

# Guilt, Empathy, Altruism and Depression among Mainland Chinese, Asian- and European-Americans



Yanlin Li<sup>a</sup>, Kevin W. Choi<sup>a</sup>, David J. Stiver<sup>b</sup>, Jack W. Berry<sup>c</sup>, Rachna Rangan<sup>a</sup>, Toni Li<sup>a</sup>, Lynn E O’Connor<sup>a</sup>  
*a The Wright Institute, b Graduate Theological Union, c Samford University*

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EMOTIONS, PERSONALITY  
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## Abstract

In an online anonymous survey, we compared 46 Chinese from Mainland China to 82 Asian Americans and 258 European Americans on measures of empathy, empathy-based guilt, compassionate altruism, depression, and the Big Five personality factors. When compared to Asian Americans and European Americans, the Chinese scored significantly lower in Survivor Guilt, Empathic Concern and Perspective-Taking, Depression and Compassionate Altruism Towards Friends. Asian Americans were significantly higher in Depression than the other groups. Implications of the findings are discussed.

## Introduction

This cross-cultural study investigates empathy-based guilt, empathy, altruism, and depression in a diverse adult population. Empathy-based guilt is defined as an often difficult emotion that arises from the belief that one has harmed another. Prior research has suggested that empathy-based guilt is significantly correlated both with depression and, in some cases, altruistic behaviors. In our previous cross-cultural studies, we found that Separation Guilt predicted altruistic behavior toward family members among Asian Americans. In contrast, Survivor Guilt, Omnipotent Guilt, and Separation Guilt all predicted altruistic behavior for European Americans.

In this study, Chinese participants from Mainland China were compared to a sample of Asian Americans and European Americans to investigate whether ethnic identification, cultural values, and immigration affect empathy, empathy-based guilt, depression and altruistic behaviors. Similar to other Asian cultures, the Chinese place cultural emphasis on interdependence and collectivistic principles such as filial piety, possibly derived from Confucianism. Yet, as China continues to implement social, political, educational, and economic reforms, the role of empathy-based guilt in depression and altruistic behaviors may also shift within the Chinese population.

## Methods

We began by translating the measures used into simplified Chinese (简体字), officially used in mainland China. The translation involved several stages, including an initial translation by two bilingual researchers, followed by a back translation by a professional translator. In the next step researchers who developed several of the measures reviewed the back translation for meaning, to assure that there was accuracy. Revisions were made when items did not accurately reflect the meaning of the original English items. After the team was satisfied with the translation, data collection began.



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## Methods (continued)

Participants were obtained by way of announcements on listservs, websites, and bulletin boards in cultural centers at Canton, China and the United States. They were directed to the ongoing online anonymous study on culture and emotions underway on the website of The Emotions, Personality, and Altruism Research Group (EPARG) at the Wright Institute. Standard measures listed below along with a demographic questionnaire were included. There were 348 adult participants included in the study as described in **Table 1**.

**INSTRUMENTS:**  
**Interpersonal Guilt Questionnaire-67** (IGQ-67; O’Connor, Berry, Weiss, Bush & Sampson, 1997). The IGQ-67 is a 67-item measure, using Likert scales to assess empathy-based guilt. Three subscales of the IGQ-67 were used: “Survivor Guilt” is characterized by the belief that being successful or happy will make others feel inadequate simply by comparison (e.g., “It makes me very uncomfortable to receive better treatment than the people I am with”). “Separation Guilt” is characterized by the belief that if a person separates, leads his or her own life, or differs from loved ones in some way, he or she will cause loved ones to suffer (e.g. “I am reluctant to express an opinion that is different from the opinions held by my family or friends”). “Omnipotent Responsibility Guilt” is characterized by the belief that one is responsible for the happiness and well being of others (e.g. “I often find myself doing what someone else wants me to do, rather than doing what I would most enjoy”).

**Compassionate Altruism Scale** (CAS; Berry & O’Connor, 2002). The CAS is a 45-item instrument, derived from a measure of social support (Vaux, Riedel, & Stewart, 1987). Instead of measuring how much social support a person received, the CAS measures how much support someone tends to extend to others. Respondents indicate how frequently they perform acts of altruism for family members, friends, and strangers in a variety of social situations. Items from this questionnaire include how often the participant “gave money for an indefinite amount of time” and “helped them think about a problem.”

**Interpersonal Reactivity Index** (IRI; Davis, 1980): The IRI is a 28-item self-report instrument measuring distinct categories of empathy. Perspective taking is the ability to identify with, or understand cognitively the situation experienced by another person. Empathic Concern is the degree of concern a person tends to feel on witnessing difficult or unpleasant experiences occurring to another person. Personal Distress is the degree of distress a person is likely to feel, upon witnessing difficulties experienced by another person.

**The Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale** (CESD; Radloff, 1977) is a widely-used 20-item self-report instrument, with responses on a Likert scale ranging from 1 to 4, and total scores ranging from 0 to 60. The cut off score for depression is equal to or greater than 16, which indicates at least a mild depression, though many clinicians mark a mild depression staring well below 16.

**Brief Big Five Inventory** (BFI; John, 1990) is a 44-item self-report inventory for assessing five personality traits: openness to experience, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism.

Table 1. Demographics

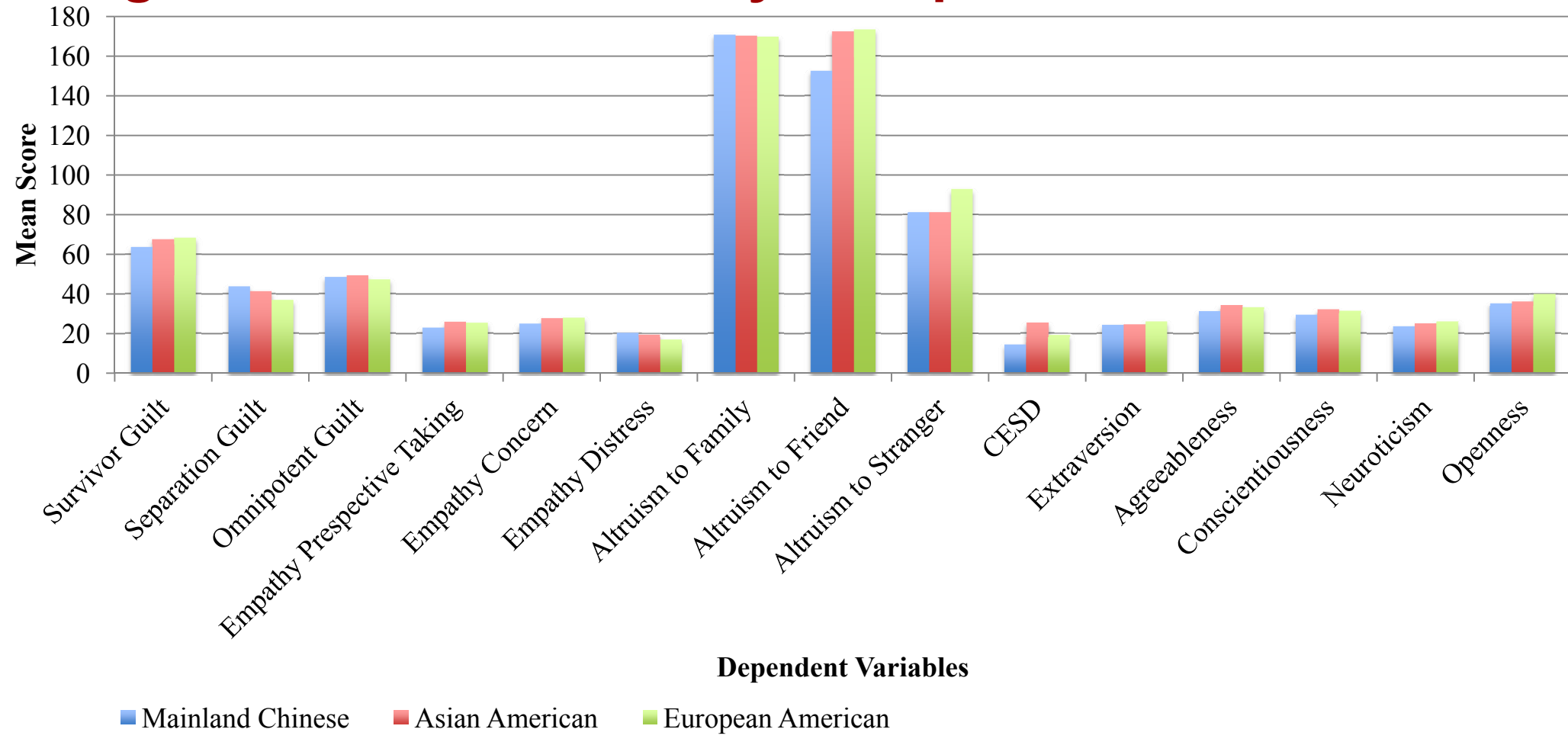
		Mainland Chinese		Asian American		European American	
		N	%	N	%	N	%
Gender	Female	24	52.2	67	81.7	226	87.6
	Male	19	41.3	15	18.3	31	12.0
	Did Not State	3	6.5	0	0	1	.4
Education	8th Grade or Below	0	0	0	0	2	.8
	Some High School	1	2.2	1	1.2	2	.8
	High School	5	10.9	3	3.7	6	2.3
	Some College	7	15.2	22	26.8	62	24.0
	A.A./A.S.	10	21.7	2	2.4	17	6.6
	B.A./B.S.	14	30.4	31	37.8	82	31.8
	Some Graduate School	3	6.5	10	12.2	23	8.9
	M.A./M.S./M.B.A.	2	4.3	7	8.5	45	17.4
	Ph.D./Psy.D./M.D.	0	0	4	4.9	7	2.7
	J.D.	0	0	1	1.2	1	.4
Religion	Did Not State	4	8.7	0	0	1	.4
	Other	0	0	1	1.2	10	3.9
	Buddhist	9	19.6	11	13.4	47	18.2
	Catholic	0	0	36	43.9	68	26.4
	Jewish	0	0	0	0	34	13.2
	Muslim	0	0	0	0	0	0
	None	30	65.2	11	13.4	47	18.2
	Other	3	6.5	3	3.7	27	10.5
	Protestant	0	0	19	23.2	76	29.5

Table 2. ANOVA on Dependent Variables

Variable	Sum of Squares	Mean Square	F	Significance
Survivor Guilt	815.596	407.798	3.344	.036*
Separation Guilt	2633.424	1316.712	18.878	.000**
Omnipotent Guilt	301.407	150.703	2.672	.070
Empathy Perspective Taking	251.379	125.690	5.525	.004**
Empathy Concern	354.943	177.472	9.894	.000**
Empathy Distress	675.163	337.581	12.170	.000**
Altruism to Family	40.803	20.401	.020	.980
Altruism to Friend	15420.477	7710.239	9.885	.000**
Altruism to Stranger	11070.420	5535.210	6.174	.002**
CESD Total	1766.515	883.258	6.910	.002**
Extraversion	186.516	93.258	2.057	.129
Agreeableness	264.750	132.375	4.599	.011*
Conscientiousness	206.649	103.325	2.552	.079
Neuroticism	213.287	106.643	2.613	.075
Openness	1419.355	709.678	19.489	.000**

Note. \* Significant at p < .05 level. \*\* Significant at p < .01 level

Figure 1. Mean Scores By Groups



## Results

One-factor analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to compare the three samples. The Mainland Chinese sample scored significantly lower (all p<.05) than both the European- and Asian- American samples (which did not differ from each other) on survivor guilt, empathic concern, perspective taking, altruism to friends, and agreeableness.

As expected, both the Mainland Chinese sample and the Asian-American sample (which did not differ from each other) scored significantly higher on separation guilt than the European-American sample (both p<.05). The Asian-American sample also scored significantly higher on omnipotent guilt in comparison to European-American sample (p=.025). Furthermore, the Mainland Chinese sample endorsed significantly fewer items on the CESD measures than the Asian-American sample (p=.002) and marginally less than the European-American sample (p=.067). The European-American sample also reported significantly less depressive symptoms than the Asian-American sample (p<.05).

There were no statistical significances on overall *F*-tests for group differences in altruism to family, omnipotent responsibility, or the Big Five traits of extraversion, conscientiousness, or neuroticism.

Since the three samples differed in gender composition (with a higher percentage of males in the Mainland Chinese sample), we used an analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) to compare the groups on the measures while adjusting for gender. The covariate-adjusted comparisons did not change any of the substantive findings.

## Discussion

Future studies of the Mainland Chinese populations are needed to better understand our results. Our preliminary findings indicate that Mainland Chinese scored significantly lower on measures of Survivor Guilt, Empathic Concern, Perspective-taking, Altruism to Friends, and Agreeableness in comparison to Asian Americans and European Americans.

This was unexpected given the important role of “filial piety,” guilt and altruistic behaviors common in collectivistic societies. As expected, the Mainland Chinese scored significantly lower on Depression in comparison to Asian Americans. We posit that the experience of immigration itself may explain the difference between their scores on Depression.

Sampling error may also affect our findings. The Mainland Chinese were primarily recruited from the Southern provinces of China. There may be regional differences in the role of empathy-based guilt on prosocial behaviors.

Also, religions may have also mediated the differences between groups. There was a higher representation of agnostic individuals among the Mainland Chinese sample than the Asian-American and European-American samples. Further cross-cultural studies are necessary to expand our understanding of the function of guilt in prosocial behaviors.

For further information, please contact Yanlin Li at [yli@wi.edu](mailto:yli@wi.edu) or Lynn O’Connor at [loconnor@wi.edu](mailto:loconnor@wi.edu)