth of shame and guilt despite lacking the same terms.

- However, the experience of these universal emotions are different by culture.

- The results confirm that shame and guilt may be universal, but that cultural background moderates their experience.
Thank you!