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Understanding the concept of shame in the Chinese Culture

Dr. Jing Zhang

Background

People feel ashamed when they perceive that someone is making a negative judgment about some activity or characteristic of theirs (Fischer & Tangney, 1995). Shame often occurs when a person becomes aware of him-/herself as having violated a moral standard, goal or social convention, and it leads typically to expressive behaviors of hiding the face, turning away, and escaping. Shame may be a highly painful state resulting in the wish to hide, disappear, or even die (H. Lewis, 1971; M. Lewis, 1992; Scheff & Retzinger, 1991; Tangney, 1995). Even though shame has been found to exist among all humans (Casimire & Schnegg, 2003), recent research on shame documents large cross-cultural differences in meaning, antecedents, actual experience of the shame state, and ensuing action tendencies. The prevalence and importance of shame in Chinese culture are evident. Due to traditional cultural values, Chinese Americans generally possess negative attitudes regarding being the subject of a CPS report, even though these services might have been effective in helping their families.

Chinese Face

面子



Shame in Chinese Culture

Confucianism conceptualizes shame as an emotion as well as a human capacity that directs the person inward for self-examination and motivates the person toward socially and morally desirable change. When one has done something wrong or socially inappropriate, admitting one's misconduct and desiring to change oneself is also believed to be an act of expiation requiring personal courage (Fung, in press; Wu & Lai, 1992). It is this very function and power of shame that Confucianism values and fosters.

The importance of shame in Chinese culture is associated with the dominant social and moral thought of Confucianism. According to Confucian teaching, life's highest purpose is seeking self-perfection, as represented by the concept of ren (仁), which means becoming the most genuine, most sincere, and most humane person one can be (Tu, 1979).

Shame state with self focus contained three further sets of meanings: (1) one's fear of losing face, (2) the feeling state after one's face has been lost, (3) guilt.

Reactions to shame with other-focus also consisted of three further sets of subcomponents at the same level: (4) disgrace, (5) shamelessness and its condemnation, (6) embarrassment.

Shame and Parenting

Wilson (1980; 1981) found the use of shaming to be a moral training technique, including ostracism or abandonment by the group for breaches of social norms.

Wilson also noted that shame is a group rather than an individual concern in China: People almost always belong to a closely integrated group on which their honor or shame is reflected.

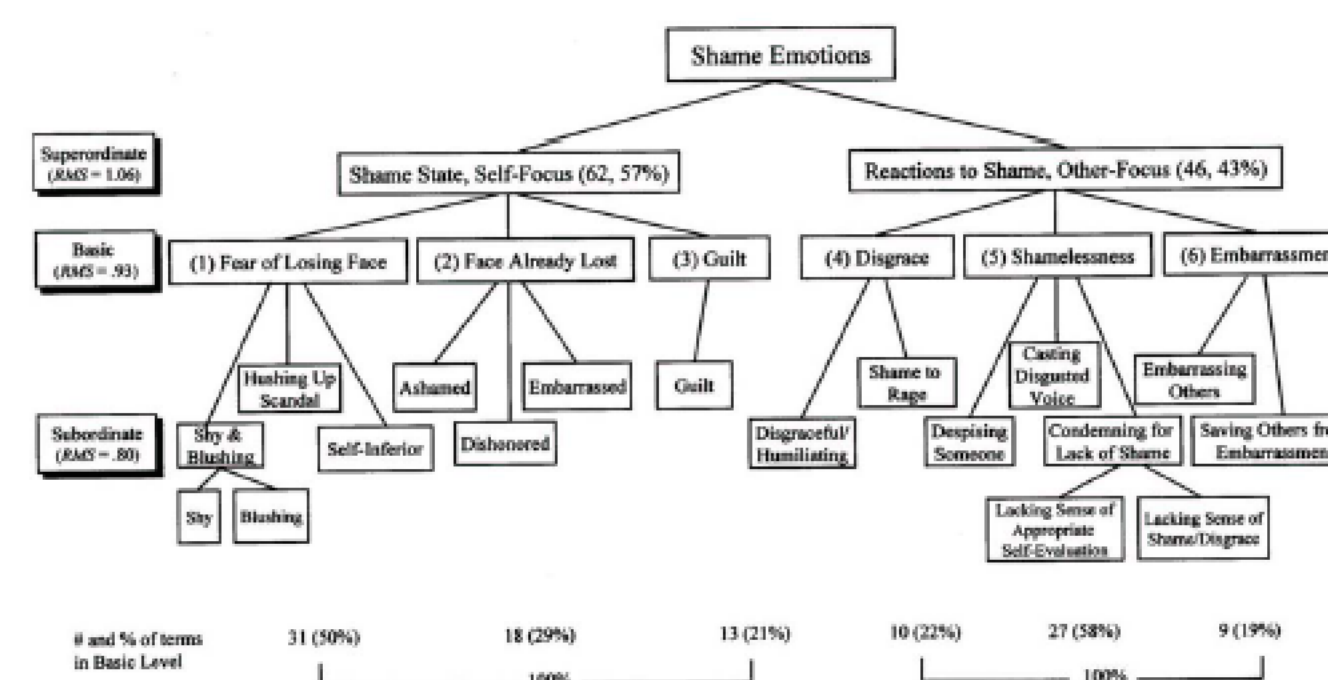
People's families and their wider community of friends, relatives, and superiors all have an interest in a member's advancements and setbacks.

When people achieve well, the entire community shares the honor. Likewise, when people fail, they do not simply lose their own face, but they shame all those around them.

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Figure 1. Hierarchy of Shame Terms



Li & Wang (2010)

