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Guilt and guilt-proneness, shame and shame-proneness in Indian and Italian young adults

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Abstract

This study investigated the distinct affective experiences of shame and guilt as well as the shame- and guilt-proneness in Indian and Italian young adults. Two undergraduate samples (132 Indian and 134 Italian) were administered the Emotional Experience Questionnaire (EEQ) and the Test of Self-Conscious Affect (TOSCA). Data showed that both emotion specificity and culture explain sizable amount of the variance in the emotion reports. Particularly, the distinction between shame and guilt as separate emotional experiences was confirmed. Moreover, Indian participants reported to react more intensely to shame, and Italian ones tended to react more intensely to guilt. However, considering the proneness, Indian young adults turned out to be more sensitive both to guilt and shame. These findings highlight the distinction between shame and guilt experiences and shame- and guilt-proneness. Further, they suggest a revision of the traditional hypothesis of a basic distinction between shame (Eastern) and guilt (Western) cultures.

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1. Introduction

Guilt and shame, like pride and embarrassment, are “self-conscious” emotions and play a central role in the construction of the self. Although both of these emotions may result from moral

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transgressions or various shortcomings and involve a negative evaluation of self, they are distinct emotions: important differences in their phenomenology have emerged in terms of adjustment, pathology, and interpersonal relatedness (Woien, Ernst, Patock-Peckham, & Nagoshi, 2003).

The specific literature suggests a useful distinction between guilt and shame as emotional experiences on the one hand (Wallbott & Scherer, 1995) and guilt and shame as personal (Tangney, Wagner, & Gramzow, 1992) or cultural (Mead, 1937) proneness on the other hand. First, it is worth differentiating guilt and shame as emotional experiences. As a “self-oriented” emotion, shame involves a global, negative self-evaluation associated with a feeling of helplessness or a sense of passivity in correcting the perceived fault. In a shame experience, the focus is with the self in its entirety: a person attaches a negative evaluation to the self due to the transgression, such as “I am a bad person” (Lewis, 1971). Consequently, in this toxic experience he/she feels diminished and worthless. Usually, he/she feels exposed, and strongly desires to disappear. During the shame episode, most people try to hide, to withdraw, to distance from others, and to avoid looking at them by lowering the head (Lewis, 1992). Often, shame elicits strong self-deprecating reactions of the entire self. Initially, hostility is directed toward the self, and then, as a “defensive strategy”, is redirected toward the rejecting other in retaliation.

On the other hand, guilt involves self-criticism for a specific action instead of the entire self, and so a distinction between the self and the action is rather clear. Feelings of guilt remain focused on a specific behaviour and the harm it may cause others. So, guilt does not affect one’s core identity, and the self remains basically intact. When experiencing guilt, a person may think, “I did a bad action”. Consequently, he/she feels a sense of remorse and regret over the wrongdoing, which may prompt reparative actions, like confessing, apologizing, or somehow repairing the misdeed. Usually, guilt experience is linked to the concern with one’s effect on others, and to the empathy by taking their perspective. Therefore, guilt is an adaptive and constructive moral affect, since it promotes behaviours that benefit interpersonal relationships (Tangney, Wagner, & Gramzow, 1989).

However, shame and guilt not only consist in transient emotional experiences, but also may be connected with a rather lasting affective predisposition. In this case scholars usually speak about guilt- and shame-proneness (Tangney et al., 1992). A shame-prone person, regardless of the circumstances, has the propensity to make internal, global and stable attributions. He/she is more likely to self-blame for behavioural errors, to engage in high rates of self-attribution for interpersonal transgressions, and to have a negative self-conception with a decreasing self-esteem. Moreover, shame-proneness seems to be significantly related to the experience of depression, fear of negative evaluation, social anxiety and social avoidance with an increase of public and private self-consciousness. Furthermore, shame-prone individuals are more likely to externalize blame, since, by blaming others and stressing an external locus of control, they think of assuaging the painful sensation of shame.

Conversely, a guilt-prone person usually makes internal, specific and unstable attributions when transgressions occur (Tangney et al., 1992). Generally, self-awareness of moral standards and ideals of the self, and negative self-evaluation, self-criticism are an important aspect in the description of guilt-proneness (Bybee, Merisca, & Velasco, 1998). In some cases guilt-prone individuals feel unable to repair, apologize, or amend for what they have done wrong (Bybee & Quiles, 1998). Obsessive rumination, seeking symbolic restitution, and magically undoing the wrong, may follow.

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