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Cultural Perspectives on Ingroups versus Outgroups and Shame Experiences

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Abstract

The concept of self varies across cultures: in some cultures, individuals tend to see themselves as interdependent on others, and clear distinction is made between in-groups and out-groups because in-group members are seen as part of the "BIG SELF". In other cultures individuals see themselves as independent and autonomous and have a less salient boundary between in-groups and out-groups. Little empirical work has been done on how such different cultural perspectives on in-groups, versus out-groups, shape emotional experiences. Although emotions are always internally experienced, these experiences often involve interpersonal and social interactions, and therefore how we think of ourselves in relation to others might influence our emotional reactions to interpersonal problems. The current study examines how such cultural differences based on the 'in-groups versus out-groups' distinction influences the attribution of *shame* experiences between Mainland Chinese and Americans. We examined self-reported descriptions and ratings of shame experiences. Results showed that Mainland Chinese and Americans differ in their attribution of *shame* antecedents: Mainland Chinese are less inclined to attribute the shame antecedents to close others, and they are more reluctant to ascribe negative traits/qualities to close others; no such bias towards in-groups is seen among Americans in the ascription of disagreeable acts or traits. The methodological implications of the current research are also discussed.

Introduction

Self-concept and shame

Shame is elicited by the reflection of the "real self" in comparison to the "ideal self", and thus is called "self-conscious emotion". Niedenthal *et al.* (2006) elaborate the process of "self-conscious emotions" as (1) formulating self-concept, and recognizing one's own identity; (2) being aware of self-evaluation and social comparison; and (3) internalizing social standards and norms. In other words, *shame* is the negative evaluation/ reflection of the self for the failure of meeting standards or norms (Lewis, 1974). *Shame* does not appear at birth and it only emerges in the process of acquiring social norms, conventions and expectations. Therefore, it might differ across cultures since social norms or expectations tend to be culture-bounded. Things considered appropriate in one culture might turn out to be not acceptable or desirable in another.

In cultures like China, where interdependent self-construal is prevalent, people are more likely to view themselves as interdependent in relation to others, and identify a "BIG SELF" inclusive of both self and close others (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Triandis, 1995). However, in cultures like the U.S., where independent self-construal is dominant, people tend to view themselves as self-dependent, idiosyncratic, and autonomous,

and they tend to have a less clear boundary between "in-group" and "out-group" members (Heine, 2001:895). The behavior towards in-group and out-group members is very different in cultures like China, much less different in cultures such as the U.S. (Triandis *et al.*, 1998).

Moreover, in collectivism-oriented cultures such as China, the concept of self is contextually and situationally dependent (Kondo, 1990). What is considered proper behavior varies with the social relationship and contexts (Bedford & Hwang, 2003; Triandis *et al.*, 1998). Thus right and wrong is socially defined and differs strikingly from western ethics in which justice and equality uniformly applies to each individual (Bedford & Hwang, 2003). For example, studies suggest that Americans are less likely to distinguish in-groups (family, friends, neighbors) from out-groups when they are attributing unpleasant events to one's personality traits in relation to Asians (Iyengar *et al.*, 1999; Markus & Kitayama, 1991). To be more specific, given the two imaginative situations where an actor had failed to stop and help a fellow student who had crashed his/her bicycle, Asians tend to attribute such acts to situational factors if the actor is stipulated to be a "friend" (such as the "friend" must be in a hurry and did not notice the accident) than if the actor is stipulated as a stranger. However, such a tendency toward taking into account situational constraints or social relations for negative acts is not as salient among Caucasian students.

It is therefore hypothesized that such cultural differences of self-concept might lead to different social emotional experiences such as *shame* in terms of attribution across cultures, such as Mainland China and the U.S. We are conscious of the fact that the distinction between "interdependent self-construal" versus "independent self-construal" cultures or "collectivism-oriented" versus "individualism-oriented" is a generalization and variations exist within cultures under each categories. However, China and the U.S. are best researched with China as a representative of the "interdependent self-construal" and "collectivism-oriented" cultures, and the U.S. as an representative of the "interdependent self-construal" and "individualism-oriented" cultures. Therefore, it would be reasonable to hypothesize that Mainland Chinese are more likely to hold strangers accountable for *shame* experiences rather than close family members because close persons are considered part of the "BIG SELF" and people may adjust their subjective judgment standards as they evaluate members from the in-groups. Such shifts seem less likely to occur among Americans. Furthermore, compared with Americans, Chinese might be more reluctant to attribute shame experiences to the intrinsic qualities or unpleasant traits of in-groups.

Rationale of the current study

The current study further investigates how different perspectives on in-groups versus out-groups in the contexts of China and the U.S., might lead to different *shame* experiences. We examined self-reported descriptions of personal *shame* experiences and how

they are construed. Specifically, we looked at how seemingly equivalent *shame* words in English and Chinese involve different types of shame antecedents and how these *shame* antecedents are evaluated in culture-specific manners.

The theoretical framework of the method is the Componential Approach that sees emotions as composed of various components, including eliciting events, evaluation of the situation, facial and motor expressions, physiological symptoms, action tendencies as well as regulatory measures. For example, a girl trips and falls in public. She might view the situation as embarrassing. She blushes and sweats. She almost wants to hide, but she decides to put on a fake smile and laugh it off as if nothing has happened.

Among all the components, the evaluation of situation plays a critical role, the importance of which has led to the development of a series of appraisal theories (Frijda, 1986; Scherer, 1984, 1987, 2001; Lazarus, 1991; Leventhal & Scherer, 1987; Ellsworth & Scherer, 2003). The appraisal/evaluation of situations includes various dimensions such as attribution, possible consequences, as well as types of standards violated (moral values, social etiquette, or mistakes), etc. The evaluation of a situation is vital to the emotional experience as it determines not only whether or not an emotion is elicited, but also the type of emotional experience elicited. Take "attribution" as an example, if the person who fell in public thought they fell due to lack of attention to where they were going, s/he might feel extremely *embarrassed*. However, if s/he believed they fell due to a wet floor, they might end up feeling *angry* and blame others who spilled things on the floor.

Two well-established questionnaires were developed from this approach, the GRID (GRID– lexical "grid") and ELIN (The Impact of Emotion language on International Negotiation) by Scherer's research group from the Swiss Center of Affective Science (for more detailed information of the two questionnaires, see Soriano *et al.*, 2013). GRID consists of 103 items, and ELIN consists of 94 items, both of which include items for each of the above component. For the GRID and ELIN task, participants are asked to rate the likelihood of each feature based on the meaning of the emotion word. For example, "when you hear/read this word (*e.g., ashamed*) in your language, how likely is it, as inferred from the meaning of the word, that the person undergoing the emotional experience felt degraded". GRID focuses more on the family level of emotion terms such as ANGER, GUILT, PRIDE and SHAME. ELIN more specifically focuses on the emotion terms within a particular emotion family, such as *embarrassed, ashamed, humiliated, and mortified* under the SHAME family.

Method

Overview

Native speakers of English and Chinese were asked to describe the situations where *shame* expressions are typically used based on their personal experiences, and how the situations are evaluated with regard to "attribution". The items central to "in-groups" and "out-groups" distinctions were modified from GRID and ELIN:

a. The event is caused by strangers

b. The event is caused by close persons

c. The event is caused by you yourself

d. The event is caused by an intrinsic quality of a stranger

e. The event is caused by an intrinsic quality of a close person (*e.g.* kin, a friend or a classmate)

Participants

Twenty bilingual participants (9 female, M_{age} = 27.1, SD=2.80, 5 from Mainland China, 2 from Taiwan, 1 from HongKong, 4 from Malaysia, and 8 from Singapore in order to control for regional difference) were recruited to identify translatable shame words from Chinese and English. Eighty-five Chinese native speakers from Mainland China (54 Male, M_{age}=21.47), and eighty-five English native speakers from the U.S. (46 Male, M_{age}=31.26) were recruited for the semantic rating task. Chinese native speakers were recruited from universities in Mainland China, and American participants were recruited through an on-line server M-Turk, the reliability of which has been supported by various studies (Berinsky *et al.*, 2012; Paolacci *et al.*, 2010).

Selection of shame words

First, 14 English and 13 Chinese shame words were selected from a free listing task in another study (Bai, 2014). The free listing task asked native speakers to freely list words that they consider to be typical expressions of *shame*. The free listing task involved 101 Chinese and English bilinguals from Singapore (79% female, M_{age} = 21.1 years old, SD= 2.67). The frequency of times each word is free listed has been shown to signal the protypicality of that expression (Fehr *et al.*, 1982: 253-254; Fehr & Russell, 1984:464; Zammuner, 1998). Then 20 bilingual participants were asked to list translation equivalents for each shame word in the two lists. The order of language was counterbalanced across bilingual participants. If they listed more than one candidate, they were asked to indicate the degree of similarity between the target word and each candidate on a scale from 1 "not similar" to 9 "extremely similar". They were also asked to list the frequency of daily use for both the target word and the candidate, on a scale of 0 to 5 (0- never, 1-occasionally, 3-fairly many times, 4- very often, 5-always).

The final 5 pairs were selected based on the agreement reached by the majority of participants: "awkward-尴尬 *gan1ga4*", "embarrassed-丢脸 *diu1lian3*", "ashamed-羞愧 *xiu1kui4*", "disgraced-羞耻*xiu1chi3*", and "humiliated-耻辱*chi3ru3*". Words in each pair were also comparable in terms of frequency of use (Table 1).

Results

The results show that the dimension of attribution seems to exhibit consistent differences between Mainland Chinese and Americans. Among all the five pairs of words,

Americans rated it more likely for the experience of awkward to be caused by close family members or friends than 尴尬 gan1ga4 for Mainland Chinese, $t(2,168)=3.31$, $p<.05$. Americans also rated it as more likely for the experiences of embarrassed to be caused by close persons than 丢脸 diu1lian3 for Mainland Chinese $t(2,168)=2.33$, $p<.05$. The trend is also found among ratings for humiliated and 耻辱 chi3ru3, ashamed and 羞耻 xiu1chi3, $t(2,168) = 2.64$, $p < .05$. Scenario descriptions also support that close persons are likely to be held responsible for Americans' shame experiences.

Table 1
Selected Translation Pairs

Word Pairs	English word Mean Frequency (SD)	Chinese word Mean Frequency (SD)
(1) *awkward-gan1ga4*	3.75 (*SD*= 1.17)	3.75 (*SD*= .71)
(2) *embarrassed- diu1lian3*	4.25 (*SD*= .89)	3.00 (*SD*= 1.41)
(3) *ashamed- xiu1kui4*	2.50 (*SD*= .54)	1.50 (*SD*= .54)
(4) *disgraced-xiu1chi3*	1.75(*SD*= .71)	1.50 (*SD*= .54)
(5) *humiliated-chi3ru3*	2.38(*SD*= .92)	1.63 (*SD*= .74)

*My granddaughter was misbehaving in a very bad way. I said something to her and was reprimanded by <u>my daughter</u>, her mother. (Participant 9 for **awkward**)*

*When I am near <u>my wife's family</u> they are very loud. I cannot get a word in edgewise. It makes me just kind of **awkwardly** stand around and listen to them spew nonsense (Participant 28).*

*<u>My wife</u> has a habit of speaking without thinking sometimes. Many times this puts me in a very awkward situation (Participant 36, for **awkward**)*

*<u>A friend</u> broke up with her partner, in a messy situation. I was friends with both of them. I was inviting friends on Facebook to a showing of a film. The ex-partner sent me a message complaining that she had not been invited but my friend had (Participant 17 for **embarrassed**).*

*When I was pregnant my <u>co-workers at work</u> were talking about how my feet smelled. (Participant 49, for **embarrassed**).*

*I was driving <u>my mother</u> to the airport and she asked me if I knew which road to take. I bragged that I never get lost and of course I knew how to get there. Well needless to say I took a wrong turn. When she laughed at my mistake I became very **embarrassed**. (Participant 57)*

*In a previous relationship, <u>my partner</u> cheated on me. Psychologically, I knew the situation was beyond my control, not my choice to make, and shouldn't reflect upon who I am. However, emotionally, I felt **humiliated** (Participant 79).*

*After bragging about my skill in sports, a kid beat me. Then <u>my friend</u> told everyone I know (Participant 85, for **humiliated**).*

I was with <u>a close friend</u>, and we kissed and hugged to greet, then he "goosed" me as I was walking

*away to my place in the group. His son was there. I don't know that anyone else noticed, but his son was there! And for all I knew everyone else saw it! (Participant 68, for **humiliated**)*

*Earlier in our relationship, <u>my now wife</u> had a habit of making deprecating comments at my expense in public. She would make the comment, I would laugh it off in public, then later we would argue about it. I felt she was making me look stupid, and also weak, in front of others, and I resented that (Participant 26 for **humiliated**)*

*One of my friends was making a fool out of themselves in a very crowded public place. I felt very **humiliated** because everyone was staring and giving us looks (Participant 14).*

*Although I've tried to show acceptance, rather than judgment, to my youngest sister, she just told me tonight during a family dinner that she feels strongly that I don't respect her and always push my opinions on her. I felt very upset. "**Ashamed**" could describe part of the mix of emotions that arose in response to this accusation (Participant 65).*

The listed situations above suggest that Americans are likely to attribute their shame experiences to close persons, such as partners, close friends, and family members. In the situation described below in particular, the participant vividly describes how her husband made her feel humiliated in public.

My husband and I were at the checkout stand in the grocery store. He was joking and laughing with the check out clerk, and told her about an event that had happened to him and me, changing some details to make me look incompetent in an area where I am quite competent, but he always thinks he's better than I am. He did it to be funny, not to be mean, but I felt disrespected. (Participant 7 for humiliated)

Among Mainland Chinese speakers however, situations in which close persons elicited their shame are not as commonly listed. The situations listed tend to be ascribed either to themselves or strangers. For example, in the following situations, strangers or people who are openly hostile were held responsible for eliciting the shame experiences.

坐公交车的是时候，有一个男人在车上打电话，一边打电话一边骂人，车里很安静，只有他一个人在骂人，这让站在他后面的我感到很尴尬。*While taking a bus, a man standing next to me was very loud in making a phone call. He was throwing those dirty words too. The bus was all quiet, and sitting next to him make me feel very* 尴尬*gan1ga4 (Participant 11 for* 尴尬 *gan1ga4).*

有人坐电梯放屁。*Someone farted while taking the lift. (Participant 32 for* 尴尬 *gan1ga4).*

被网友骂成"骚货"。*I once was called a whore by someone I met through the Internet. (Participant 20 for* 耻辱*chi3ru3).*

我上高中时，把校服剪短了，穿着网袜，搭配了一双绿色的鞋子（校服是红色的），被一个不是很喜欢我的老师在操场上当着几个讨厌我的学生面骂了我还踢了我，当时那几个讨厌我的女生笑的很开心，我当时觉得很耻辱。*While in high school, I wore a pair*

*of green shoes and my red school uniform. A teacher who does not like me very much pointed that out and even kicked me in front of some girls that I am not on good terms with. They were laughing and I felt really humiliated (Participant 43 for*耻辱*chi3ru3).*

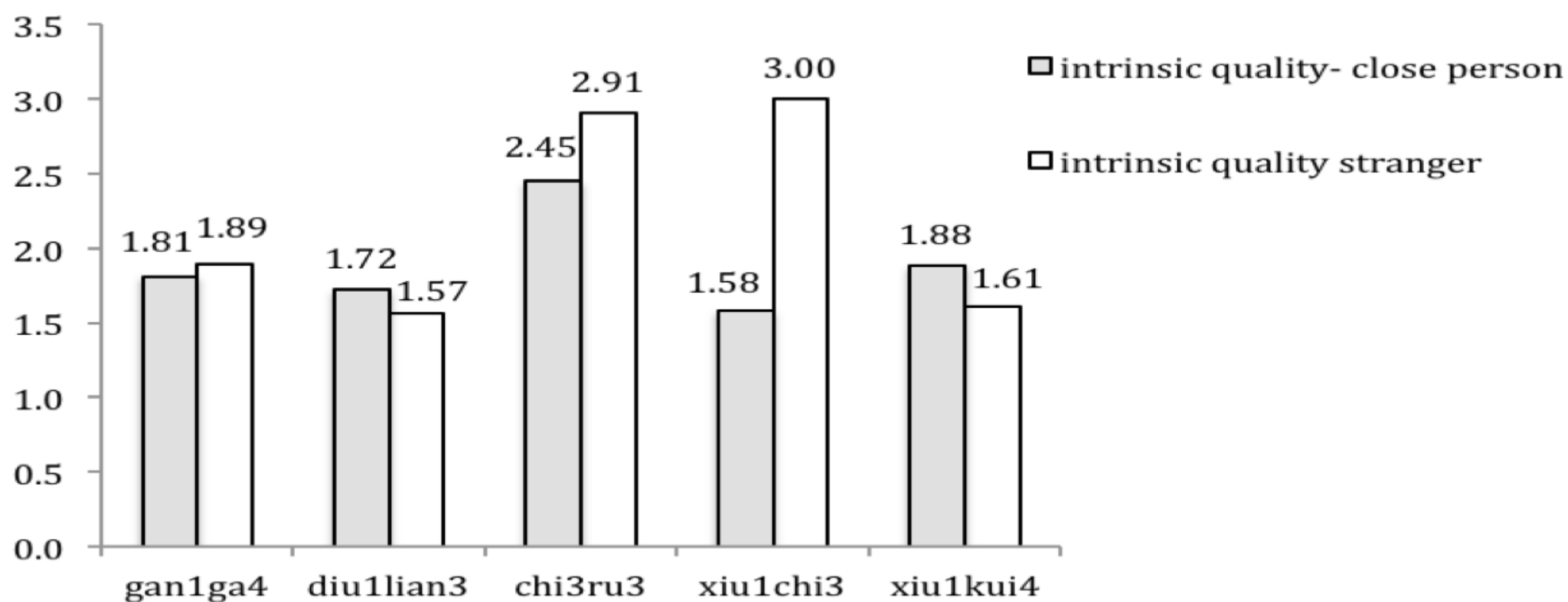
Figure1
Chinese Speakers' Ratings of Shame Experiences

The description of "group *shame*" for the threatening of the group image or reputation was also common among Mainland Chinese participants. For example, participant 11 felt丢脸 *diu1lian3* when foreign friends criticized Chinese academia for its corruption. Participant 67 felt耻辱 *chi3ru3* when people from another part of China insult people from his hometown for their bad reputation for lack of moral integrity. Among all the situations listed, situations related to耻辱 *chi3ru3* seem more likely to be used to describe "collective *shame*" than other shame words, as shown in the following examples.

外国朋友讨论中国学术界的黑暗和文章的没水平。*Chinese academia was criticized by some* foreign friends *for its corruption (Participant 11 for* 丢脸 *diu1lian3)*

在外地读书，被别人说我们那的人品格不好，感到耻辱 。*While studying in another part of China, locals commented that people from my hometown are notorious for being morally bad (Participant 67 for* 耻辱 *chi3ru3)*

同胞不顾场合不讲文明,却需要"中国"为之背黑锅... *Some Chinese people misbehaved in public and the whole nation was criticized for such behaviors (Participant 55 for* 耻辱*chi3ru3)*

有些中国的不法商家仿冒优质产品，欺骗消费者 我觉得作为中国人，这件事让我感觉到耻辱。*As a Chinese, I feel* 耻辱*chi3ru3 because some Chinese factories produced fake or lower quality products to cheat customers.*

We also tested whether Chinese are more likely to attribute *shame* experiences to strangers' intrinsic qualities than to those of close persons. Results (See Figure 1) showed a slight tendency of attributing to strangers' intrinsic qualities than to that of

close persons among the Mainland Chinese participants, particularly for experiences such as 耻辱chi3ru3, 羞耻xiu1chi3. For example, Participant 33 stated that s/he felt羞耻 xiu1chi3 for the bar girls who flirted/made out with male customers.
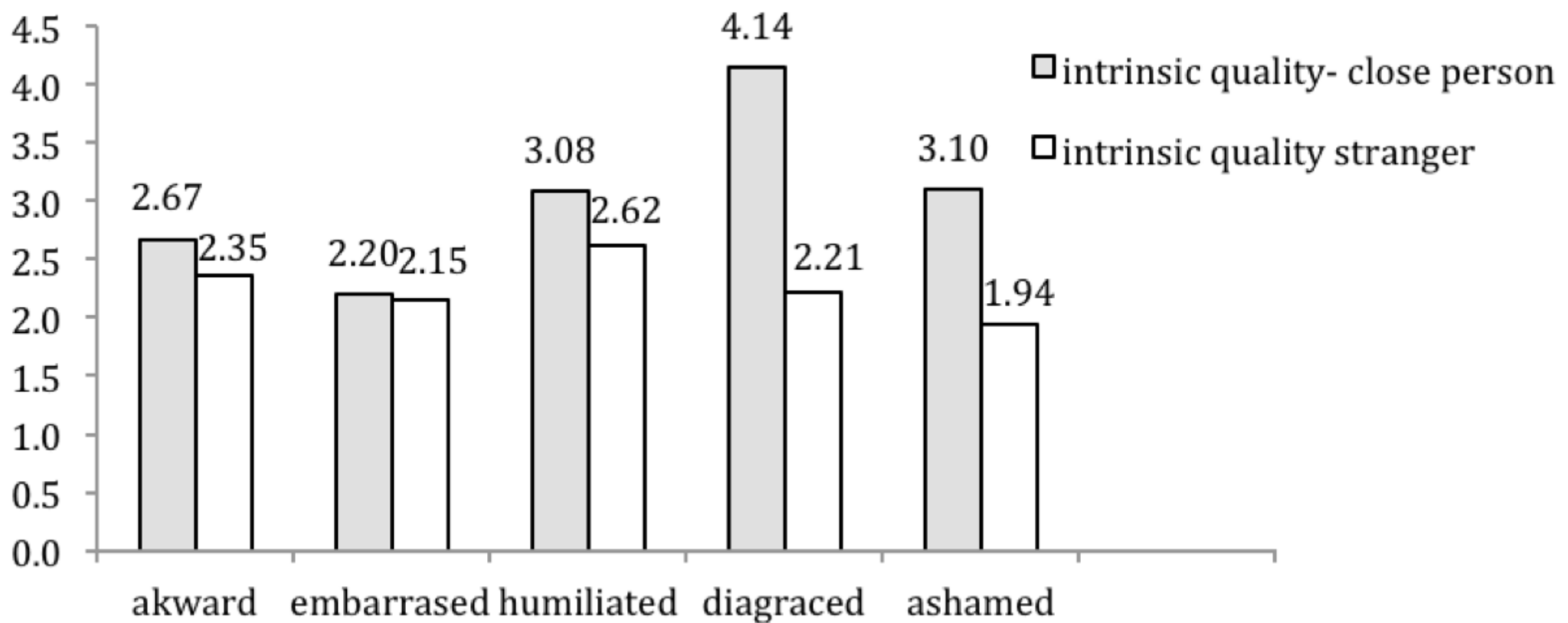

Figure 2
Chinese Speakers' Ratings of Shame Experiences

By contrast, Americans did not seem to be biased towards close persons when attributing *shame* experiences to the intrisinc qualities (See Figure 2). For example, Participant 81 stated "I told my daughter I was **ashamed** of her for pooping in her pants". *Disgraced* in particular, seems more likely to be attributed to close persons intrisinc qualities than the rest of the four shame words. In the situations listed below, significant others or people who are close are held accountable for participants' experience of disgrace.

*I felt **disgraced** when <u>someone significant in my life</u> became manipulative and belittled me, telling me I do not demonstrate love or care for him, when I told him I would be unable to purchase outdoor gear he had requested because it was too expensive (Participant 24).*

*A situation when I feel **disgraced** is when I shared a secret with <u>a friend of mine in confidentiality</u> and then she shared it with others. I was furious. Especially since she shared it at a party when there were many people aroun. I will not be sharing anything with her again.*

*I felt **disgraced** when <u>my girlfriend</u> yelled at me in the store and I didn't put her in her place. She didn't show me the respect I deserve and I never put her in her place (Participant 84).*

General Discussion

The current study shows that self-concept is important for self-conscious emotions such as *shame*. The results support the hypothesis that different self-concepts in Mainland China (*i.e.*, interdependent self-construal) and the U.S. (*i.e.*, independent self-construal) lead to different *shame* experiences in terms of attribution. To be more specific, Mainland Chinese make a clear distinction between "in-groups" and "out-groups".

Compared with strangers, Mainland Chinese participantss are less inclined to see close family members or friends as being responsible for eliciting feelings of worthlessness or inferiority that are closely related with *shame*, or for making them aware of their flaws, faults, weaknesses, or failures. Such a tendency of biasing close persons against strangers is not present among American speakers. Moreover, it is less likely for Mainland Chinese to ascribe *shame* antecedents to the traits or qualities of in-group members if the *shame* experience is caused by close persons. The findings support previous studies that Asians are more sensitive to social and situational constraints and people are relatively reluctant to assign negative traits to their close family members or friends to account for negative or disagreeable actions (Griffin & Roger, 1993; Iyengar *et al.*, 1999). The study provides a working template for the comparison of self-conscious emotions such as pride and guilt across cultures where the self-concept might differ.

Conclusions

Although cross-cultural differences regarding self-concept and in-groups versus out-groups has been vastly researched, limited research has been done on how these perspectives shape emotional experiences. The study fills the gap by exploring such correlations. Our findings demonstrate that people with culturally distinctive self-concepts tend to present culture-specific attribution patterns for *shame* experiences. In cultures where self identity is inseparable from those of other people, interdependence or connectedness to others is highlighted, and people emphasize the sense of "WE" or "US", they thus are less likely to attribute their *shame* experiences to close others. They are also less inclined to ascribe *shame* antecedents (*i.e.*, undesirable wrongdoings) to the qualities or traits of close persons than to strangers. However, in cultures where self identity is defined as separate from other people and the sense of "ME" or "I" is highlighted, there is no such clear distinction between in-groups or out-groups. Whether such attribution patterns also apply to other emotional experiences and to what extent the attribution is linked with the valence of emotions remain to be explored by future research.

In addition, self-report provided information on how experiences are subjectively construed by people, and how individuals with different cultural backgrounds might evaluate the similar antecedent in varied ways. The use of descriptions, incorporated with ratings, not only allows participants to both report the range of emotions they experience to the fullest, but also to provide quantitative data pertaining to the research questions of interest. The study also represents a significant attempt at providing a working template for cross-cultural studies of self-conscious emotions.

Author note

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