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Guilt and Shame and Their Reactions: An Investigation from a Social Cognitive Theory Perspective

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Both guilt and shame are moral emotions. Studies often distinguish the two emotions according to individuals' differing dispositions. From the perspective of social cognitive theory, this study explores how the situational factors (target of focus and evaluation source) of a wrong-doing event generate feelings of guilt and shame, and how they subsequently lead to behavioral reactions. When individuals focus on others and perceive evaluation from themselves, they are more likely to feel guilty rather than ashamed, and when individuals focus on themselves and perceive evaluation from others, they are more likely to feel shamed rather than guilty (study 1 and study 2). Furthermore, we add the characterological blame trait as a personality factor to understand how that disposition interacts with situational factors on the generation of guilt and shame. Our findings suggest that the two emotions lead to different behavioral tendencies (study 2). The results of both studies show that when individuals perceive the evaluation source from themselves and focus on others, they generate more guilty feelings than ashamed feelings; however, when they feel the evaluation source from others and the focus on themselves, more ashamed feelings are generated. Furthermore, study 2 illustrates that when the context is characterized by the fact that the individual has caused damage to others, it is difficult for the individual's self-blame tendency to produce its strengthening or weakening effect on the generation of guilty feelings. However, when the situational characteristics are neutral or vague, the individual's self-blame tendency affects the generation of guilty feelings. In addition, guilt leads to increased compensation behaviors and reduced denial tendencies, while shame triggers both self-enhancement and escape behaviors.

Keywords: *guilt, shame, evaluation source, target of focus, self-blame tendency*

Extended Abstract

Guilt and shame are often induced in individuals who have committed some wrong-doing behavior and recognize the wrong-doing behavior (Teimouri, 2018). Past studies have often distinguished these two emotions based on individuals' differing dispositions. However, these studies have not effectively explained why the same individual produces the two emotions in different situations and different individuals produce the same emotion in the same situation. Therefore, this study explored the processing mechanism of these two emotions from the perspective of social cognitive theory to distinguish their emotional characteristics and to understand how individuals extract environmental characteristics and generate different behavioral reactions to guilt and shame.

Based on the literature, it is proposed that the psychological process that triggers guilt is that an individual makes a self-evaluation of the wrong-doing behavior and focuses on the harm they have caused others (hypothesis 1-1). In contrast, although the psychological process that triggers shame also involves an individual attributing wrong-doing behavior to themselves, at the moment of the feeling, the individual perceives the evaluation from others and focuses the negativity on themselves (hypothesis 1-2). This study proposes that when the individual's self-blame trait is added to explore

the interaction of personality tendency and situational characteristics, the self-blame tendency has a direct effect on the production of guilt and shame (hypothesis 2-1). This would mean that individuals have different perceptions of wrong-doing events because of their self-blame tendency, and that there is an interactive effect between personality tendency and situational characteristics on the extent to which these two emotions are triggered (hypothesis 2-2). This would mean that individuals with high self-blame tendencies, regardless of whether the situational features are different in wrong-doing events are likely to attribute wrong-doing event to themselves (Janoff-Bulman, 1979); however, individuals with low self-blame tendencies would attribute the wrong-doing events to themselves only when the situational features are salient and correspond to the caused feelings of guilt (when they perceive themselves as the evaluation source and focus on the harm to others) or shame (when they perceive others as the evaluation source and focus the negativity on themselves).

In addition, research has pointed out that guilt and shame can trigger different reactions. Guilt is likely to be a compensatory behavior, while shame is an avoidance or denial behavior; therefore, guilt is considered to be a more adaptive moral emotion, while shame is considered a more maladaptive moral emotion (Baumeister et al., 1994; Tangney & Dearing, 2002) that may include anger, blame, anxiety symptoms, and externalizing aggressive behavioral responses (Bear et al., 2009; Cândea et al., 2018). However, there are two limitations to the above viewpoint. First, it underestimates the negative behavioral reactions that guilt can trigger. Previous studies have found a moderate correlation between guilt and avoidance behavior, and a high correlation between compensatory behavior and avoidance behavior, indicating that when individuals feel guilty, although they tend to compensate, they also fall into the struggle of wanting to escape (Pivetti et al., 2016). This article agrees with Tangney et al. (1996, 2002, 2011), who claim that guilt triggers compensatory behaviors but also causes individuals pain, so it may also trigger escaping behaviors (hypothesis 2-3). Furthermore, shame is not always a negative outcome. De Hooge et al. (2010) found that shame can trigger motivations for both self-repair and self-protection. Among these motivations, the motivation to restore self-consciousness will prompt individuals to accept the challenge again, hoping to restore the damaged self-consciousness by succeeding in the next challenge, while the motivation to protect self-consciousness will prompt individuals to stay away from the challenge to avoid self-consciousness being damaged again. This study argues that some positive effects of shame may be triggered and that in the follow-up response to shame, in addition to escaping or denial behaviors, there may also be self-improving behaviors (hypothesis 2-4).

Study 1 and Its Results

Two empirical studies were conducted to test the proposed hypotheses. Study 1 manipulated the evaluation source and attentional focus of the wrong-doing event through an experimental design, and study 2 added measures of the self-blame tendency and behavioral reactions following the two emotions. The participants in study 1 were 168 college students, consisting of 66 male and 102 female participants, with an average age of 20.43 years. The results showed that, across two wrong-doing scenarios (overturning a bowl of soup and being late for a group trip) in study 1, the individuals in the guilt manipulation condition who perceived themselves as the evaluation source and focused on the harm to others in the wrong-doing event generated more guilty feelings than those in the shame manipulation condition (who perceived others as the evaluation source and focused the negativity on themselves in the wrong-doing event); however, the individuals in the shame manipulation condition did not generate more ashamed feelings than those in the guilt manipulation condition (see Table 1). The results supported hypothesis 1-1 but not hypothesis 1-2.

There are two possible reasons for these unexpected results. First, the severity of hurting others was higher in two scenarios (overturning a bowl of soup and being late for a group trip). Both scenarios had high guilt scores, while the overall shame scores for both scenarios were lower, indicating that the manipulated condition was more likely to trigger the participants' feelings of guilt,

Table 1

Mean and standard deviation of the intensity of guilt and shame for the two scenarios in Study 1

DV	total participants (*n* = 168)		Scenario 1 (*n* = 66)		Scenario 2 (*n* = 102)	
	Cond 1	Cond 2	Cond 1	Cond 2	Cond 1	Cond 2
Guilt	4.25[a] (0.55)	3.91[b] (0.74)	4.25[a] (0.70)	3.86[b] (0.70)	4.27[a] (0.43)	3.96[b] (0.78)
Shame	3.15 (0.89)	3.33 (0.95)	3.12 (0.88)	3.49 (0.79)	3.15 (0.91)	3.22 (1.03)

Notes: DV: dependent variables. The total number of participants is 168. The values without brackets are the means, and the values in brackets are the standard deviations. Scenario 1: overturned a soup; Scenario 2: late for a group trip. Cond 1: guilt manipulated group; Cond 2: shame manipulated group. If the letters after the means of each column are different, it means that the mean difference between the two values is significant, $p < .05$.

Table 2

Mean and standard deviation of the intensity of guilt and shame for the three scenarios in Study 2

	Scenario 1 (***n*=108**)			Scenario 2 (***n*=108**)			Scenario 3 (***n*=108**)		
DV	Cond 1	Cond 2	Cond 3	Cond 1	Cond 2	Cond 3	Cond 1	Cond 2	Cond 3
Guilt	4.15[a] (0.67)	3.37[b] (1.02)	2.97[b] (1.00)	4.44[a] (0.60)	3.86[b] (0.74)	3.64[b] (0.67)	4.26 (0.56)	4.32 (0.75)	3.98 (0.67)
Shame	3.28 (1.15)	3.73 (0.72)	3.42 (1.05)	3.43[a] (0.93)	3.31[a] (0.75)	2.4[b] (0.86)	3.69[b] (0.65)	4.09[a] (0.85)	3.9[ab] (0.77)

Notes: DV: dependent variables. The values without brackets are the means, and the values in brackets are the standard deviations. Scenario 1: overturned a soup; Scenario 2: late for a group trip; Scenario 3: poor performance on behalf of the team. Cond 1: guilt manipulated group; Cond 2: shame manipulated group; Cond 3: control group. Each manipulation condition was randomly assigned 36 participants. If the letters after the means of each column are different, it means that the mean difference between the two values is significant, $p < .05$.

but less likely to trigger feelings of shame. Second, in the manipulated condition, the degree of self-criticism did not reach a significant difference between the guilt-manipulated and the shame-manipulated group ($F(1,158) = 0.90$, $p = .34$), showing that in the shame-manipulated condition, the individuals' self-devaluation was not highlighted in the study. When the lack of self-ability is not highlighted, it is difficult to induce individuals' attention on themselves. Therefore, in study 2, we added a third scenario (poor performance on behalf of the team) to highlight individuals' awareness of their own lack of ability, and hoped that the effect of the shame manipulation would work. We also added a control group as the baseline for comparison.

Study 2 and Its Results

The participants in study 2 were a total of 108 college students, consisting of 43 male and 65 female participants, with an average age of 20.52 years. The results of study 2 once more supported hypothesis 1-1 overall, but hypothesis 1-2 was supported only in scenario 3 (see Table 2). Some of the lack of support for hypothesis 1-2 may have been due to participants with a high self-blame tendency, which may have masked the manipulating effects. In addition, there were some interactions between the self-blame tendency and the manipulating condition that affected the extent to which guilty feelings were generated (see Tables 3 and 4). When the wrong-doing events were saliently characterized by

Table 3

Results of regression analysis for predicting guilt

IV	DV：guilt								
	Scenario 1			Scenario 2			Scenario 3		
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Age	-0.04	-0.07	-0.05	-0.02	-0.02	-0.04	-0.01	0.00	-0.03
Sex	0.09	0.17*	0.17*	0.23*	0.18*	0.18*	0.13	0.12	0.11
S-B Tendency	0.32***	0.30***	0.00	0.23*	0.20*	0.49***	0.36***	0.37***	0.22
DG1		-0.33***	-0.34***		-0.35***	-0.33***		-0.03	-0.02
DG2		-0.56***	-0.57***		-0.47***	-0.45***		-0.25*	-0.23*
DG1 x S-B Tendency			0.24^{+}			-0.11			0.07
DG2 x S-B Tendency			0.27*			-0.36**			0.20^{+}
R^2	0.12	0.34	0.38	0.11	0.28	0.34	0.15	0.20	0.23
ΔR^2	0.12**	0.23***	0.04^{+}	0.11**	0.18***	0.06*	0.15***	0.05*	0.02
F value	4.46**	10.48***	8.61***	4.04**	8.02***	7.34***	5.95**	5.10***	4.10**

Notes: IV: independent variables; DV: dependent variables. Scenario 1: overturned a soup; Scenario 2: late for a group trip; Scenario 3: poor performance on behalf of the team. S-B: Self-blame. DG1: Guilt manipulated group vs Shame manipulated group; DG2 Guilt manipulated group vs Control group. + $p < .1$, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

Table 4

Results of regression analysis for predicting shame

IV	DV：shame								
	Scenario 1			Scenario 2			Scenario 3		
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Age	-0.23*	-0.25*	-0.24*	-0.14	-0.11	-0.14	-0.09	-0.08	-0.13
Sex	0.05	0.06	0.07	-0.11	-0.16^{+}	-0.17*	0.07	0.07	0.06
S-B Tendency	-0.04	-0.03	-0.11	0.19*	0.20*	0.28^{+}	0.29***	0.27**	0.35*
DS1		-0.22*	-0.21^{+}		0.06	0.04		-0.19^{+}	-0.20^{+}
DS2		-0.20^{+}	-0.20^{+}		-0.46***	-0.46***		-0.10	-0.09
DS1 x S-B Tendency			-0.05			0.12			-0.22
DS2 x S-B Tendency			0.19			-0.24^{+}			0.10
R^2	0.06	0.10	0.13	0.07	0.31	0.37	0.10	0.13	0.17
ΔR^2	0.06	0.04^{+}	0.03	0.07^{+}	0.24***	0.07**	0.10*	0.03	0.05^{+}
F value	1.96	2.18^{+}	2.09^{+}	2.51+	8.86***	8.29***	3.86*	2.93*	2.95**

Notes: IV: independent variables; DV: dependent variables. Scenario 1: overturned a soup; Scenario 2: late for a group trip; Scenario 3: poor performance on behalf of the team. S-B: Self-blame. DS1: Shame manipulated group vs Guilt manipulated group; DS2: Shame manipulated group vs Control group. + $p < .1$, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

the fact that the individual had caused damage to others, the individual's self-blame tendency did not play its differential role in generating guilt. However, when the characteristics of the wrong-doing event were neutral or vague, the individual's self-blame tendency affected the generation of guilty feelings. In addition, guilt led to increased compensation behaviors and reduced denial behaviors, while shame triggered both self-enhancement and escape behaviors (see Tables 5 and 6).

Discussion

Antecedents of Guilt and Shame

Previous research perspectives have lacked explorations of the mechanisms of individuals producing guilt and shame emotions in different contexts. Evidence from this study suggests that individuals are more likely to feel guilty when they perceive the source of their wrong-doing in themselves and focus on the damage to others, while shame is more likely to occur when others are the source of the evaluation and the focus of negativity is themselves. This indicates that the same wrong-doing can produce feelings of guilt or shame depending on the perception of the situational features. In addition, the findings indicate that individuals' self-blame tendencies can affect their moral attribution process when the situation is neutral or ambiguous; however, when the situation contains clear features (the consequences of the event cause damage to others), the individual's self-blame tendencies are less likely to have an impact. These results echo the view of social cognitive theory, which argues that individuals' psychological and behavioral responses are influenced by the interaction of situational features and individual personality.

Table 5

Results of regression analysis for predicting compensatory and self-improving behaviors

IV	DV：compensatory behaviors						DV：self-improving behaviors					
	Scenario 1		Scenario 2		Scenario 3		Scenario 1		Scenario 2		Scenario 3	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2
Age	0.04	0.07	-0.06	-0.04	0.06	0.06	-0.05	0.04	0.03	0.06	0.12	0.16^{+}
Sex	0.08	-0.02	0.04	0.02	0.08	0.05	-0.07	-0.12	-0.07	-0.04	-0.06	-0.08
S-B Tendency	0.32^{+}	0.03	0.09	0.11	0.27	0.10	0.38*	0.23	-0.09	-0.06	0.27	0.06
DC1	0.26*	-0.10	0.39***	0.26*	0.21*	0.14	-0.20^{+}	-0.28*	0.33**	0.19	0.11	0.13
DC2	-0.07	-0.21*	0.17	0.11	0.21*	0.15	0.01	-0.09	0.12	0.00	0.11	0.07
DC1X S-B Tendency	-0.17	-0.01	0.20	0.11	-0.10	-0.03	-0.24	-0.12	0.22^{+}	0.12	-0.17	-0.05
DC2 X S-B Tendency	-0.08	-0.04	-0.02	-0.07	0.22^{+}	0.26*	-0.18	-0.10	0.15	0.09	0.07	0.11
Guilt		0.62***		0.21^{+}		0.30**		0.15		0.04		0.07
Shame		-0.02		0.06		-0.02		0.34***		0.26*		0.31**
R^2	0.14	0.38	0.20	0.24	0.23	0.29	0.10	0.22	0.14	0.19	0.10	0.19
ΔR^2	0.01	0.24***	0.03	0.04	0.05*	0.07*	0.03	0.13***	0.03	0.05^{+}	0.03	0.09**
F value	2.28*	6.49***	3.60**	3.39**	4.12**	4.41***	1.49	3.05**	2.32*	2.53*	1.55	2.54*

Notes: IV: independent variables; DV: dependent variables. Scenario 1: overturned a soup; Scenario 2: late for a group trip; Scenario 3: poor performance on behalf of the team. S-B: Self-blame. DC1: Guilt manipulated group vs Control group. DC: Shame manipulated group vs Control group.
+ $p < .1$, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

Table 6

Results of regression analysis for predicting escaping and denial behaviors

IV	DV：Escaping behaviors						DV：Denial behaviors					
	Scenario 1		Scenario 2		Scenario 3		Scenario 1		Scenario 2		Scenario 3	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2
Age	0.05	0.14	0.09	0.12	0.09	0.13	0.09	0.10	0.23*	0.24*	0.12	0.14
Sex	0.06	0.02	-0.08	-0.08	0.06	0.02	-0.07	-0.02	-0.12	-0.10	0.10	0.11
S-B Tendency	0.17	0.07	0.03	0.06	0.29	0.00	0.28	0.40*	0.15	0.15	0.19	0.20
DC1	0.24*	0.22^{+}	0.37**	0.20	0.02	0.01	-0.11*	0.08	0.11	0.09	-0.25*	-0.20^{+}
DC2	0.38**	0.30**	0.19^{+}	0.08	-0.08	-0.15	0.09	0.14	0.09	0.06	-0.21^{+}	-0.19^{+}
DC1 x S-B Tendency	-0.21	-0.11	0.13	0.01	0.04	0.19	-0.27	-0.33*	0.07	0.06	-0.08	-0.07
DC2 x S-B Tendency	-0.04	0.04	0.12	0.04	-0.18	-0.12	-0.11	-0.11	-0.17	-0.18	-0.20	-0.21
Guilt		0.04		0.18		0.18		-0.32**		-0.06		-0.15
Shame		0.37***		0.19		0.33**		0.13		0.08		0.15
R^2	0.14	0.26	0.16	0.22	0.09	0.23	0.08	0.15*	0.11	0.12	0.11	0.13
ΔR^2	0.02	0.12***	0.01	0.06*	0.03	0.15***	0.04	0.07	0.03	0.00	0.02	0.02
F value	2.16	3.65	2.66*	3.01**	1.33	3.29**	1.26	1.91^{+}	1.76	1.40	1.72	1.63

Notes: IV: independent variables; DV: dependent variables. Scenario 1: overturned a soup; Scenario 2: late for a group trip; Scenario 3: poor performance on behalf of the team. S-B: Self-blame. DC1: Guilt manipulated group vs Control group. DC: Shame manipulated group vs Control group.
$+ p < .1$, $* p < .05$, $** p < .01$, $*** p < .001$.

Behavioral Reactions to Guilt and Shame

In addition to echoing the view that guilt produces a compensatory reaction and shame an avoidant reaction to behavior, this study also shows that shame makes individuals aware of their inadequacies, and that they can learn norms through feedback from others, then improve themselves through reflection to avoid making the same mistakes again. Chinese culture emphasizes the mottos that "knowing shame is akin to courage" and "if the people be led by virtue, and uniformity sought to be given by the rules of propriety, they will have the sense of shame, and moreover will become good." These mottos teach that once people know shame, they can check themselves, reflect on their own shortcomings, and work toward goodness. This kind of personality cultivation and improvement has important implications for Chinese social education, and the improvement of self-cultivation triggered by shame is an uninterrupted process of life (Fung, 2006). Guilt and shame are both negative emotional feelings, but both have the function of promoting individual moral growth. As for when individuals choose to adopt escaping strategies and when they choose to positively make things up to others or improve themselves, these are issues worthy of further exploration in the future.

Contributions

The merit of this study lies in examining the process differences between guilt and shame by verifying that evaluating oneself and focusing on the harm to others produce more guilt, while evaluations from others and negativity toward oneself produce more shame. The study also revealed that an individual's self-blame tendencies play an important role in generating guilt and shame. In addition, the results of this study showed

that the difference in behavioral tendencies caused by guilt and shame are not just a dichotomous response of compensation and escaping, as previously thought, but that shame also has a positive function in self-cultivation in Chinese society. Overall, the differences in the mechanisms of guilt and shame processes can be further understood by initiating the antecedents that trigger both emotions and examining subsequent behavioral reactions of guilt and shame.