

Belief in Karma and its Relationship with Guilt, Shame, and Psychological Inflexibility

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ABSTRACT

India has strong religious tradition, and even though western ideas are influencing young people, belief in karma is still very important. However, karma belief and its link to moral emotions and cognitive flexibility remains underexplored. This study examines such associations in a sample of 204 young adults (18 - 40) by using proven psychometric scales: Belief in Karma Scale (BKS), Guilt and Shame, Proneness Scale (GASP), acceptance and Action Questionnaire II (AAQ-II). Correlational analysis and independent t-test were used to analyse the relationship among variable, and any demographic differences. The result revealed a significant positive correlation between relief and karma and guilt/shame proneness, but belief in karma was not significantly related to psychological inflexibility-meaning that people can believe in karma and still be emotionally flexible. There were no significant differences in age and gender study variables. Overall, the study suggests that belief in karma plays an important role in shaping moral emotional experience without necessarily aiding psychological inflexibility.

Keywords: *Belief In Karma, Psychological Inflexibility, Guilt, Shame*

Good or bad, what you do, it always come back in one way or the other. It is an intergenerational belief system. The ancient concept of karma is basically that whatever we do will come back to us one day, although this idea began with religious texts such as the Bhagwat Gita.

Karma has three key concepts judging right or wrong, today's actions impact the future, and life as a rebirth cycle. Moral attribution theories suggest that when individuals interpret negative outcomes as internally caused, they experience stronger guilt and responsibility for their actions (Weiner, 2010). We believe that there are long-term consequences to moral behaviour and that it makes us understand success failure and suffering. In nation such as the ones in South and East Asia, Karma is not a religious concept, but a perception that we apply in every life experience what is right or worth it (Banerjee and Bloom, 2016; White and Norenzayan, 2019).

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Belief in karma operates not only at the social level also with an individual internal moral regulation. Interpreting adverse experiences as morally deserved, consequences may intensify self evaluation and responsibility attributions, there by increasing suspect ability to guilt based emotional responses Although faith in karma might provide a feeling of continuity and ability to maintain moral order, but internalized karma belief could be involved in rigid self-evaluations and emotional sensitiveness.

Karma and Guilt

The concept of karma is founded on the belief that there are moral consequences of actions and that events of life in a personal attributed to what we did in the past, when this belief is firmly held, there are higher chances that negative experiences will be perceived as self-inflicted instead of being influenced by the outside factors. This disposition may make guilt worse since the thought of having done something wrong and returning to it may be experienced even prior to result are taken, which may slowly construct the emotional experience, therefore, perceived ethical failure does not only cause temporarily guilt, but the result of suffering can also be long term emotional incursion since it can be considered right or even necessary (Banerjee and Bloom, 2014; White and Norenzayan, 2019).

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Guilt may be adaptive as it enhances corrective behaviour, but maladaptive when chronic, extreme, or self-accusing (Tangney et al.,2007). Moral casualty studies suggest individual with high moral. Karma affects moral reasoning, responsibility attributions, emotional reaction; intensifies guilt when outcomes morally attributable (Banerjee and Bloom, 2016).

This study addresses the gap by asking whether increased karma belief predict adaptive guilt response or avoidance of India and painful emotional condition.

Karma and Shame

Shame and guilt are different guilt targets specific bad actions, While shame deems one a bad person overall (Tangney et al., 2007). strong karma belief misfortunes as punishment for past deeds, due to this, they cannot only become guilty of particular actions will also begin to consider themselves unworthy defective as individuals (Banerjee and Bloom, 2016; White and Norenzayan, 2019).

Research on belief in a just world suggests that individuals are motivated to interpret life event as deserved, even reconstructing memories in ways that preserve fairness beliefs (Callan et al.,2012). Search justice-based meaning making frameworks may be conceptually similar to karmic interpretation of suffering, where negative outcomes are moralized and internalized.

Although, guilt can promote corrective behaviour, chronic shame linked to karmic interpretations maybe detrimental to mental health, contributing to lower self-esteem, social isolation and depression. Despite existing research on karma beliefs and their influence on guilt and moral reasoning, their role in fostering shame and diminishing self-worth remains underexplored. Therefore, the present examined shame as a potential mechanism linking belief in with negative psychological outcomes alongside guilt and psychological inflexibility.

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Karma and psychological inflexibility

To believe in karma is to hold a fixed way of thinking, since one thinks that life events are determined results of previous action and engages in rigid blame of self instead of finding alternative explanations and coping strategies.

Psychological inflexibility manifest itself through inflexibility of thoughts and actions, think experiential avoidance, preoccupation with self blame and difficulty adjusting to changes in this situation (Hayes et al.,2006). With a good karma belief, it is possible to moralize your issues such as seeing sufferings as a punishment that you deserve and therefore, you lack flexibility in processing emotions. As an example, just world rigidity may manifest in people who hold karmic beliefs, suppress their emotions, ruminate or deny the truth of events (Furnham,2003; Callan et al.,2012). This entrap people in rumination and separation and not to accept in solutions (Banerjee and Bloom, 2015; White and Norenzayan, 2019).

This paper will test the existence of psychological inflexibility in people who hold high karma beliefs.

Current Study

While we frequently think karma as source of comfort a promise that the universe is fair, it may put psychological weight on some. The belief that “every action has a reaction” provides a sense of order and moral working. Yet, when held to tightly the belief hampers growth and becomes suffocating. Strict believer blur errors with sins, feeling intense guilt over human flaws, where “sorry” does not feel enough.

For those high in karma belief, the fear of karmic debt fosters psychological rigidity. Instead of flexibly adapting to life’s complexity, individual get trapped and overthinking in dread of spiritual consequences.

This research doesn’t aim to invalidate the value of karma, but to understand its consequences. The study aim to explore how belief meant for guidance can sometimes become a cage for mankind.

Objectives

- Objective 1: To examine association between believe in Karma, psychological inflexibility, guilt and shame.
- Objective 2: To examine differences and believe in karma, psychological inflexibility, guilt and shame across gender and age.

Hypothesis

- Hypothesis 1: There is no significant relationship between belief Karma, psychological, inflexibility, guilt, and shame.
- Hypothesis 2: There is no significant difference in belief in karma, psychological inflexibility, guilt and shame across age and gender.

METHOD OF STUDY

Sample

The present study consisted of 204 participants (94 males and 114 females) in the age group of 18 - 40 years. Data was collected using convenience sampling along with snowball techniques.

Instruments

Three measures were used in this study,

1. **The belief in karma scale (BKS):** The BKS measures how much someone agrees with the concept of karma. karma is an idea of a moral causality that consist of cause and effective relationship that influence life events. The BKS is a 16 item self report. Questionnaire. A higher score on the test indicates the following: They believe in moral causality, individual responsibility for the outcome and the effect of action are always commensurate within those actions. The higher BKS scores higher you are towards karmic ideas. The total score on the BKS was used in analysis.
2. **Acceptance and Action Questionnaire-II (AAQ-II):** psychological inflexibility was measured using the acceptance and action questionnaire. The AAQ is a seven items for scale me, the degree of experience avoidance and behavioural inflexibility shown by an individual response in our experience of anxiety, stress or other forms of discomfort. The total score is related to our age of psychological, inflexibility and construct, including rigidity and behavior. Psychological flexibility, interpret the total score of AQQ-II was analysed.
3. **Guilt and Shame Proneness Scale (GASP):** Guilt and shame proneness was measured using the guilt and shame proneness scale GASP, a 16 item self-report scale assessing an individual’s propensity to experience feelings of guilt or shame as a response to violating moral or interpersonal standards or behaving in a manner that violates important social norms. This scale consists of four subscales: Guilt-Negative Behaviour Evaluation, Guilt-Repair, Shame- Negative Self-Evaluation and Shame-Withdrawal. The total score used in analysis.

Procedure

Data collection occurred via an online survey, informed consent was obtained first. Participants then completed a demographic questionnaire, followed by the psychometric scales with instruction to respond honestly under assurance of anonymity and confidentiality. Participants were fully debriefed about the study and no incentive provided.

RESULTS

Table No. 1 correlation between belief in karma, psychological inflexibility, guilt and shame.

Variable	M	SD	AAQ	Belief in Karma	Guilt (NBE)	Guilt Repair	Shame (NSE)	Shame Withdrawal
AAQ	24.24	6.50	—					
Belief in Karma	58.63	13.98	.08	—				
Guilt (NBE)	19.89	6.08	.11	.77**	—			
Guilt Repair	17.70	6.44	-.03	.79**	.61**	—		
Shame (NSE)	17.52	6.55	-.07	.74**	.60**	.84**	—	
Shame Withdrawal	16.90	6.67	.00	.77**	.58**	.85**	.80**	—

*Note: Values are Pearson correlation coefficients (r). **p < .01 (2-tailed). AAQ = Acceptance and Action Questionnaire; NBE = Behaviour Negative Evaluation; NSE = Negative self Evaluation, N= 204.*

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Relationship among variables

There is a non-significant positive relationship between belief in karma and psychological inflexibility, indicating that karmic belief were not associated with psychological rigidity. Psychological inflexibility showed weak and non-significant correlation with guilt, guilt repair shame, and shame withdrawal, suggesting experiential avoidance was unrelated to moral emotions in this sample.

The belief in karma indicated significant positive and statistically significant relationship with the variables of guilt and shame in particular, the belief in karma was strongly associated with guilt (NBE) $M = 19.89$, $SD = \pm 6.08$, $r = .77$, $p < .01$, indicating that those who believed that karma was stronger, had more guilt proneness. An equally significant positive relationship was found between thinking about karma and guilt repair ($M = 17.70$, $SD = \pm 6.44$), $r = .79$, $p < .01$, indicating that participants with higher karmic belief were more likely to engage in reparative behaviour following wrongdoing. Additionally, shame (NSE) ($M = 17.52$, $SD = \pm 6.55$), $r = .74$, $p < .01$, and shame withdrawal ($M = 16.90$, $SD = \pm 6.67$), $r = .77$, $p < .01$, was strongly and positively connected with belief in Karma.

Table No.2 independent t-test for gender differences

Variable	Male M (SD)	Female M (SD)	t	p
AAQ	23.34 (6.12)	24.95 (6.73)	-1.76	.08
Belief in Karma	58.67 (14.07)	58.60 (13.97)	0.04	.97
Guilt (NBE)	19.87 (5.92)	19.91 (6.23)	-0.05	.96
Guilt Repair	17.94 (6.50)	17.51 (6.42)	0.48	.63
Shame (NSE)	17.79 (6.42)	17.32 (6.68)	0.51	.61
Shame Withdrawal	17.31 (6.71)	16.57 (6.66)	0.79	.43

Note. AAQ = Acceptance and Action Questionnaire; NBE = Negative Behavior Evaluation; NSE = Negative Self Evaluation.

Independent sample t-tests examined gender differences in belief in karma, psychological inflexibility guilt, and shame proneness subscales. No significant differences emerged for psychological inflexibility, $t(202)=[P\text{-value}]$ males ($M = 23.34$, $SD = \pm 6.12$) and females ($M = 24.95$, $SD = \pm 6.73$) belief in Karma, with males ($M = 58.67$, $SD = \pm 14.07$) and females ($M = 58.60$, $SD = \pm 13.97$); or guilt-NBE ($M = 19.87$, $SD = \pm 5.92$) and females ($M = 19.91$, $SD = \pm 6.23$). similarly, guilt-repair, shame-NSE, and shame withdrawal showed nonsignificant differences between genders. These results indicate no gender differences among variables.

Table No.3 Independent Samples t Tests for Age Group Differences

Variable	Younger M (SD)	Older M (SD)	t	p
AAQ	24.37 (6.87)	23.31 (3.62)	0.81	.42
Belief in Karma	58.21 (13.24)	60.10 (17.27)	-0.68	.50
Guilt (NBE)	19.74 (5.70)	20.41 (7.87)	-0.56	.58
Guilt Repair	17.47 (6.24)	18.66 (7.25)	-0.93	.35
Shame (NSE)	17.40 (6.16)	17.76 (8.32)	-0.27	.79
Shame Withdrawal	16.71 (6.35)	17.52 (8.11)	-0.61	.54

Note. AAQ = Acceptance and Action Questionnaire; NBE = Negative Behavior Evaluation; NSE = Negative Self Evaluation.

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Independent sample, t-test examined age group differences in belief in karma, psychological, inflexibility, guilt and shame subscales. No significant differences emerged for psychological inflexibility between younger ($M = 24.37$, $SD = \pm 6.87$) and older participants ($M = 23.31$, $SD = \pm 3.62$) or belief in Karma, $t(201) = -0.68$, $p = .496$ (despite slightly higher scores among older participants). Similar guilt (NBE), guilt repair, shame (NSE), and shame withdrawal showed non-significant age differences. Overall these results indicate no significant differences among variables.

DISCUSSION

This study looked at how believe in karma is related to psychological inflexibility, guilt, and shame among young adults. The result help us understand how belief in karma impact psychologically in today's generation.

Contrary to H_01 , which posited no significant relationship between belief in karma, psychological inflexibility, guilt and shame. This was partially rejected, belief in karma showed no significant relationship with psychological inflexibility, suggesting karmic beliefs do not inherently promote thinking patterns (Hayes et al., 2012). This indicate that strongly endorsing causality does not necessarily correspond to maladaptive cognitive processing. This means that because someone believes strongly that actions have consequences doesn't mean there thinking pattern is rigid or unhealthy. It appears that karma is a kind of moral compass instead of a rigid way of thinking. (White and Norenzayan 2019) argue that karmic belief often serves as a moral explanatory framework rather than a cognitively constraining ideology.

However, strong positive correlation emerged with guilt and shame, indicating karma, fosters moral accountability and reparative behaviours (Banerjee & Bloom, 2016; Tangney et al., 2007). People who believed most and karma were more likely to feel guilty when they did something wrong. They also showed a greater tendency to fix or repair their mistakes. This reflects how karmic belief builds a sense of personal responsibility. The feeling that what I do will come back to me. This finding supports prior research, suggesting that karmic believes strength in moral accountability and social motivation (Banerjee & Bloom, 2017). Guilt is closely linked to adaptive moral behaviour and reparative intentions, which is consistent with observed association between karma, relief and guilt repair.

Believing deeply karma may also make people more aware of their own behaviour. When someone feels their actions will return to them and some they may monitor themselves more closely. Because of this, if they do something wrong, they may experience stronger, guilt or shame. Sometimes if the belief becomes very intense individual might even worry about future punishment or suffering because of their actions. This supports previous findings. The global self attributions in morally framed belief systems can intensify shame, responses which have been associated with withdrawal, tendency and vulnerability to depressive affect.

H_02 , predicting no significant differences in belief in karma, psychological, inflexibility, guilt and shame across age and gender, was accepted. No gender effects were observed aligning with cross culture, view of karma as a shared philosopher construct (White & Norenzayan, 2019). Male and female scored similar on karmic belief, psychological, inflexibility, guilt, and shame. This suggest that believe in karma isn't shaped by gender, but it Is more of a share culture and philosophical ideas that people grow up learning.

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The same pattern was saying there was no significance in age difference. Previous research has similarly indicated that moral and religious worldview are often an internalized early and remains stable across development stages (Furnham, 2003). A possible reason is that people are introduced to the idea of karma very early in life through family, teaching, religion, media and social environment. So even younger adult already hold fairly developed believes putting together the studies their belief in more as a moral framework. Something that create psychological rigidity. It may not make people inflexible, but it does shape how emotionally respond to the right and wrong.. strong harm belief can encourage ethical behaviour and motivate people to make amends, but it can also intensify feeling of guilt and shame when they believe they have done something wrong.

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Conflict of Interest

The author declared that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this research.

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