

Analysis on Guilt and Shame Induction in Chinese Parenting

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Abstract. Guilt and shame induction are two distinct forms of parenting methods commonly seen in the traditional Chinese parenting culture. The present research analyzed the findings of experiments included in two previous studies related to the effects of guilt and shame induction on the psychological well-being of Chinese children. Additionally, this paper draws reference from the statistical models of another study to focus specifically on how guilt induction is perceived by the children's mind. The results indicated significant correlation between shame induction and the undermining of child well-being and further infers theoretically that guilt induction is also possible to yield similar results.

Keywords: Guilt induction; Shame induction; Child psychological well-being.

1. Analysis on Guilt and Shame Induction in Parenting

Disciplinary methods related with parenting and the psychological growth of children have been subject to much research and analyses in the past years. Namely, the parenting methods of guilt and shame induction, both of which are popular and historically prevalent in the traditional cultural setting of China (Fung & Lau, 2012; Patrick & Gibbs, 2012), have received great attention lately. According to Smetana et al. (2021) and Fang et al. (2021), guilt and shame induction are defined as the parents' actions of invoking the child's empathy-related negative emotions through social comparison, sharing responsibilities, or plain denigration. Guilt and shame induction can further be divided into act-focused guilt and shame induction and parent-focused guilt and shame induction; act-focused guilt and shame induction refers to guilt and shame inductions used to address the negative consequences of a particular act (Hoffman, 2000), while parent-focused guilt and shame induction involves the emotional attachment between the parent and the child as a tool of guilt and shaming (Barber et al., 2005; Fung, 1999; Rote & Smetana, 2017). Guilt and shame induction are especially focused on by multiple recent studies, all of which seek to articulate on how these methods impact the psychological well-being and academic achievement of children (Fang et al., 2021; Rote et al., 2021; Smetana et al., 2021). The aim of this article is mainly to provide an analysis on the findings made by Fang et al. (2021), Rote et al. (2021) and Smetana et al. (2021) on the influence of child's psychological health by guilt and shame induction and to formulate a conclusion on the effectiveness and appropriateness of these two methods in parenting in the Chinese cultural environment.

1.1 Analyses of Articles Associated with Guilt and Shame Induction

Fang et al. (2021) and Smetana et al. (2021) are the main sources focused on the study of guilt and shame induction, as they include experiments directly connected with the effects of these methods on child well-being. In addition, Rote et al. (2021) provides supporting evidence that evaluates the perception of adolescents on guilt and shame imposed by the mother. Each of these articles will be analyzed individually in this section, with specific focuses on the experiments presented in Fang et al. (2021) and Smetana et al. (2021) and the statistical figures in Rote et al. (2021) on the relationship between maternal negativity and guilt and shame.

1.2 Analysis on the Experiment Conducted by Fang et al. (2021)

In this article, Fang et al. (2021) conducted a longitudinal experiment on how different ways of psychological control in the Chinese parenting culture impact the well-being and academic abilities of children. Two groups of elementary school (and later middle school) students, 642 in total, were taken from the city of Nanjing and a village in Shandong Province, with each group representing typical urban and rural children. From 2016 to 2018, the participants were given surveys that inquire

upon their psychological well-being and academic motivations in four different occasions, while their grades were provided by the schools. Five categories of psychological controls were evaluated in the survey: harsh psychological control, love withdrawal, social comparison shame, shared shame, and parental relationship-oriented guilt induction. Results from the experiment shows that, in both urban and rural settings, social comparison shame is most evident in decreasing the academic autonomy of adolescents and is harmful to their psychological well-being, despite not having severe effects compared to harsh psychological control and love withdrawal; that shared shame and parental relationship-oriented guilt induction shows no significant negative effect in either category; and that the hypothesis of social comparison shame being harmful in the urban sample but beneficial in rural sample is also refuted (Fang et al., 2021). This article suggests that, as a parenting method, shame induction is related to the undermining of children’s psychological health if social comparison is involved in the process, but parent-focused guilt and shame induction does not prove to be harmful in either urban or rural Chinese settings.

1.3 Analysis on the Experiment Conducted by Smetana et al. (2021)

Smetana et al. (2021) performed another distinctive, concurrent experiment on the effects of guilt and shame induction, which focuses more specifically on the evaluation of Hong Kong youths on maternal guilt and shame induction. Smetana et al. formed the sample groups with 206 Hong Kong students from schools in lower and lower-middle class city areas, in which the local culture is considered more traditionally Chinese than modern or Western (Smetana et al., 2021), including fourth grade children and eighth grade adolescents. The participants were asked to evaluate the parenting methods of act-focused guilt induction, parent-focused guilt induction, social comparison shaming, and denigration based on two real-life simulation questions, referring respectively to moral and academic situations. Compared to that of Fang et al. (2021), the results of Smetana et al. (2021) are much more detailed; nevertheless, the outcomes are mostly similar. Both children and adolescents viewed act-focused guilt induction as most appropriate, most effective, containing most love and concern, and invoking most positive feelings in both moral and academic settings, followed by parent-focused guilt induction and then by social comparison, as the scores of evaluations gradually decrease; lastly, denigration was viewed universally as the worst particular parenting method of the four (Smetana et al., 2021). Despite being divided into smaller subgroups and analyzed individually, Smetana et al. (2021) still provides clear information that associates guilt and shame induction with Chinese child well-being: both forms of guilt induction are proven to be relatively beneficial psychologically and academically, while social comparison shaming and degradation are generally met with negative responses and considered harmful.

1.4 Analysis on the Graphs Presented by Rote et al.

While the focus of Rote et al. (2021) is set on the negative perceptions of adolescents with internalizing psychological problems in relation with maternal communication and parenting methods, the article provides several statistical figures that provide unique information related to guilt induction, namely Figure 1 and Figure 2 (presented as Figure 3 by Rote et al.).

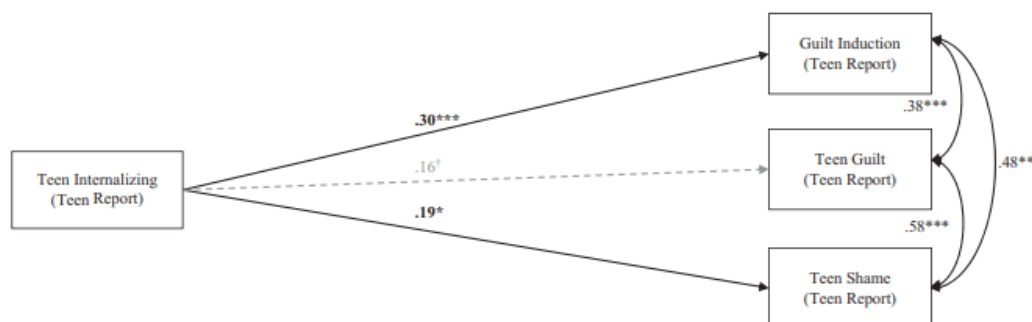


Fig. 1 Path model showing relationships between adolescents internalizing symptoms and teen-reported guilt, shame, and guilt induction.

Figure 1 is a path model that illustrates connections between internalizing symptoms in the adolescent sample group and the reactions related to guilt and shame in the experiment procedure; the figure shows significant correlations of guilt induction to the test subjects' feeling of guilt and a similar correlation between guilt and shame. These significant correlations indicating that guilt induction is indeed effective of creating guilt in the mind of teenagers.

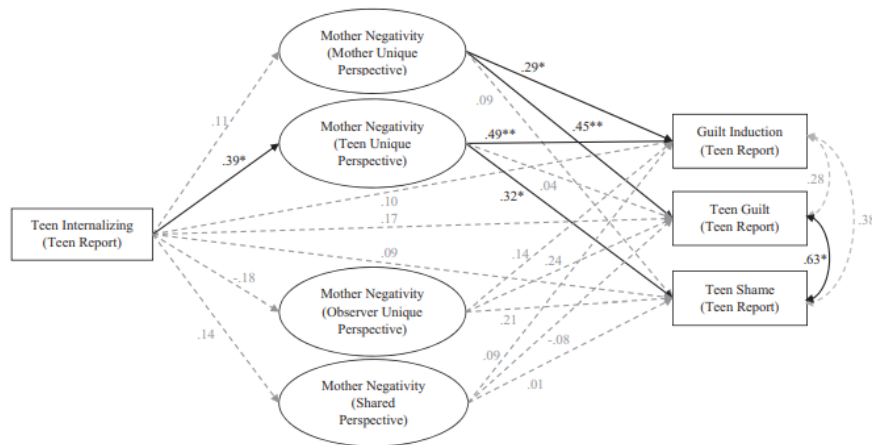


Fig. 2 Structural equation model of views of maternal negativity from different subgroups and teen-reported guilt, shame, and guilt induction

Figure 2 (shown as Figure 3 in Rote et al. and as presented here) shows an expanded structural model based on the views of maternal negativity by different subgroups in the sample and their relations to guilt induction and perceived guilt and shame. A significant correlation between the teens' perception of mother negativity and guilt induction can be observed, meaning that the teens do perceive guilt induction as a form of negative action (Rote et al. 2021). These figures, while seemingly unrelated to guilt and shame induction in the Chinese setting, actually provide a unique insight into the basis of these parenting methods: they prove that guilt induction is perceived as a negative action by the children, and further validates the finding in Figure 1 of guilt induction being active in stemming negative emotions.

2. Discussion and Critique

In the traditional Chinese culture, guilt and shame induction are commonly viewed as acceptable and sometimes beneficial parenting methods (Smetana et al., 2021); they are viewed as distinct features of the traditional Chinese family culture (Shek & Sun, 2014), and parents tend to utilize them to educate their children in accordance with the interdependent and family-focused expectations prevalent in the society (Fang et al. 2021; Rudy et al., 2014; Yu et al., 2019). However, recent studies have produced results that poses several doubts against the conventional cultural perception of these methods. The experiment conducted by Fang et al. (2021) discovered that, while parent-focused guilt induction and shared shame do not prove to be significantly harmful psychologically to Chinese urban or rural children, social comparison shaming does undermine their well-being and is especially harmful to their academic autonomy. Smetana et al. (2021) also found out that both act-focused and parent-focused guilt induction are seen by children to be more effective and appropriate, while social comparison and denigration shaming are clearly considered ineffective and inappropriate. From the results of these two experiments, it is possible to conclude that shame induction is harmful to the psychological well-being of Chinese children, but guilt induction is evidently beneficial; however, the figures included Rote et al. (2021) indicate that guilt induction is still perceived as a harmful action by children, and that it is effective in invoking negative emotions. This finding thus moves guilt induction closer to the boundaries of harsh psychological control identified by Fang et al., which deals significant harm to children's well-being and academic performance (2021). In other words, guilt induction should not be viewed as a harmless or even beneficial practice completely; while Fang

et al. (2021) and Smetana et al. (2021) did not evaluate it as harmful, it is still possible to make children feel negatively about themselves.

The three articles discussed previously sufficiently demonstrate the effects of guilt and shame induction in the Chinese parenting culture; however, there exist multiple limitations in the studies of Fang et al. (2021) and Smetana et al. (2021): neither experiment involved opinions from parents on their ways of parenting and focuses mainly on children ranging from 8 to 14 years old, who still have limited perceptions of their psychological well-being. The inclusion of parents' opinions would further strengthen the credibility of the results, as they can be used to compare with those of the children. In addition, the experiment of Smetana et al. (2021) only features 206 elementary school and middle school students from a particular district of Hong Kong. While the small sample size might be useful in formulating a united, significant result, it also serves as a main limiting factor of the experiment, as the sample size might be too small to be representative of the opinion of children in setting of Hong Kong, and sample size similar to that of Fang et al. would be more appropriate.

3. Conclusion

Guilt and shame induction are two of the most prevalent traditional Chinese parenting methods in the present age, and debates on whether they are beneficial in a traditional Chinese cultural environment persists (Fung & Chen, 2001; Fung et al., 2012). Through analyses on the findings of Fang et al. (2021) and Smetana et al. (2021) in their experiments on relevant topics, and with support from the statistical figures of Rote et al. (2021), it can be reasonably inferred that shame induction is proven to be significantly harmful to the psychological well-being of children. On the other hand, while no evidence is found about the negative effects of guilt induction, it should still be treated with caution, as it is perceived by children as a negative method that invokes similarly negative emotions. More study in these particular parenting models is still needed to further analyze how they should be compared to universal harmful parenting methods like harsh psychological control and love withdrawal, and further research is essential to inquire upon the actual effect of guilt induction in particular; nevertheless, the studies presented in this paper provide a unique and reasonable insight into traditional Chinese parenting methods that are still insufficiently discussed.

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