Are Constructiveness and Destructiveness Essential Features of Guilt and Shame Feelings Respectively?

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In the contemporary literature, the feelings of guilt and shame are categorized as self-conscious emotions. They are labeled as “self-conscious” because experiences of guilt and shame involve a reflective thought process on the self (Eisenberg, 2000). In the conceptualization of the feelings of guilt and shame, there are some controversies regarding their nature as well as their relation to behavior outcomes. The first problem to be considered here emerges mainly from the conceptualization of guilt as an adaptive feeling. This question can be stated as follows: “Does guilt have only an adaptive function as some of the studies claim and report?” A second concern of this paper, which is closely related to the first one, focuses on the conceptualization of guilt in comparison to shame and can be put forward by the question “Do guilt and shame feelings relate to constructive and destructive behaviors, respectively, by their very nature?”

First part of this paper gives different conceptualizations of guilt and shame in the literature. In the second part, research findings that report the relationship between guilt, shame, and adaptive and maladaptive behaviors are presented. In the following parts, difficulties involved in the conceptualization of self-conscious emotions with regard to their universal validity are considered, and heuristic value of the recent conceptualization of guilt and shame in terms of its focus on self is discussed.

THE CONCEPTUALIZATION OF GUILT AND SHAME

The Feeling of Guilt

Guilt has long been a subject matter of clinical psychology because of the central role assigned to it in the development of psychological disturbances such as neurosis in psychoanalytic theory (Tangney, Wagner, & Gramzow, 1992). Unlike some contemporary conceptualizations (Hofmann, 1982; Tangney, 1991; Tangney,
Wagner, & Gramzow, 1992; Tangney & Dearing, 2004), psychoanalytic theory qualified guilt as a destructive emotion and defined it as the expression of the tension rooted in the condemnation of ego by the superego (e.g., Freud, 1923/1968).

We see that a more positive view of guilt was introduced in the literature in the following decades. For example, Ausubel (1955) defined guilt as an emotion that may have adaptive functions depending on its intensity. According to Ausubel (1955), moderate levels of guilt may lead to socially adaptive behavior by inhibiting non-normative behavior. In later years, Izard (1977) and Weiner (1985) described guilt as emerging with the development of the self and sense of responsibility. More recently, the role of guilt in moral development has been highlighted in theory (Hoffman, 1982) and verified by numerous empirical research (for a review, see Baumeister, Stillwell, & Heatherton, 1994; Kochanska, DeVet, Goldman, Murray, & Putnam, 1994; Konstam, Chernoff, & Deveney, 2001; Krevans & Gibbs, 1996; Leith & Baumeister, 1998), which overall draw attention to a more constructive aspect of guilt feeling.

Distinguishing between Guilt and Shame

It is stated that, historically, the distinction between guilt and shame has largely been neglected by scientists as well as by the layperson (Tangney 2001; Tangney & Dearing, 2004). One of the early attempts to differentiate guilt and shame (Ausubel, 1955; Benedict, 1967) characterized guilt as a private emotion and shame as a public one. Although, empirical research (Tangney, Miller, Flicker, & Barlow, 1996) disconfirmed this distinction and indicated that the existence of audience was not the factor that differentiates between these two emotions, a more metaphorical existence (Taylor, 1985) rather than actual existence of an audience was suggested to be one of the distinguishing features of guilt and shame (Crozier, 1998; Martenz, 2005). According to Taylor (1985), an actual or imaginary audience may not be necessary to feel shame. However, shame requires a self-critical and sophisticated self-consciousness which relies on the concept of another such that in this sophisticated self-consciousness one realizes the discrepancy of his/her own assumptions about his/her actual action or state and a possible detached observer-description of that action or state.

Lewis (1971, as cited Tangney, 2001) and Taylor (1985) proposed that the focal point of evaluation (behavior vs. self) determines the nature of guilt and shame. Accordingly, guilt is experienced when the individual targets his/her behavior as the focus of evaluation, and shame experience comes about when the individual targets his/her own self in case of wrongdoing (Tangney, 1998). According to Taylor (1985), a person who feels guilt thinks that he/she did something wrong, but the deed is alien to what he/she really is. However, in feeling shame, what has been done is thought to be identical to what the person is.
Weiner (1985) pointed that guilt and shame could be distinguished with respect to the controllability of an action’s consequence. According to this view, guilt emerges when there is failure due to lack of effort, and shame emerges when the failure is self-related and uncontrollable, such as in the case of lack of ability. Hoffman (1982) also made a distinction between guilt and shame in terms of their consequences, and asserted that guilt-related emotions promote reparative behavior and motivational activation, whereas shame-related emotions give rise to withdrawal and motivational inhibition.

In the more recent literature, the view that guilt and shame are distinct emotions in terms of their antecedents, experiential aspects and consequences has been accepted by many researchers and led them to explore behavioral correlates of these two emotions (Ferguson, Stegge, Miller, & Olsen, 1999; Lindsay-Hartz, 1984; Lindsay-Hartz, de Rivera, & Mascolo, 1995; Tangney, 1990, 1991, 1998; Tangney, Burggraf, & Wagner, 1995).

BEHAVIORAL CORRELATES OF GUILT AND SHAME

In some of the empirical research that has been conducted since 1990’s, guilt has been defined as an agitation-based emotion accompanied by feelings of regret, fear, worry, anxiety and a wish to make reparations for the wrongdoing that is perceived as violation of an internal moral standard. In the same research trend, shame has been defined as a dejection-based emotion accompanied by feelings of helplessness, incompetence and a wish to disappear and not to be in contact with others (for a review see, Ferguson et al., 1999; Tangney, 1991; Tangney et al., 1995). Although this definition formulates guilt and shame as adaptive and maladaptive emotions, respectively, empirical research shows controversial findings regarding this formulation. The section below reviews the research on behavioral correlates of guilt and shame feelings.

Guilt as Adaptive and Shame as Maladaptive Emotions

Research depicts guilt and shame as two moral emotions that may foster socially desirable behavior (for a review, see Eisenberg, 2000). Hoffman (1982) asserts that guilt feeling plays an important role in the development of morality referring to the function of guilt in empathic arousal that motivates prosocial behavior. In support of the constructive role of empathy-based guilt in Hoffmans’ theory, studies report a positive link between guilt, prosocial behavior, perspective taking (for a review, see Baumeister et al., 1994; Kochanska et al., 1994; Krevans & Gibbs, 1996) and reparative behaviors in children (Zahn-Waxler, 2000). For example, Kochanska, Gross, Lin and Nichols (2002) report that children who display more guilt following a mishap are less likely to violate the desirable behavior standards,
and early guilt-proneness predicts later “moral sense” in young children. Kochanska et al. (2002) state that feeling of guilt is required in social development because it helps the child to inhibit conduct that violates rules. Findings (Baumeister, Arlene, Stillwell, & Heatherton, 1995; Covert, Tangney, Maddux, & Heleno, 2003; Konstam et al., 2001; Leith & Baumeister, 1998) have also demonstrated that guilt plays a positive role in relationship enhancement and efficacy in interpersonal problem solving. Overall, these studies suggest that the feeling of guilt is related to the development of conscience in children and to conscientious behavior in young adults.

As stated above, a vast number of research investigated guilt and shame separately to elucidate their different behavioral correlates. Studies report that guilt-proneness is negatively correlated with problematic alcohol and drug use and personal distress and positively linked to empathic responsiveness, whereas shame-proneness is positively related to these problem behaviors and inversely related to empathic responsiveness (Dearing, Stuewing, & Tangney, 2005; Tangney, 1991). Similarly, other research report that while shame is linked to psychological problems (e.g., anger, internalizing and externalizing behaviors, self-condemnation, suspiciousness, resentment, irritability, symptoms of somatization, obsessive-compulsive behavior disorder, psychoticism, depression, personal distress), shame-free guilt (i.e., guilt controlling for shame) remains unrelated to such problem behaviors and is positively linked to empathic responsiveness (Ferguson et al., 1999; Fontaine, Luyten, De Boeck, & Corveleyn, 2001; Leith & Baumeister, 1998; Lutwak, Panish, Ferrari, & Razzino, 2001; Niendenthal, Tangney, & Gavanski, 1994; Orth, Berking, & Burkhardt, 2006; Pineles, Street, & Koenen, 2006; Tangney et al., 1995; Tangney, Wagner, Fletcher, & Gramzow, 1992; Tangney, Wagner, & Gramzow, 1992).

Tangney (1991) and colleagues (Tangney et al., 1995; Tangney, Stuewing, & Mashek, 2007) interpret the relations found between guilt and adaptive responses and shame and maladaptive responses in the literature cited above in line with the conceptual distinction that they adopted regarding the difference between guilt and shame. According to this distinction (Tangney, 1990, 1991, 1995), since guilt-prone individuals focus on the wrong behavior, they are more concerned for the consequences of behavior. The attention on the consequences of behavior motivates these people to care for the victim and make some reparations. On the contrary, since shame-prone individuals focus on their self who displayed the wrongdoing; they are more concerned with themselves as the actors of the wrongdoing. As turning their attention to the self, shame-prone individuals feel more personal distress and, therefore, cannot show empathic responsiveness towards others.

Research findings cited in this section agree on the maladaptive nature of shame, except one (Fountain et al., 2001) which reports a positive correlation between shame and empathy as an unexpected finding. Although the destructive nature of shame feeling has been widely accepted in the literature (Baumeister
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et al., 1994; Tangney, 2003), at least in the Western context, the adaptive nature of guilt is still debatable. The following section reviews research that highlights the “darker” side of the guilt feeling.

The Relationship between Guilt, Shame, and Problem Behaviors

There is both theory (Barrett, 1995; Bybee & Quiles, 1998; Campos, Mumme, Kermoian, & Campos, 1994; for a review, see Ferguson & Stegge, 1998; Lindsay-Hartz et al., 1995) and research (e.g. Harder, 1995; Harder, Cutler, & Rockert, 1992; Kugler & Jones, 1992) that challenge the conceptualization of guilt as an exclusively adaptive emotion (Tangney, 1990, 1991). From a functionalist perspective, emotions cannot be inherently negative; any emotion can be both adaptive and maladaptive depending on the circumstances and on the function of the emotion in the context of individual’s lives (Barrett 1995; Campos et al., 1994; Ferguson, & Stegge, 1998; Ferguson, Stegge, & Damhuis, 1991). For example, according to Lindsay-Hartz and her colleges (Lindsay-Hartz, 1984; Lindsay-Hartz et al., 1995), guilt may be adaptive, when it motivates the individual to be concerned with others, and maladaptive, when it leads the individual to focus on his/her ego in the form of self-punishment and turns out to be excessively guilt-driven behavior. Similarly, shame can be maladaptive, for example, when the person accepts the view of others as the only way of approaching to a particular issue (e.g., viewing a “disability” as terrible). Yet, shame can also be adaptive, if this feeling motivates the individual to commit to change and thereby helps to resolve the shame experienced (Lindsay-Hartz et al., 1995). Such a shame experience can also help the individual to acquire self-knowledge through the eyes of the others and foster deference to standards of group conduct (Barrett, 1995; Ferguson et al., 1991). These statements suggest that an emotion can be dysfunctional or functional depending on how effectively it is regulated (Bybee & Quiles, 1998).

Multidimensional construction of guilt. The consideration that guilt can be both adaptive and maladaptive (for a review, Ferguson & Stegge, 1998; Ferguson, Stegge, Èyre, Vollmer, & Ashbaker, 2000; Kugler & Jones, 1992; Quiles & Bybee, 1997; Zahn-Waxler, Kochanska, Krupnicky, & McKnew, 1990) and that its magnitude may vary as a function of cognitive and affective dimensions (Kubany, Abueg, Kilauano, Manke, & Kaplan, 1997; Kubany & Watson, 2003) have led some researchers to operationalize guilt as a multidimensional construct. For example, Zahn-Waxler et al. (1990) conceptualized adaptive guilt as an action-oriented conscious feeling accompanied by making reparations and helping others, and maladaptive guilt as an excessive, self-critical feeling accompanied by a sense of responsibility for everything that goes wrong. Based on the investigation of adaptive and maladaptive patterns in children, researchers (Donenberg & Weisz, 1998; Kochanska et al., 1994; Zahn-Waxler & Kochanska, 1990; Zahn-Waxler et al.,

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1990) stated that pathogenic forms of guilt might develop since childhood years in case the child develops an overgeneralized sense of responsibility and an unrealistic belief in the effect of his/her behaviors on misfortunes of others.

In their methodological endeavour, Kugler and Jones (1992) developed a three dimensional guilt inventory (e.g., trait-guilt, state-guilt and moral standards) and compared this measure with other guilt and shame measures in relation to psychological problems (e.g., resentment, suspicion, depression, anxiety, and anger). In Kugler and Jones's conceptualization (1992), trait-guilt refers to how one generally feels, whereas state-guilt refers to how one currently is feeling in relation to specific events, and moral standards refers to subscription to a mode of moral principles without reference to specific situations. Kugler and Jones' study (1992) indicated that the trait- and state-guilt scales were positively linked, and the moral standards scale was negatively linked to measures of resentment, suspicion, depression, anxiety, and anger. In addition, the moral standards scale indicated higher correlations with scenario-based guilt measures (e.g., Mosher Guilt Inventory (Mosher, 1988), Hogan and Check Guilt and Shame Scales (Hogan & Check, 1983), and Self Conscious Affect and Attribution Inventory (Tangney, 1990)). Depending on results of their study, Kugler and Jones (1992) commented that these scenario-based guilt scales in fact measure moral standards by providing moral dilemmas to the participant rather than measuring the affective experience of guilt. Similarly, Bybee and Quiles (1998) stated that scales that tap continual feelings of guilt, which were unrelated to a specific situation (e.g., Personal Feelings Questionnaire (Harder et al., 1992), Guilt Inventory (Kugler & Jones, 1992)) measure chronic guilt and those that assess readiness to experience guilt contingent upon a specific event (e.g., Mosher Guilt Inventory and Test of Self Conscious Affect (TOSCA) (Tangney, Wagner, & Gramzow, 1992)) measure predispositional guilt. This point was supported by other research (Boye, Bentsen, & Malt, 2002; Kubany et al., 1996) which used guilt and shame measures comparatively to identify the link between guilt, shame and indices of psychopathology.

Reminiscent of the operationalization of trait- and state-guilt in Kugler and Jones’ study (1992), Quiles and Bybee (1997) conceptualize predispositional guilt as a personal proclivity to experience guilt in response to specific, guilt-eliciting situations, and chronic guilt as an ongoing condition of guiltiness, accompanied by regret and remorse, which is not mainly attached to a specific situation. In support to their two dimensional conceptualization of guilt, Quiles and Bybee (1997) reported that they found no significant link between experiencing predispositional guilt and psychological problems such as somatic, obsessive-compulsive, anxious and paranoid symptoms in a sample of college students; however, in the same sample, chronic guilt was found to increase as a function of these symptoms and depression.

Studies that operationalize guilt as a multidimensional construct (e.g., Kugler & Jones, 1992; Quiles & Bybee, 1997; Zahn-Waxler et al., 1990) are important since they show that there are different aspects of guilt feeling that can be adaptive.
or maladaptive. The maladaptive aspect of guilt has been supported by numerous research ranging from non-clinical to clinical samples. The section below reviews research that report a positive correlation between guilt and problem behaviors from such diverse samples.

Empirical Support for Maladaptive Guilt

Some research examined the magnitude of guilt and shame in their relationship to indices of psychopathology in non-clinical adult samples as well as in student samples. For example, it has been shown that both guilt and shame are positively related to negative perfectionism (Fedewa, Burns, & Gomez, 2005) and psychopathological symptoms (e.g., depression, somaticization, obsessive-compulsiveness, psychoticism; paranoid ideation, anxiety, and anger) (Balkaya, 2002; Harder et al., 1992; Jones & Kugler, 1993; O'Connor, Berry, & Weiss, 1999; Sahin & Sahin, 1992). Furthermore, some of these studies (Harder et al., 1992; Jones & Kugler, 1993; O'Connor et al., 1999; Sahin & Sahin, 1992) reports that guilt remains to be significantly associated with problem behaviors even after its commonality with shame is partialled out.

Research that investigated the relationship between guilt, shame, and psychopathological symptoms comparing clinically referred and non-referred children (Ferguson et al., 2000) and adults (Ghatavati, Nicolson, MacDonald, Osher, & Levitt, 2002; Gulec, 2005; O'Connor, Berry, Weiss, Bush, & Sampson, 1997) supported the view that guilt might be maladaptive. For example, O'Connor et al. (1997) examined the relationship between interpersonal guilt (comprised of measures of survivor guilt, separation guilt, omnipotent guilt, and self-hate guilt), shame and psychological problems (depression, automatic self-related negative thoughts, optimism/pessimism) in a sample of clinically referred (drug addicts) and non-referred groups and found a positive link between guilt and depression in both samples. In Gulec’s study (2005), on the other hand, only anger was found to predict depressive symptoms in non-clinical samples with low and moderate levels of depressive symptoms; however, in the clinical sample (with major depression disorder), both guilt and shame were found to predict depressive symptoms in addition to anger. Ghatavi et al. (2002) also suggested that clinical sample (with current or past depression) and non-clinical sample differ in terms of proneness to guilt and shame; the latter group scoring higher in both measures.

In brief, except Gulec’s study (2005) which report insignificant correlations between guilt, shame and psychopathology, studies conducted with non-clinical populations revealed that both guilt and shame might be linked to psychopathology. There are also studies that report findings from clinical samples only (Alexander, Brewin, Vearnals, Wolff, & Leff, 1999; Kubany et al., 1996; Kubany et al., 1997). For example, Alexander et al. (1999) stated that, contrary to the findings from non-clinical studies that report a positive link between guilt and adaptive behavior,
and shame and maladaptive behavior (e.g., Tangney, Wagner, Fletcher et al., 1992),
guilt, but not shame, was found to be associated with depression in a clinical
sample of moderately and severely depressed patients.

Theoreticians (Kubany et al., 1997; Kubany & Watson, 2003) also highlight the
role of contextual factors, in severity and destructiveness of guilt by showing that
moderate to very high levels of guilt and self-blame are the common sequel of
many traumatic events (e.g., abuse, rape, combat, serious accidents, and death of
a loved one). Kubany et al. (1997) state that people who are exposed to traumatic
life events overestimate their responsibility in the event and thus engage in
excessive self-blame, which is qualitatively different and more maladaptive than
the commonplace guilt.

Other research (Barr, 2004; Boye et al., 2002; Ferguson et al., 2002) also
showed that guilt might be related to psychological problems under hard life
conditions. For example, Boye et al. (2002) found that guilt conscience (negative
self-judgment and evaluation of self in relation to moral inadequacy) was positively
related to distress, depression, and coping failure in the relatives of schizophrenic
patients.

Studies conducted with children also highlighted the context dependency of
destructiveness of guilt feeling (Ferguson et al., 2000; Zahn-Waxler et al., 1990). For
e.g., an investigation of adaptive and maladaptive guilt patterns in children
of depressed and non-depressed mothers revealed that children of non-depressed
mothers had a constructive guilt pattern associated with concern for others and
empathy, whereas children of depressed mothers displayed excessive levels of
responsibility and involvement (Zahn-Waxler et al., 1990). In Ferguson et al.’s
study (2000), shame, experienced in response to both ambiguous (where there
were no clear-cut norm violations) and unambiguous scenarios were found to be
related to the index of internalizing behavior problems (sum of depression, trait
anxiety and internalization scores) in self-reports of clinically referred and non-
referred 6-to-13-year-old children. Guilt, on the other hand, was found to be
associated with internalizing index in both groups only in ambiguous situation.
Overall, research cited in this section shows that guilt can be as maladaptive as
shame in relation to psychopathology under certain circumstances and that con-
textual factors play an important role in determining the nature of guilt responses.

The Concepts of Shame-fused and Shame-free Guilt

In the previous section, we reviewed studies reporting data gathered from non-
clinical to clinical samples, which supported the view that there was a darker side
to guilt. However, Tangney and Dearing (2004) and Tangney et al. (2007) argue
that studies that report a positive correlation between guilt and psychological
symptoms (Boye et al., 2002; Ghatavi et al., 2002; Harder, 1995; Jones & Kugler,
1993) do so since they fail to distinguish between guilt and shame. According to
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Tangney’s conceptualization (Tangney et al., 1995; Tangney et al., 2007) it is not guilt per se that is associated with psychological maladjustment but guilt fused with shame, and therefore the variance that is accounted for by guilt in maladjustment can be accounted for by shame. This conceptualization was also supported by some empirical research (Ferguson et al., 1999; Fontaine et al., 2001; Niendenthal et al., 1994; Orth et al., 2006; Pineles et al., 2006; Tangney, Wagner, Fletcher et al., 1992) cited in the previous section. However, it has also been challenged by some other research indicating a positive link between shame-free guilt and problem behaviors (Fedewa et al., 2005; Harder et al., 1992; Sahin & Sahin, 1992).

The formulation of guilt as “fused with shame” and as “free of shame” (Tangney et al., 1995) is criticized on theoretical grounds as well. For example, Kubany and Watson (2003) state that it is not possible to experience two emotions simultaneously though it may be possible to experience them in close contiguity. Harder (1995) is also critical of the concept of shame-fused guilt and the conceptualization of guilt as an adaptive emotion (Tangney et al., 1995). To put it in Harder’s (1995) own words:

... by this definition, when a person feels devaluated that person is primarily ashamed, even if the basis of his or her feeling is a bad deed condemned by an internal standard, without reference to any condemning other. Hence, any depressive experience involving a negative self-statement automatically becomes shame-fused and, consequently, only minimally a guilt-related symptom.

The same definitional distinction leads M. Lewis (1992, p. 101) to conclude that a student who feels it is his fault that his father died (because he did not visit during holiday) is experiencing shame, not guilt, and that a disturbed man who believes he brought on his mother’s severe headaches (because of his noise) is likewise experiencing shame, not guilt. These examples that have, in clinical circles, traditionally been considered strong guilt reactions, not shame-based phenomena. (pp. 381–382).

In line with this criticism, it has also been stated that there may be a continuum for guilt-proneness and that different levels of guilt might be related to different responses (e.g., low levels of guilt with externalizing behavior problems and high levels of guilt with irrational guilt and shame) (Eisenberg, 2000).

Tangney, Wagner and Gramzow (1992) leave room for the fact that guilt which can be found to be associated with maladjustment in a clinical sample may actually be qualitatively different from guilt they have measured in their studies. In fact, criticisms (Eisenberg, 2000; Harder, 1995; Kubany & Watson, 2003) directed to the concept of shame-free adaptive guilt call for phenomenological studies to discover the guilt experience. In a recent work, Tangney and Dearing (2004) admitted that mutability of the situation (i.e., to be able to make reparations and resolve guilt feeling) may be an important factor that gives rise to truly behavior-based reparative guilt reactions and unproductive guilt reactions (e.g., guilt felt in case of the death of a neglected grandparent). However, they also claim that there is still reasonable ground to adhere to the notion of shame-fused guilt.
In the first part of this paper, we reviewed research, reporting findings on the behavioral correlates of guilt and shame which overall point to a controversial picture regarding the maladaptive nature of guilt and compartmentalization of guilt and shame experiences as constructive and destructive, respectively. The following section will review research that highlights different aspects of guilt and shame experiences, considering the meaning and function of these self-conscious emotions in the cultural context.

A CROSS-CULTURAL CONSIDERATION OF THE CONCEPTUALIZATION OF GUILT AND SHAME AND THEIR BEHAVIORAL CORRELATES

It has been claimed that both guilt and shame have similar roles in all cultures in the sense that people often engage in normative behavior to refrain from experiencing feeling of either guilt or shame; hence, both emotions function as internalized moral control mechanisms in the social lives of cultures (Bedford & Hwang, 2003; Creighton, 1990; Hong, 2004).

Solomon (1997) states that the molding of emotions in a culture is not an unconscious shaping process; on the contrary, ideas, and philosophies of life embedded in the culture infuse into the cultivation of emotions. In the literature, the constructs of individualism and collectivism and the cultural self-construals (independent vs. interdependent self) have been used as heuristics to understand cross-cultural differences in emotion experiences (e.g., Kitayama, Markus, & Matsumoto, 1995; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Triandis, 1994). Although there is no firm consensus on the definition of the terms “individualism” and “collectivism” (Oyserman, Coon, & Kemmelmeier, 2002), individualism is usually characterized by the emphasis of culture on the independence of the individual, and priority of personal goals over the goals of the group or community. Collectivism, on the other hand, is characterized by the interdependence between members of the group, and priority of group goals over individual goals (Triandis, 1994). Both independence and interdependence are assumed to exist in each culture, but many Western cultures (particularly, Northern American) emphasize independence, whereas many non-Western cultures (particularly, Asian cultures) emphasize interdependence in congruence with their dominant ideology (i.e., individualism and collectivism, respectively) in the society (Kitayama et al., 1995). Accordingly, individualist cultures encourage the development of independent self whose behavior is organized primarily in reference to one’s own thoughts, feelings and actions, rather than in reference to those of others. Thus, in the “West”, the individual is considered as a self-sustained unit and the society as the collection of units. Cultures of collectivism, on the other hand, pave the way for the development of interdependent self whose behavior is mainly contingent on or organized by thoughts, feelings, and actions of the significant others in relationships. In these contexts, which are typically Eastern, the individual is considered to be a part of a connected
whole (e.g., family, society) and therefore boundaries of the self are conceived to encompass significant others (Kitayama et al., 1995; Markus & Kitayama, 1991).

It has also been argued that moral goods (e.g., justice, loyalty, liberty, sacrifice, and sanctity) are also related to cultural construals of self (Shweder, 2003). According to Shweder (2003), moral goods are prevalent in each culture but they cluster in three kinds of ethics, in each of which the self is positioned differently. For example, in the ethics of autonomy, the individual is the point of reference and the moral regulation aims to increase individual choice and personal liberty. In the ethics of community, the individual is part of a larger collective entity (e.g., family, society) and thus one’s role or position in life is essential to one’s identity; hence, priority is given to the collective entity and valued moral goods (such as loyalty, duty, honor, respectfulness, sacrifice, and self-control) are the ones that protect this collective entity. In the ethics of divinity, on the other hand, the self is considered to be a part of a spiritual entity and the regulating principle in this ethics is to refrain from doing anything that is incommensurate with divine order of things. Shweder (2003) also states that relative weights of these three ethics in a given culture influence the experience of emotions.

Bedford and Hwang (2003) give an argument that supports Shweder’s (2003) remarks and further elaborate on the function of feelings of guilt and shame in relation to different conceptualizations of self. According to Bedford and Hwang (2003), since the individual in individualist cultures is self-bounded and does not encompass others, he/she is responsible for his/her behavior primarily to him/herself. Therefore, in an individualist society, the feeling of guilt plays a central role in the social control mechanism. In other words, because guilt is associated with an internalized personal moral code, it is primarily this feeling that functions as a sanction when there is moral transgression in an individualist culture. On the contrary, in a collectivist context (e.g., the Chinese culture), where the self is developed as a relational one, shame originates from internalization of cultural moral standards, and so it is the shame feeling that mainly operates as the social control mechanism in case of transgression (Bedford & Hwang, 2003).

However, at this point Bedford and Hwang (2003) call attention to differences in experiences of shame in Western and Eastern contexts. In experiencing shame, the individual in the Western culture focuses on the self which is construed individually (i.e., a self that does not encompass others). Thus, shame is considered to be an inadequate and immature response to moral transgressions since it fails to motivate people to show concern to others. Moreover, since the self is defined as an autonomous and self-sustaining being in the Western context, moral transgression is mostly associated with the feeling of guilt, which is essentially related to responsibility and concern for others in that context. However, the self extends to family members and significant others in the Chinese and Japanese cultures. Therefore, the feeling of shame may not necessarily refer to a selfish concern, as it does in Western cultures, but can be connected to morality since there is already a concern for others in the very experience of shame feeling (Bedford & Hwang, 2003).
In support to these arguments, Bedford (2004) has shown empirically that experiences of guilt and shame tend to display variation across cultures. For example, in a phenomenological study, Bedford (2004) found that although Chinese experience of guilt is similar to that of American in the sense that guilt is aroused in case of moral transgression in both cultures, three types of guilt can be differentiated in Mandarin language, which is not possible in English. These three different types are the guilt felt in case of failure to uphold an obligation to another (nei jiù), in case of moral transgression (zui e gan), and of transgression of law (fan zuo gan). Bedford argues that the guilt feeling originating from failure to fulfill an obligation to another (nei jiù) is different from the Western sense of guilt in the sense that it involves personally defined obligation or responsibility towards others. For example, when patients request from a traditional doctor, who does not have the certificate to do surgery, to perform a medical operation, the doctor feels nei jiù, because he is incapable of doing this (Bedford, 2004).

Similarly, in Bedford’s study (2004) four types of shame (i.e., shame felt in case of loss of reputation (diu lian), failure to obtain an ideal (can kuì), personal failure (xiu kuì), and social failure (xiu chi)) were identified in the Mandarin language. Bedford (2004) argues that, unlike shame in Western experience, shame in Chinese experience is necessarily connected to a moral belief, since maintaining one’s identity in a social hierarchy is a duty that is connected to morality which is based on the view that social hierarchy is part of the cosmic order (Hwang, 2001). For example, a teacher who is reminded of her low job performance feels shame (xiu chi) because she is not good enough, so she harms her students. This form of shame (xiu chi), although resembling nei jiù which is a type of guilt, differs from it in the sense that the feeling in nei jiù (guilt) is towards the other person, and the feeling in xiu chi (shame) is towards the self, yet both has a component that involves concern for others (Bedford, 2004).

These findings have led to arguments (Bedford & Hwang, 2003; Bedford, 2004) that the Western conceptualization is inadequate and problematic when applied to non-Western cultures. The conceptualization of guilt as being a more mature emotion in contrast to shame, which is identified as a maladaptive feeling (Leith & Baumeister, 1998; Tangney, 2001; Tangney & Dearing, 2004) and childish regression (for a review, see Creighton, 1990) was criticized. Kitayama et al. (1995) raise a similar criticism regarding the maladaptive nature of shame experience in the Western context. Referring to Tangney, Wagner, Fletcher et al.’s (1992) study, which reports a transition from shame to anger, Kitayama et al. (1995) claim that such a transition can be a culturally scripted experience in which the script serves as a strategy for protecting the autonomy of the self against the threat that feeling shame creates in an individualist culture. Kitayama et al. (1995) state that because shame does not necessarily bring out a threat to the self in a collectivist context, it may not turn into internalized or externalized anger.

Fischer, Manstead and Mosquera (1999) pose similar comments and argue that perception of and judgments about self-conscious emotions are influenced by cultural variables, especially by how the self is defined. They conducted a study

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with samples from Spain and Holland, which they thought could be characterized as “honor based” and “individualist” cultures, respectively. This study revealed that Spanish people referred to positive beliefs to the experience of shame; they interpreted shame as an indication of honesty and vulnerability, so also thought that shame should be shared. On the other hand, Dutch people interpreted shame as a threat to self-esteem, and reported that it should be concealed. Fischer et al. (1999) stated that feeling shame in an honor culture is a social experience rather than a self-oriented individual experience.

Taken together, it appears that culture provides a script for what to feel in a given situation. Moreover, the appropriateness of the feeling is also defined by the culture.

Necessity of Ethnopsychological Knowledge in Conceptualizations of Emotions

From an ethnopsychological point of view, it has also been stated that experience of an emotion has its meaning in the cultural context where it was defined, and the local emotion narratives have to be studied to understand these meanings (Shweder, 1997; White, 1997). It is also stated (White, 1997) that in order to assess the nature of emotion concepts, we need to have more ethnopsychological information about the culturally organized ways of thinking about the self. Similar to other researchers (Bedford, 2004; Bedford & Hwang, 2003), Shweder (2003) and White (1997) criticized the fact that emotion conceptualizations in the literature were mainly based on the individualistic notion of self. This may not be a problem for basic emotions (e.g., happiness, sadness, anger, fear, surprise, disgust, and interest) which are shown to be experienced similarly across cultures (Triandis, 1994); however, complex moral-emotions such as guilt and shame need to be elaborated more via cross-cultural examinations.

In one of such ethnographic studies, White (1997) found that in Santa Isabel in Solomon Islands, the term *mamaja* which was translated into English as “shame” was fundamentally about social relations, not about the individual self. That is, *mamaja* is experienced when the person upsets a valued social relation. In addition, both parties have the feeling of shame under such circumstances. Depending on his linguistic studies, White (1997) also stated that shame was in close relation with the feeling of being sad in Santa Isabel. In this culture, shame is a moral transgression that requires reparation. This is contrary to the conceptualization of guilt and shame (e.g., Tangney, 1991, 1998, 2001, 2003) in which moral transgression and need for reparation are thought to be characteristics of the feeling of guilt. Breugelmans and Poortinga’s study (2006) also showed that there could be phenomenological differences in guilt and shame experiences across cultures. This study revealed that although Rarámuri Indians did not have a word for “guilt”, they distinguished between two clusters of emotion characteristics of guilt and shame. Moreover, the feeling of guilt, rather than shame, was associated with negative evaluations of self (e.g., feeling like a bad person, being angry at or
disappointed with oneself) in both rural Javanese and Rarámuri Indians. In interpreting the findings of their study, Breugelmans and Poortinga (2006, p. 1117) suggested that; “Guilt may be related to negative self-affect and shame may be related to constructive social behavior in non-Western groups, in contrast to what has been argued for these emotions in a Western context (e.g., Tangney & Dearing, 2002)”.

**DISCUSSION**

In the light of the literature reviewed above, let us go back to the question we asked as the title of the present paper: Are constructiveness and destructiveness essential features of guilt and shame, respectively?

As we explained before, the conceptualization of guilt and shame that we addressed in this paper is based on the claim that guilt experience targets the behavior in case of wrongdoing. As focusing on the behavior, guilt motivates the individual to repair the harm he/she caused. On the other hand, shame targets the self as the object of criticism, and such a focus leaves the individual helpless and inactive to take reparative actions since one cannot repair anything focusing on his/her self and worrying about defects of it. This line of argument assumes an inherent connection between guilt and constructiveness on the one hand, and shame and destructiveness on the other. However, from the assumption that guilt and shame focus on behavior and self respectively in evaluative thought, it does not logically follow that guilt experience necessarily encompass reparative concerns and shame experience inherently engross inactivity and withdrawal. At that point, one may need to turn to empirical data to see the extent such a connection—even though it is not theoretically well grounded—is supported empirically.

In this paper, we reviewed a variety of research examining the relationship between guilt and shame and constructive and destructive behaviors and we tried to elucidate possible answers given to the questions “Does guilt has only adaptive function?” and “Do guilt and shame relate exclusively to constructive and destructive behaviors respectively?” The studies we reviewed here provided controversial findings. Those findings, which confirm the dichotomy of adaptive-guilt versus maladaptive-shame, have been reported by the studies that used Tangney’s measure (TOSCA). However, as Kugler and Jones (1992) have commented, this scale measures moral standards; that is, in this scale, guilt items are already operationalized as measuring reparative actions and the concern for others.¹

Studies that challenge the dichotomous conceptualization of guilt and shame, in general, stress the need for a more contextual approach to guilt and shame feelings. The main suggestion is that both guilt and shame can be adaptive and destructive depending on the circumstances. Not only guilt and shame but also other emotions can be adaptive and maladaptive depending on the context and the function that specific emotion serves in an individual’s life in that given context (e.g., Campos et al., 1994).
With regard to guilt, what makes it constructive or destructive can also be related with its intensity and how the person perceives his/her involvement and responsibility in a specific situation (Kubany & Watson, 2003). In that sense, some researchers (e.g., Barr, 2004; Eisenberg, 2000; Harder, 1995; Kugler & Jones, 1992) uttered the need for the re-evaluation of conceptualization of guilt and the refinement of measurement tools. It has also been emphasized that findings are likely to be inconsistent until situational guilt based on situational empathy is differentiated from chronic guilt (Eisenberg, 2000).

In that sense, the multidimensional construction of guilt (Bybee & Quiles, 1998; Ferguson et al., 2000; Kubany et al., 1997; Kubany & Watson, 2003; Kugler & Jones, 1992; O’Connor et al., 1999; Zahn-Waxler et al., 1990) and shame would be much more illuminating to identify and examine their adaptive and maladaptive aspects.

Culture is one of the important contexts in which human behavior is molded. In that sense, the conceptual framework we addressed here faces with some problems in terms of its comprehensiveness to explain behavior in a non-Western context too. Researchers (Bedford, 2004; Bedford & Hwang, 2003; Kitayama et al., 1995; Shweder, 2003; White, 1997) claim that different cultures may provide different scripts for the understanding and experience of an emotion. They also stress that cross-cultural variation can mostly be seen in the case of self-conscious emotions such as guilt and shame, which are related to cultural self-construals (e.g., independent vs. relational selves).

This criticism is challenging and calls for explorative research in the area of social and cognitive aspects of the development of self-conscious emotions in diverse cultural groups. There is lack of information on the phenomenology of guilt and shame experiences and how they are related to adaptive and maladaptive behaviors in non-Western societies. The prevailing research findings (e.g., Bedford, 2004; Breugelman & Poortinga, 2006; Fischer et al., 1999; White, 1997) indicate cross-cultural variation in experience of guilt and shame. The remark on the construction of self in terms independency and independency (e.g., Bedford, 2004; Bedford & Hwang, 2003; Kitayama et al., 1995; Markus & Kitayama, 1997) sheds further light on the fact that shame may not be maladaptive in collectivist cultures.

We think that there is also the need to evaluate the dichotomous conceptualization of guilt and shame in terms of its theoretical and empirical fruitfulness. As reviewed in the first part of this paper, a branch of research (e.g., Dearing et al., 2005; Lutwak et al., 2001; Tangney, 1991; Tangney & Dearing, 2004; Tangney et al., 1995) has shown that shame is maladaptive, whereas guilt is adaptive. These findings are justified with the claim that self-focused evaluation leads to destructive responses, whereas behavior-focused evaluation leads to constructive responses (Tangney, 1990, 1991). However, guilt was categorized as a maladaptive feeling in earlier conceptualizations of guilt (Freud, 1923/1968) and as a feeling that could be both adaptive and maladaptive by some contemporary psychologists (e.g., Bybee & Quiles, 1998; Ferguson & Stegge, 1998; Ferguson, et al., 2000; Zahn-Waxler et al., 1990). In this conceptual framework, adaptive guilt corresponds
to “guilt” in Tangney’s (e.g., 1990) conceptualization. In conceptualizations of maladaptive guilt, on the other hand (e.g., Harder, 1995; Harder et al., 1992; Zahn-Waxler et al., 1990), guilt feeling is characterized by excessive self-condemnation, which corresponds to “shame” in Tangney’s conceptualization.

Tangney (e.g., 1995) insists on the idea that what is termed as “maladaptive guilt” in other studies is nothing but shame (Harder, 1995). From this standpoint, the debate regarding the distinction between guilt and shame in terms of their constructive and destructive nature seems to be a trivial one, since it inevitably boils down to a minor discussion on whether self-condemnation is a characteristic of “shame” or of “global guilt”. For heuristic purposes, there seems to be not much theoretical and practical value in labeling what is conceptualized as “global guilt” previously as “shame” now, and in insisting that guilt is exclusively a constructive emotion.

This is not to say that the distinction drawn between guilt and shame is meaningless and does not have any theoretical or empirical value. However, it seems that the dichotomous distinction that we addressed here does not provide good heuristics for understanding guilt and shame experiences. In that sense, it ends up being not comprehensive enough to explain the dynamics of maladaptive guilt (the existence of which is widely accepted by scholars) that might involve self-blame and regret, as well as adaptive shame, that might engross concern for others (Bedford, 2004) and function as a chance for self-improvement (Lindsay-Hartz, 1984; Lindsay-Hartz et al., 1995). In that connection, such a dichotomous conceptualization of guilt and shame has the potential danger of misguiding the empirical research.

We believe that context sensitive phenomenological study of guilt and shame feelings is required to rise above the controversy reviewed in the present paper.

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NOTE

However, the criticism that a research tool is constructed out of a certain conceptual framework and therefore, what is presented as a fact by a study is constrained by the conceptual and operational definitions it adopts is valid for the studies which disconfirm the dichotomous conceptualization of guilt and shame. In other words, one can generally claim that research tools are providing empirical confirmation for the conceptualization the researcher already has in his/her mind out of which he/she constructs these tools. At this point, scientific endeavors face with the difficult and age-old task of refraining from and eliminating the researcher or more generally paradigm bias. Whether a research paradigm fails to capture the true nature of the phenomena it describes or misrepresents it due to its conceptual bias is difficult to judge. However, we believe that the feedback provided by the scientific community on both theoretical and empirical grounds is a valuable source for any research paradigm to make a reality check and re-evaluate its theoretical basis as well as its research tools.

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