Abstract. China has been referred to as the shame-society by some social and behaviour scientists. The shame-related studies carried out in China are broadly reviewed. The subjects of the study are varied. Topics include shame and relevant factors; shame, stress and coping; shame, personality, and social anxiety; and shame and guilt. It has been indicated that cultural background plays an obvious and important role with the psychology of shame, and further research is needed concerning cultural factors.

Key words: shame, guilt, personality, coping, social anxiety, culture, China.

INTRODUCTION

Shame is a painful and devastating experience under which self is painfully scrutinized and negatively evaluated (Tangney, 1991). Although the experiences of feeling shame are found to exist in almost all cultures and societies, such subjective experience tends to contain different components under different cultural backgrounds. Traditional Eastern societies such as Japan and China which emphasize interpersonal relations and collectiveness are proposed to have a “shame culture” whereas many Western societies such as America and United Kingdom which values law and concerns rightfulness, are proposed to have a “guilt culture.” Although it has been referred to as the society of “shame culture,” the studies on shame in mainland China were nearly non-existent until the latter part of 1990s. The first study was carried out from the middle part of 1990s as a collaborative work by Chinese and British colleagues. They developed the Experience of Shame Scale (ESS) (Andrews et al., 2002; Qian et al., 2000). Soon after the ESS was developed, some studies on shame were conducted by Chinese colleagues.

SHAME-RELATED STUDIES

The research relevant to shame published in professional journals by Chinese colleagues can be divided into the following types:

Shame and relevant factors

This research was mainly correlation research in nature, investigating relations of shame with self-efficacy, self-esteem, parental rearing patterns, and mental health. The main findings were: (1) Parental rearing patterns could affect children’s shame-proneness; (2) Positive relation was found between scores of shame and those of factors of SCL-90, and negative correlations between scores of shame and those of self-efficacy and self-esteem (Qian et al., 1999; Zhu et al., 1999).
Shame, stress and coping

Some other studies focused on shame and coping styles and behaviour, and the results showed that comparing the low shame proneness’ behaviours of seeking social support, the high shame prone individuals were more likely to cope with stressors by withdrawing, hiding feelings, praying and waiting for change (Qian et al., 2003; Shi & Qian, 1998).

One experimental study asked shame-prone and non-shame-prone individuals under the high- and low-stress conditions to recognize affective words. Results showed that under low-stress conditions, there was no significant difference in the recognition performance between the two groups. However, under high-stress conditions, the hit rates of the high-shame group on shame affective words and depression affective words were both significantly higher than those of the low-shame group (Zhang & Qian, 2003).

Shame, personality, and social anxiety

Because shame might be an important influential factor of social anxiety, some studies aimed to explore the relationship between them, as well as personality.

Two studies found that, among the influential factors of social anxiety, shame has played an important role in forming social anxiety. Personality, such as neuroticism and introversion-extraversion, are also related to social anxiety symptoms in Chinese college students. As a result, theoretical models were established for the relationship of personality, shame and mental health, as well as social anxiety (Li et al., 2005; Li et al., 2005; Zhong et al., 2002; 2003).

The above results have been applied in a clinical study. An intervention of cognitive-behavioral group psychotherapy (CBT) for high scored social anxiety college students was carried out, in which shame proneness was considered as one element of treatment. Compared with the waiting-list group, CBT group got positive improvement in their social anxiousness, especially in interpersonal sensitivity and self confidence. The results proved that shame proneness intervention is effective on the improvement of social anxiety level (Li et al., 2006).

A further research which tried to explore cross-cultural differences of the effects of shame and personality on social anxiety was conducted among Chinese and American college students. The Structural Equation Model (SEM) results reveal a shame-mediating model, which is adaptive only in the Chinese sample. This suggests that shame is a mediator between Chinese personality and social anxiety. The shame factor did not play the same role in the American sample. This empirical study supports the hypothesis that shame has a more important effect on social anxiety in Chinese culture, compared to its effect on Americans (Zhong et al., in press).

Shame and guilt

Several comparative studies on the differences between shame and guilt among Chinese college students were conducted. The findings on strong, shameful situations mirrored data collected on American students, and strong differences remained for guilt situations. However, there were no significant differences between personal capabilities among shame and guilt groups, which differed from Western findings (Qian et al., 2001; Xie & Qian, 2000).

Xie (1998) found that ashamed participants were concerned about “self.” That is, one felt himself/herself was hurt during a given event; whereas in guilt eliciting situations, one was concerned about “other” the object one hurts or inflicts a negative outcome upon. Xie thus proposed a “hurt self versus hurt other” distinction. This distinction was confirmed by Qian and Qi’s study (2002). However, when the hypothesis was applied to both Chinese and American samples, it was only supported in Chinese samples, and not completely supported in American samples (Qian et al., submitted paper).
The studies reviewed above show the up to date development of studies on shame in China. It can be said that culture background obviously plays an important role with the shame components, and further research should be more concerned about cultural factors.

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