



Components of Emotional Meaning: A sourcebook

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CHAPTER

26 Cultural differences in the meaning of guilt and shame

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Abstract

Guilt and shame have been conceptualized in several different ways in the psychological and anthropological literature. This study aims to clarify, whether the meaning of the terms guilt and shame differs systematically as a function of cultural-level characteristics. We found that guilt and shame terms are differentiated in very comparable ways across cultural and linguistic groups, with guilt being characterized by a concern for others and a tendency to set things right, and shame being characterized by a tendency to feel exposed and willingness to withdraw from the social situation. We also found some small cultural differences. However, against the prominent view in the literature, these differences were not related to the collectivism–individualism dimension, but instead to uncertainty avoidance and especially to power distance.

Keywords: [guilt](#), [shame](#), [cultural differences](#)

Subject: [Developmental Psychology](#), [Social Psychology](#)

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26.1 Guilt and shame in cross-cultural and anthropological theorizing: Contradicting predictions

Ever since Ruth Benedict (1946) hypothesized a distinction between guilt and shame cultures, there has been a longstanding tradition in both anthropology and cross-cultural psychology which assumes that guilt and shame differ between cultural groups (Bierbrauer, 1992; Hofstede, 1980; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Mead, 1952). Despite this long tradition, no cumulative theorizing and supportive empirical findings have been generated with respect to cultural differences in guilt and shame. Rather on the contrary, opposing hypotheses have been formulated in the literature. For instance, Triandis (1988) and Hofstede (1980) hypothesized that guilt would be more salient in individualistic than in collectivistic cultural groups, but Eid and Diener (2001) hypothesized the reverse. They predicted that guilt would be more salient in collectivistic cultural groups than in individualistic cultural groups.

These inconsistent and sometimes even opposite predictions can be attributed to the different ways in which guilt and shame have been defined and differentiated from one another (Fontaine et al., 2006). According to the hypothesis, which states that guilt is more salient in individualistic cultural groups, guilt and shame are differentiated in terms of an internal versus an external orientation. Guilt would be triggered by a violation of internalized standards, while shame would be triggered by an audience (real or imagined) disapproving one's wrongdoing or norm incompatibility (e.g., Ausubel, 1955; Smith, Webster, Parrott, & Eyre, 2002). Based on this definition, it can indeed be expected that guilt is more salient in individualistic cultural groups, where internalized and personal standards are more salient. Shame would be more salient in collectivistic cultural groups that stress one's relationship with the in-group. However, the currently dominant framework in social and personality psychology differentiates guilt and shame in a very different way. According to this view, guilt would be characterized by an action focus: in guilt the person would be oriented toward restoring the wrong done. In contrast, shame would be characterized by a global negative self-focus: in shame the global self would be experienced as weak and inferior (e.g., Tangney & Dearing, 2002; Tracy & Robins, 2004a). From this line of theorizing it makes no sense to expect that shame is more salient in collectivistic cultural groups, or that guilt is more salient in individualistic cultural groups. For guilt there is still a third line of theorizing, namely that guilt would be a communal-oriented emotion (Baumeister, Stillwell, & Heatherton, 1994). Through its reparative action tendency the function of guilt would mainly be to restore interpersonal bonds. If guilt is defined in this way, it makes sense to predict that guilt is more salient in collectivistic cultural groups.

While each of these three previous approaches disagree on the defining and differentiation characteristics of guilt and shame, they do share the expectation that the meaning of guilt and shame is comparable across cultural groups. Cultural differences are only expected in the salience or prevalence of these emotions. The inconsistencies in the anthropological and cross-cultural literature have also been explained in a different way: it has been hypothesized that the very meaning of guilt and shame, and how they are differentiated, differs systematically between cultural groups (e.g., Kitayama, Markus, & Matsumoto, 1995; Mesquita & Karasawa, 2004). In the literature, we identified four such hypotheses which we labeled (1) the embarrassment hypothesis, (2) the defensive reaction hypothesis, (3) the standards and law hypothesis, and (4) interpersonal-orientation hypothesis.

26.2 The embarrassment hypothesis

Walbott and Scherer (1995) studied emotional experiences in 37 countries around the world in their project called the International Survey on Emotion Antecedents and Reactions (ISEAR). They found that self-reported shame experiences were more acute/short-lived with less trophotropic AROUSAL (lump in the throat, stomach troubles, crying/sobbing), fewer negative influences on self-esteem and relationships, more laughing/smiling, and a higher felt temperature in cultural groups that were collectivistic, high in POWER distance and high in uncertainty avoidance compared to cultural groups that were individualistic, low in POWER distance, and low in uncertainty avoidance as assessed by Hofstede's cultural value dimensions (1980; 2001). The pattern in cultural groups that were collectivistic, high in POWER distance and in uncertainty avoidance resembles the Western concept of embarrassment, which is characterized by sympathetic nervous system activation and the feeling of being at the center of attention (Miller, 2007). For guilt experiences, Walbott and Scherer (1995) did not find clear cultural differences. In general, guilt appeared to be a more internal experience that reflected the sense of moral transgression, and was often attributed to the self. Shame experiences were found to be more similar to guilt experiences in cultures that are individualistic and low on POWER distance and low on uncertainty avoidance. Based on these findings, we formulated the embarrassment hypothesis: the meaning of shame is more characterized by embarrassment features in cultural groups that are collectivistic, high in POWER distance, and high in uncertainty avoidance compared to cultural groups that are individualistic, low in POWER distance, and low in uncertainty avoidance.

26.3 The defensive reaction hypothesis

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In Western theorizing, it has been suggested that shame is likely to lead to defensive reactions, whereas guilt would motivate positive social behaviors (e.g., Joireman, 2004; Tangney & Dearing, 2002). Tangney, Stuewig, and Mashek (2007) argue that the connection between shame and defensive reactions can be explained by the painful nature of shame as a negative self-focused emotion. In order to relieve shame, the shamed individual may externalize the blame or withdraw from the shameful situation. Tangney, Stuewig, and Mashek (2007) propose that “in this way, shamed individuals may regain some sense of control and superiority in their life.” However, Kitayama, Markus, and Matsumoto (1995) argue that shame relates to defensive reactions only in individualistic cultures, like the U.S. where an independent sense of self is valued. In individualistic cultures, expressing shame to others can be interpreted as a sign of weakness, because it communicates submission. In cultures where interdependence is valued, expressing shame to others is seen as positive. There the concept of self includes a deep sense of connectedness to others. In other words, people in interdependent cultures may not have a similar “sense of control in their life,” nor do they expect to have it. Social hierarchies and submission are not seen as humiliating, but as an essential part of social interaction. Moreover, in many Eastern cultures like China and Japan, expressing anger, in general, is considered as highly inappropriate, because it would disrupt harmonious social interaction (e.g., Markus & Kitayama, 1991). In contrast, in cultures with an independent self-construal, anger is often seen as positive and as a justified way to defend one’s individual rights.

Consistent with this idea, Fontaine, Poortinga, Setiadi, and Markam (2002) found that guilt and shame were more closely associated with fear in Indonesia than in the Netherlands, whereas these concepts were considered more related to anger in the Netherlands than in Indonesia. Moreover, there are studies suggesting that shame relates to more positive social behaviors in some cultural contexts than others. Bagozzi, Verbeke, and Gavino (2003) studied Dutch and Filipino salespersons’ experiences of shame and found that the emotional shame experience was very similar for both groups (painful, self-focused emotion, felt threat to the core self), but the behavioral reactions to it were different: for Filipino employees shame enhanced customer relationship building, whereas for Dutch employees shame diminished it. Similarly, Mesquita and Karasawa (2004) emphasize that in the Japanese culture, shame is seen as a valued emotion, and not a threat to the self-esteem. Experiencing shame is seen as a way to maintain social harmony and develop oneself as a person. In Japan, shame is often accompanied by public expressions and apologizing. One of the most frequent responses in shame situations is *gambaru*, that can be translated as a resolve to self-improvement. In accordance with this, Bear, Uribe-Zarain, Manning, and Shiomi (2009) found that Japanese children were less prone to externalize blame compared to American children, and that shame had a much stronger connection to anger among American than Japanese children. Similarly, Rozin (2003) found that Indians were clearly more likely to agree with the statement “shame is more similar to happiness than to anger” than Americans were. Americans considered shame and anger to be similar, because they are both negatively valenced emotions, whereas Indians considered shame and happiness to be similar, because both have positive effects on social interaction, while anger is socially disruptive.

Based on this line of theorizing and these empirical findings, we formulated the *defensive reaction hypothesis*. We hypothesize that the meaning of shame is defined by the presence of defensive reaction features (externalization/aggression and desire to withdraw) in cultural groups with an independent self-construal, whereas in cultural groups with interdependent self-construal defensive reaction features (externalization/aggression and desire to withdraw) are absent from the meaning of shame (Kitayama, Markus, & Matsumoto, 1995; Mesquita & Karasawa, 2004).

26.4 The standards-orientation hypothesis

p. 391 It has also been hypothesized that guilt varies systematically between cultural groups. Markus and Kitayama have hypothesized in 1991 that the violation of internalized moral and legal norms would be much more central for guilt in Western cultural groups characterized by an independent self-construal than in Eastern cultural groups characterized by an interdependent self-construal. [↳] Thus, guilt would be a more internally-oriented emotion in independent cultural groups compared to interdependent cultural groups. Based on this line of theorizing, we formulated the standards-orientation hypothesis, namely that the meaning of guilt is more defined by the violation of internalized standards and laws in more independent cultural groups.

26.5 The interpersonal-orientation hypothesis

In the same article, Markus and Kitayama (1991) also suggested that guilt is much more focused on interpersonal relationships in cultural groups with an interdependent self-construal compared to cultural groups with an independent self-construal. The interpersonal-orientation hypothesis then states that the meaning of guilt is more defined in terms of interpersonal reparative features in more interdependent cultural groups.

The current study investigates whether the meaning of guilt and shame terms differs systematically between cultural groups as expected by the embarrassment, the defensive reaction, the standards and law, and the interpersonal-orientation hypotheses. Moreover, it will be exploratively investigated whether meaning differences between guilt and shame are found in the overall four-factorial structure of VALENCE, POWER, AROUSAL, and NOVELTY that spans the emotion domain (Fontaine, Scherer, Roesch, & Ellsworth, 2007).

26.6 Method

Samples

Data from 34 samples were used: Belgium, Canada (French), Chile, China, Czech Republic, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Greece, Hong Kong, Israel, Italy Bari, Italy Bologna, Italy Turin, Japan, Myanmar, Peru, Poland, Russia, Singapore, Slovakia, South-Africa (Afrikaans), Spain (Basque), Spain (Spanish North), Spain (Spanish South), Switzerland (French), Switzerland (Romanish), Taiwan, The Netherlands, Tunisia, Turkey, United Kingdom, Ukraine, and the United States. Characteristics of the individual samples are described in Chapter 6.

Emotion features

Out of the 142 emotion features in the GRID, those features that best represented the hypotheses were identified and were aggregated into conceptually coherent feature scales. Two features closely matched the embarrassment hypothesis, namely “center of attention” and “blushed.” The embarrassment feature scale had an internal consistency of 0.82 (Cronbach’s alpha). Six features closely matched the defensive reaction hypothesis, namely “wanted to do damage, hit, or say something that hurts,” “wanted to destroy whatever was close,” “wanted to flee,” “wanted to disappear or hide from others,” “wanted to withdraw into her/himself,” and “wanted to run away in whatever direction.” As there are conceptually two clearly different aspects involved, namely reacting aggressively and withdrawing, two feature scales were constructed for the defensive reaction hypothesis. The aggression feature scale had an internal consistency of 0.69 and the withdrawing feature scale had an internal consistency of 0.88. Two features corresponded to the standards-orientation hypothesis, namely “incongruent with own standards and ideals” and “violated laws or socially accepted norms.” The standards-orientation feature scale had an internal consistency of 0.48. Finally, five features closely related to the interpersonal-orientation hypothesis, namely “in itself unpleasant for somebody else,” “consequences negative for somebody else,” “wanted to take care of another person or cause,” “wanted to tackle the situation,” and “wanted to make up for what she or he had done.” As the first two features related to a cognitive concern for others and the last three to reparative behavior, two feature scales were constructed. The first feature scale had an internal consistency of 0.86 and the latter of 0.73.

Besides these ad hoc constructed feature scales, we also analyzed the scores of guilt and shame on the four overall factors of VALENCE, POWER, AROUSAL, and NOVELTY.

Cultural characteristics

In order to understand which cultural features best explain the possible meaning differences, we used the Hofstede (1980; 2001) cultural dimensions. He proposed five dimensions on which cultures may vary, namely Individualism, POWER Distance, Uncertainty Avoidance, Masculinity, and Long-Term Orientation. Individualism–collectivism (IDV; high scores indicate individualism and low scores indicate collectivism) relates to the degree to which individuals are supposed to look after themselves versus the degree to which they are integrated into in-groups. The POWER Distance dimension (PD) refers to the extent to which a society accepts that POWER is unequally distributed among its institutions and people. Uncertainty Avoidance (UA) describes the extent to which members of a society or culture feel uncomfortable with ambiguous situations. Masculinity–femininity (MAS; high scores mean masculine and low scores mean feminine) indicates the degree to which the dominant values in a society are “masculine” oriented (such as assertiveness, money, heroism, achievement) or “feminine” oriented (such as high quality of life, caring for others, maintaining relationships). Long-Term Orientation is not included in this study, as scores for this dimension were lacking for too many countries from our sample. The Hofstede scores were not available from Myanmar, Tunisia, and Ukraine. Values of similar countries were used as proxies for these samples. The values of Russia were used for Ukraine, the values of Arab countries were used for Tunisia, and the values of Thailand were used for Myanmar.

Analyses

A stepwise regression analysis with three steps was applied on each of the six feature scales and each of the four overall factors. In a first step, the (effect-coded) differentiation between guilt and shame was entered as a predictor. In the next step, individualism, POWER distance, masculinity, and uncertainty avoidance were entered as predictors. Only the significant predictors were retained using a forward selection procedure. In the final step, the interaction between guilt and shame on the one hand and individualism, POWER distance, masculinity, and uncertainty avoidance on the other hand were entered as predictors. Only the significant interaction effects were retained using a forward selection procedure. Note that the hypotheses are only tested in the last step as each of the hypotheses implies that guilt and shame are differentiated differently as a function of cultural characteristics. The results are presented step by step.

26.7 Results

Step 1. The average differentiation between guilt and shame terms. Four of the six feature scales differed significantly in the first step. Shame was significantly more related to embarrassment ($R^2 = 0.65$, $p < 0.001$) and to withdrawal ($R^2 = 0.42$, $p < 0.001$) than guilt, and guilt was systematically more related to reparation ($R^2 = 0.54$, $p < 0.001$) and to concern for others ($R^2 = 0.29$, $p < 0.001$) than shame was. Guilt and shame did not differ significantly on aggression ($R^2 = 0.00$, $p = 0.720$), nor on standards-orientation ($R^2 = 0.04$, $p = 0.103$).

p. 393 Guilt and shame differed significantly on all four emotion factors: shame was seen as more negatively valenced ($R^2 = 0.12$, $p = 0.003$), less powerful ($R^2 = 0.23$, $p < 0.001$), more activated ($R^2 = 0.25$, $p < 0.001$), and especially more unpredictable ($R^2 = 0.47$, $p < 0.001$) than guilt.

Step 2. Relations of both guilt and shame with the four Hofstede dimensions. The meaning of both guilt and shame related to cultural characteristics for three of the six feature scales, namely for the withdrawal scale ($\Delta R^2 = 0.04$, $p = 0.036$), the embarrassment scale ($\Delta R^2 = 0.07$, $p < 0.001$), and the standards-orientation scale ($\Delta R^2 = 0.36$, $p < 0.001$). As the withdrawal scale was also involved in an interaction effect in the third step, we only present here the results for the embarrassment and the standards-orientation scales. It was observed that both guilt and shame related more to embarrassment features in more uncertainty avoidant societies ($\beta = 0.27$, $p < 0.001$). Moreover, both guilt and shame were more related to a standards-orientation in more uncertainty avoidant societies ($\beta = 0.33$, $p = 0.002$), but were less related to a standards-orientation in more POWER distant ($\beta = -0.24$, $p = 0.019$), and more masculine ($\beta = -0.40$, $p < 0.001$) societies.

None of the four overall emotion factors were related to the Hofstede dimensions.

Step 3. The differential meaning of guilt and shame in relation to the Hofstede dimensions. In the final step, a significant interaction effect was not observed for any of the four emotion factors. A significant interaction effect was observed for two of the six feature scales. A significant interaction effect between guilt/shame and POWER distance was observed for withdrawal ($\Delta R^2 = 0.03$, $p < 0.041$) and for interpersonal-orientation ($\Delta R^2 = 0.05$, $p < 0.024$). To further explore these significant interaction effects, regression analyses were executed separately for guilt and shame. POWER distance was unrelated to withdrawal for guilt ($\beta = -0.01$, $p = 0.948$), but POWER distance was negatively related to withdrawal for shame ($\beta = 0.56$, $p < 0.001$). Thus the more POWER distance, the less withdrawal defined the meaning of shame. The opposite effect was observed for concern for others. POWER distance was not related to concern for others for shame ($\beta = 0.22$, $p = 0.223$), but POWER distance was negatively related to concern with others for guilt ($\beta = -0.35$, $p = 0.046$). In more POWER distant cultural groups, guilt is less characterized by concern for others.

26.8 Discussion

The overall differentiation between guilt and shame terms

While guilt and shame are closely related emotion terms, we do confirm a systematic differentiation between the terms on average. Shame was generally seen as a more unpleasant, weaker, higher in AROUSAL, and less predictable emotion than guilt. This is consistent with theories describing shame as more painful and more difficult to manage than guilt (Lewis, 1971; Tangney & Dearing, 2002; Tracy & Robins, 2004a). Moreover, when it comes to the guilt- and shame-specific features, guilt and shame turn out to be strongly differentiated. On one hand, guilt is characterized by more concern for others and especially more reparative behavior. This is in line with the theories that define guilt in terms of a moral focus (Lazarus, 1991a) and consider it as a communal-oriented emotion (Baumeister, Stillwell, & Heatherton, 1994). Guilt is focused on the negative consequences of one's behavior for others much more than shame is, and it is related to a strong tendency to set things right. On the other hand, shame is strongly characterized by its external orientation and the tendency to withdraw. This is in line with the old theorizing of Benedict (1946) and Mead (1952), and more recently of Smith, Webster, Parrott, and Eyre (2002) that consider an external orientation as the central feature of shame.

p. 394 We find no evidence that guilt is more characterized by a focus on (internalized) standards and norms, as predicted by the old internal-external opposition. Apparently, the fact that the expectation of public exposure defines the meaning of shame does not imply the absence of an awareness of the violation of (internal) standards and norms. Moreover, we find no evidence for the position that the meaning of shame would be more related to aggression as predicted by Tangney and colleagues. Together with the finding that shame is related to a strong external orientation, the present findings question the theory that shame is to be defined in terms of a global negative self-focus. The link with aggression was mainly expected as a defensive reaction against the painfulness of the global negative self-focus in shame. However, as the GRID does not contain emotion features that directly operationalize global negative self-focus, the present study gives only indirect indications about the role of a global negative self-focus in the meaning of guilt and shame.

26.9 Culturally determined meaning shifts in guilt and shame

The central research question of the present study was whether the meaning of guilt and shame shifted systematically as a function of cultural-level characteristics. To that end, we derived four hypotheses from the literature, namely the embarrassment, the defensive reaction, the standards-orientation, and the interpersonal-orientation hypotheses.

The embarrassment hypothesis. Based on the research of Wallbott and Scherer (1995), it was hypothesized that shame, but not guilt, would be more related to a public exposure experience in more collectivistic, more uncertainty avoidant, and more POWER distant societies. This was not observed. Still, it was observed that the meaning of *both* guilt and shame related more to an experience of public exposure in more uncertainty avoidant cultural groups. This could mean that the community is more actively involved in imposing rule abidance in highly uncertainty avoidant cultural groups.

The defensive reaction hypothesis. Based on the theorizing that negative self-focus is (more) threatening in cultural groups with an independent self-construal, it was hypothesized that shame would be more related to defensive reactions (externalizing aggressive reactions as well as withdrawal) in individualistic cultural groups than in collectivistic cultural groups. The hypothesis was only partially confirmed: The meaning of shame did not vary systematically in terms of externalizing aggressive reactions, nor did withdrawal reactions relate to

individualism–collectivism. The predicted effect was only observed for POWER distance: the more POWER distant a society, the less the meaning of shame is defined by withdrawal tendencies. This is consistent with previous studies suggesting that in some cultural contexts behavioral responses in shame situations are less defensive than in others (e.g., Bear et al., 2009; Bagozzi, Verbeke, & Gavino, 2003).

The standards–orientation hypothesis. Based on the theorizing of Markus and Kitayama (1991) that guilt is more about standards and law violation in cultural groups with an independent self-construal, it was hypothesized that guilt is more defined by a standards–orientation in individualistic cultural groups. This was not observed. It was observed though, that the meaning of both guilt and shame substantially varies in terms of standards–orientation: The more uncertainty avoidant, the less masculine, and the less POWER distant the cultural group is, the more *both* guilt and shame refer to a violation of standards and norms.

The interpersonal–orientation hypothesis. Building on the theorizing of Markus and Kitayama (1991) which assumed that guilt is much more interpersonally oriented in cultural groups with an interdependent self-construal, it was predicted that the meaning of guilt is more related to concern for others and to reparation in collectivistic cultural groups. However, no such effect was observed. Reparative behavior did not relate to cultural characteristics, and moreover, individualism–collectivism was not related to concern for others. Still, p. 395 guilt did differ systematically ↵ in meaning with respect to concern for others: in more POWER distant cultural groups the meaning of guilt was *less* related to concern for others.

While none of the hypotheses was fully confirmed, the present analyses did find evidence for some systematic shifts in meaning of guilt, shame, and their differentiation as a function of cultural characteristics. However, none of the meaning shifts were related to the expected individualism–collectivism dimension. Two cultural dimensions accounted for most of the meaning shifts, namely uncertainty avoidance and especially POWER distance. The present study calls for an extension of our cultural focus beyond individualism–collectivism and the way it is currently elaborated in terms of independent and interdependent construal of the self. Especially the role of POWER distance mirrors the findings in the chapter on pride (see Chapter 25): There it was also found that variations in the meaning of pride did not relate to individualism–collectivism, but to POWER distance. Pride was more negative in high POWER distant cultural groups. Here it is observed that shame is less related to withdrawal and that guilt is less related to concern for others in high POWER distant cultural groups. This seems to indicate that the prototypical meaning of self-conscious emotion terms is coloured by their role in preserving the hierarchical social organization. Personal pride can question the existing hierarchical social order. Moreover, in high POWER distant cultural groups, there is a higher acceptance of hierarchies and being judged by more powerful others is inevitable. It can be hypothesized that guilt and shame are more often elicited or purposefully aroused by others after a breach of the hierarchical social relationships with the goal to align the person's behavior again with his social hierarchical position. In such a context, norm violation neither implies a disadvantaged or hurt person, nor is it functional to withdraw from the social situation.

While we found clear evidence for systematic cultural differences in the meaning of guilt and shame, the size of these differences is mostly small. Six of the 10 features that were investigated were unrelated to the cultural variables. For three of the feature scales, the effects were small. Only for one feature scale, namely standards–orientation, a large cultural effect was observed. These findings indicate that the overall meaning of guilt and shame terms, and how they are differentiated, is stable across cultural groups. Cultural effects do not alter the overall meaning of the terms, but lead to shades of variation with respect to specific meaning features. The present study indicates that the meaning of guilt and shame is by and large comparable across cultural groups.

26.10 Limitations

An important limitation of the present study is that it only looked at the meaning of translation equivalent terms for guilt and shame. It did not study the emotion processes themselves. It can therefore not be concluded from the present study that the emotion processes, which are labeled by the terms guilt and shame, truly differ between cultural groups. Genuine differences in the emotion processes form only one possible account for the differences in meaning. Another account could be that the prevalence of the specific events that trigger these emotions differs between cultural groups (e.g., a breach of the hierarchical social order is less likely to occur in more egalitarian societies). These differences in prevalence could get encoded into the prototypical decontextualized meaning of these terms.

Another important limitation is that the GRID features do not operationalize all characteristics that are theoretically deemed important for differentiating guilt from shame, like for instance a global negative self-focus (e.g., Tracy & Robins, 2004a; Tangney & Dearing, 2002). Moreover, most feature scales only relied on two features, which makes the scales sensitive to the specific wording of the features. We thus need further research from various theoretical stances that operationalizes these concepts better in order to fully understand the meaning variations in guilt and shame across cultural groups.

The fact that the GRID only studies differences in action *tendencies*, and not in *actual behavior* can also be considered as a limitation from a culture-comparative point of view. Cultural differences in emotion often appear in the domain of emotion regulation and thus in the behavior that is actually observed (Mesquita & Frijda, 1992). For instance, while no cultural differences in the tendency for defensive aggression were found, it is very well possible that cultural groups differ in the actual display of defensive aggressive behavior.

26.11 Conclusions

We can conclude that by and large guilt and shame terms are differentiated in very comparable ways across cultural and linguistic groups, with guilt being characterized by a concern for others and a tendency to set things right, and shame being characterized by a tendency to feel exposed and desire to withdraw from the social situation. At the same time, systematic cultural variation in shades of meaning of guilt and shame terms was revealed. This variation, however, could not be attributed to cultural differences on the individualism–collectivism dimension. The present study calls for a broadening of the theorizing of the cultural characteristics that have an impact on guilt and shame and to the function of these two emotions in different social contexts.

Notes

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