Interpersonal Aspects of Guilt: Evidence from Narrative Studies

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Psychologists have discussed guilt for decades, but solid and reliable conclusions have not emerged. Theoretical difficulties and methodological obstacles have plagued empirical work, resulting in a scarcity of data. The *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* contained only three titles that referred to guilt in the entire decade of the 1980s (plus a couple more on sex guilt). In that same decade, the *Annual Review of Psychology* volume indices listed only three pages on which the word “guilt” appeared. Many textbooks on emotion and motivation do not cover guilt at all.

The 1990s have begun with a renewed or reborn interest in guilt. Tangney (1990, 1991; see also Tangney, Wagner, Fletcher, & Gramzow, 1992) has shown that it is possible to distinguish guilt from shame and to study the behavioral consequences of each. Zahn-Waxler and Kochanska (1990) have demonstrated that developmental psychologists have slowly built up an enlightening collection of guilt-related empirical findings, and they have called for new theories to integrate these findings and shape further research.

Responding to that call, we have outlined a theory of the interpersonal aspects of guilt (Baumeister, Stillwell, & Heatherton, 1994). Our argument may be summarized briefly as follows. Whereas traditional theories have depicted guilt as a largely intrapsychic phenomenon based on self-judgment, we regard guilt as an interpersonal phenomenon based in close relationships, especially in certain interactions with intimate partners. To some extent, this
is merely a shift in emphasis—a shift toward considering self-judgment the
derivative phenomenon and interpersonal dynamics the main foundation.
Still, we do reject the strongest assertions of intrapsychic theories, such as
that of Lewis (1971), who asserted that “guilt is evoked only from within
the self” (p. 85) and “the imagery of the self vis-a-vis the ‘other’ is absent
in guilt” (p. 251).

INTERPERSONAL FUNCTIONS OF GUILT

Our contention is that guilt serves to protect and strengthen interpersonal
relationships. The prototype cause of guilt is hurting a relationship partner.
(We use the term “relationship partner” in a broad sense, referring to the
other person involved in any type of relationship, and thus not just a
romantic partner.) Generally, people will feel guilty when they benefit
inequitably at a partner’s expense or inflict harm, loss, distress, disappointment,
or other misfortune on a significant other person. Subjectively, guilt
is an unpleasant emotional state, and we suggest two affective bases for
it—namely, empathic distress over the suffering of one’s partner and victim
(e.g., Hoffman, 1982), and separation or exclusion anxiety over the possible
loss or damage to the relationship that may be caused by one’s transgression
(see Baumeister & Tice, 1990; Bowlby, 1969, 1973). Three main specific
functions of guilt can be identified.

The first is that guilt directly contributes to good relationships by
promoting behaviors that benefit relationships and by serving as a symbolic
affirmation of the relationship. Guilt causes people to act in ways that will
be beneficial to relationships, such as expressing affection, paying attention,
and refraining from transgressions. Furthermore, relationships may be
threatened by even seemingly mild transgressions, because such actions
symbolically convey that the transgressor does not care enough about the
partner or the relationship to behave as the other wishes. By feeling guilty
(and showing it), the transgressor can then erase the symbolic damage to
the relationship, because the presence of guilt indicates that the transgressor
really does care.

The second function of guilt is as an influence technique. One person
may get his or her way by making the other feel guilty. To use guilt as an
influence technique, the influencer communicates to the partner that some
action or inaction will hurt the influencer in some fashion (including
disappointing, distressing, or harming him or her). That action or inaction
will therefore make the partner feel guilty because it entails hurting the
influencer. To avoid the aversive state of guilt, the partner avoids that action
or inaction. In this case, merely the threat of impending guilt is enough to
keep the potentially offending partner from acting in the undesirable fashion.
Guilt may thus operate either as a deterrent (before the fact) or as an impetus
for desired behavior change (after the fact).

Guilt is an influence technique that operates in the absence of formal,
objective, status-based, or physical power; indeed, it may be especially useful
to the less powerful partners in relationships. As such, guilt serves to equalize
the balance of power. It also emphasizes the relationship bond and should
therefore be far more effective for influencing intimate partners than for
influencing casual acquaintances or strangers. Although guilt may be an
effective influence technique, its use may involve significant costs, one of
which is a partner’s resentment (despite compliance). Another potential cost
is “metaguilt”—that is, guilt over inducing guilt. Guilt results from hurting a
partner, and making the partner feel guilty is a form of hurting, so some
people could conceivably feel guilty over making intimate partners feel guilty.

The third function of guilt is to redistribute emotional distress. Transgessions
may create affective inequities, because one person did what he or
she wanted and therefore may feel good, while the victim suffers the negative
consequences. Such affective inequities are bad for relationships and hamper
effective communication and interaction (e.g., Locke & Horowitz, 1990).
Guilt, however, reduces the benefits of the transgressor. Moreover, the
transgressor’s guilt may make the victim feel better. The net effect of guilt
is therefore to reduce the negative affect of the victim and increase that of
the transgressor, as if transferring the negative affect from the victim to
the transgressor—who, after all, is its rightful owner in the sense of being the
person who has caused it.

Why might victims feel better when they see that transgressors feel
guilty? At least two sets of reasons can be offered. First, a transgressor’s
guilt already helps rectify the inequity, because the transgressor can be seen
as suffering for his or her misdeed rather than enjoying his or her ill-gotten
gains, so to speak. Second, as noted earlier, the guilt feelings may serve as
evidence that the transgressor cares about the relationship and about the
victim, and this affirmation of the social bond may be reassuring to
the victim. In other words, feeling guilty may be an effective way of communi-
cating the existence of affectional ties.

AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL NARRATIVES

The research we conducted (Baumeister, Stillwell, & Heatherton, in press;
see also Baumeister, Reis, & Delespaul, in press) was not explicitly designed
to test these assertions about guilt. Rather, it was designed to explore in a
broad way the interpersonal transactions and contexts of guilt. Both studies
used autobiographical-narrative methodology, which in recent years has
been particularly useful in shedding light on guilt (e.g., McGraw, 1987;
Tangney, 1992).

As suggested earlier, methodological and ethical difficulties have
plagued and retarded the empirical study of guilt. Experimental studies have
mainly relied on accidental transgressions, because it is nearly impossible to
induce subjects systematically or reliably to commit intentional transgressions in the laboratory. Even if it were possible to induce subjects to act in highly immoral ways, it would not be ethical to do so. McGraw (1987) has noted that accidental transgressions do not necessarily produce the same effects as intentional transgressions, and it is very difficult to elicit the latter in the laboratory. Moreover, our emphasis on the interpersonal context suggests that empirical studies of guilt should focus on transgressions within intimate relationships, but it seems highly unethical to use laboratory procedures to induce serious intentional transgressions (or indeed guilt of any sort) within important relationships.

Our empirical approach has thus made use of autobiographical narratives, a methodology that has become increasingly available to personality and social psychologists in recent years (Gergen & Gergen, 1988; Harvey, Weber, & Orbuch, 1990; McAdams, 1985; Ross & Holmberg, 1990). It has proven particularly useful in exploring topics that resist conventional laboratory methods, such as the termination of intimate relationships (Harvey, Flanary, & Morgan, 1988; Harvey, Weber, Galvin, Hruszt, & Garnick, 1986; Vaughan, 1986), unrequited love (Baumeister & Wotman, 1992), criminal and antisocial activity (J. Katz, 1988), the interpersonal genesis of anger (Baumeister, Stillwell, & Wotman, 1990), lay understanding of emotion (Shaver, Schwartz, Kirsan, & O'Connor, 1987), and sexual masochism (Baumeister, 1988a, 1988b, 1989). Guilt falls into this category of theoretically important but empirically elusive phenomena, and so it seems a prime candidate for this methodology (Brooke, 1985; McGraw, 1987; Tangney, 1992).

In essence, the method relies on having people relate significant stories from their own lives pertaining to a particular theme (which is defined by the topic of study). The stories are then coded for content on dimensions relevant to the hypotheses. Our approach has generally relied on comparisons between two sets of stories. Thus, in previous research we have compared male against female accounts of masochistic experiences (Baumeister, 1988b), and compared perpetrators' and victims' accounts of interpersonal transgressions (Baumeister et al., 1990). In our first study on guilt, we compared interpersonal transgressions that led to guilt with transgressions that did not lead to guilt. In a second one, we compared accounts of being made to feel guilty with accounts of making someone else feel guilty (Baumeister, Stillwell, & Heatherton, in press).

The methodological implications and limitations of autobiographical narratives are discussed elsewhere (see, e.g., Baumeister et al., 1990; Baumeister & Stillwell, 1992). Briefly, autobiographical narratives sacrifice some of the precision, control, and homogeneity that are obtainable with laboratory experimentation. The benefits include an increase in external validity (because of using real stories from actual lives rather than laboratory simulations) and, most important, the capacity to study topics that resist laboratory methods. As noted elsewhere, we regard laboratory experimentation as the best methodology when viable, but the inability of laboratory experimentation to provide a thorough understanding of guilt has encouraged us to pursue this alternative method (see also Brooke, 1985; McGraw, 1987).

GUilt OR NO Guilt?

Our first investigation in this line of research (Baumeister, Stillwell, & Heatherton, in press, Study 1) was an attempt to explore the factors related to feeling guilty over a transgression. We collected first-person accounts of transgressions, specifying that these had to be things about which the person later felt guilty. To furnish a basis for comparison, we also collected accounts of transgressions that did not lead to guilt. In order to define the transgression in a comparable way, the instructions for all stories requested each subject to relate an incident in which he or she had done something that made someone else angry. Using anger as a criterion is an effective way of eliciting stories about interpersonal transgressions (cf. Baumeister et al., 1990), but of course it may not cover the full range of guilt-inducing episodes. Thus, every subject wrote two stories about transgressions that he or she had committed—one chosen so that the transgressor did not feel guilty, and the other so that the transgressor did feel guilty. In other respects the instructions for the two stories were identical; thus the two sets of stories were comparable in terms of another person's condemnation and disapproval of the subject's actions, and they differed as to whether the subject felt guilty afterwards.

The stories were provided by upper-level college students. We randomly varied the order in which each subject wrote the two stories, but there did not seem to be any effect of which one the person wrote first. Subjects were assured of confidentiality and asked not to identify themselves or anyone else in the stories. A secretary then typed the stories, and a judge coded them along a series of dimensions. We used a dichotomous coding system, in which the coder simply made a series of binary judgments as to whether the story contained a given feature or not (e.g., "Did the transgressor apologize in the story?"). Table 10.1 summarizes the main results.

The first issue that concerned us was whether guilt is linked to close or otherwise special relationships. To examine this, we looked for differences in the relationship between transgressor and victim in the guilty stories as opposed to the not-guilty stories. Consistent with the interpersonal view of guilt, people were significantly more likely to express high esteem for the other (angry) person in the guilty stories than in the not-guilty stories. More specifically, 85% of the guilty stories expressed some high or positive regard for the partner, as compared to only 37% of the not-guilty stories. This pattern fits the view that guilt is characteristic of offenses within the context
TABLE 10.1. Comparison of Stories in Which the Author Did versus Did Not Feel Guilty

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Coding dimension</th>
<th>Percentage coded yes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Guilty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lesson learned</td>
<td>40.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mitigating circumstances</td>
<td>46.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perpetrator regards victim highly</td>
<td>85.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apology given</td>
<td>36.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Author still feels bad</td>
<td>21.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perpetrator was selfish</td>
<td>42.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perpetrator's actions were justified</td>
<td>27.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victim helped provoke incident</td>
<td>44.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perpetrator confessed misdeed</td>
<td>8.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perpetrator happy with outcome</td>
<td>8.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perpetrator's behavior changed</td>
<td>21.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Things now back to normal</td>
<td>44.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perpetrator foresaw outcome</td>
<td>29.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. \( n = 86 \text{–} 93 \) stories.

of valued relationships. People apparently feel less guilty about their transgressions against people whom they dislike or disrespect.

As examples, many episodes referred to partners in intimate relationships. Others described close friends and emphasized that the guilt was linked to remorse over potential damage to the relationship. In one subject's words, "We had been really good friends during the year. . . . I felt bad that our friendship had gone bad." One woman's story indicated that her rising esteem for the partner produced the guilt. She had been dating several men innocently, but when she fell in love with one of them she felt guilty over having dated the others, even though she stopped seeing them. Another wrote of leaving for the summer without saying goodbye to a close friend.

It must be kept in mind that these results are correlational. There is no way of assessing whether the disrespect eliminated the guilt or whether the lack of guilt led to disrespect, although the former seems far more plausible. Our results do suggest, however, that derogating a victim would be an effective way of minimizing guilt. Previous studies have shown tendency for people to derogate their victims (Lerner & Matthews, 1967). Such derogation may accomplish the result of making one's relationship to the victim trivial, expendable, or undesirable. By thus severing the social bond, one removes an important basis for guilt. It is also noteworthy that Noel (1973) failed to replicate the standard finding that people become more helpful and compliant after committing a (usually accidental) transgression. In Noel's study, the transgression involved derogating another person; possibly the derogation of the victim removed the guilt that often mediates subsequent altruistic behavior.

An experimental study by I. Katz, Glass, and Cohen (1973) is also relevant to the implication that derogation may reduce guilt. In that study, white subjects derogated black victims more than white victims, which seems to suggest that severing the tie of fellow-feeling is easier when one's victim is from another race. This suggestion seems to fit several observational studies, which have proposed that perpetrators of crimes and atrocities tend to derogate their victims to remove any sense of fellow-feeling; perpetrators even sometimes regard their victims as subhuman, especially when the victims belong to some ethnic or social group that can be clearly separated from their own (Conquest, 1986; Lifton, 1986).

Taken together with these past conclusions, our work thus seems to suggest that a positive relationship context is an important foundation for guilt. People feel guilty about offenses against esteemed others. Such transgressions may pose a risk to a valued relationship, and so the resultant guilt may well be regarded as an adaptive reaction if guilt is indeed (as we have suggested) a relationship-enhancing pattern born out of positive concern over a desired relationship.

Our theory has suggested further that guilt has relationship-enhancing functions. Because the interpersonal relationships varied systematically between the two sets of stories (as our first finding indicated), it was not feasible to code the stories for comparative relationship outcomes. One dimension that could be effectively coded, however, was whether the narrator indicated having learned a lesson or changed subsequent behavior patterns as a result of this. To be sure, anger may be understood generally as an objection to another's actions (e.g., Averill, 1982), so one might expect all incidents to lead to behavior change. But we found that guilt feelings were apparently a powerful mediator of such changes. Only one not-guilty story referred to behavior change, whereas 21.3% of the guilty stories did, and the difference was significant. An even stronger finding was obtained by coding whether subjects indicated that they had learned a lesson or changed in any positive fashion. Forty percent of the guilty stories contained some indication of having learned or changed, whereas none of the not-guilty stories contained such an indication.

Several examples are useful to illustrate these lessons. One subject described an argument and looked back with regret: "If I had to do it over again, I would have tried to be more tactful. As a matter of fact, if I ever see that guy and his truck, I do plan to apologize to him." Insight into self was often mentioned, as in this example: "I regretted treating my friend badly and I decided to apologize to her. I explained to her why I did what I did, and it really helped me understand my feelings." Other lessons pertained to relationship partners, as in the case of the woman who had a summer romantic fling while away from her boyfriend, who was quite upset by the affair: "I never realized how fragile he was, and I wish to God I had thought things through first." Yet other lessons referred to improvements in interpersonal relationships, as in the following example: "Some good came out of this, however. We agreed from then on that if we ever got into
a dumb argument on the phone, we won't let it escalate; instead, we will wait until we see each other and can talk it over in a civilized manner."

These results are nicely consistent with suggestions that guilt is an effective internal mechanism for adaptation and self-control (e.g., Freud, 1930; Wertheim & Schwarz, 1983). Although some studies have suggested that people who feel guilty are better socialized and more responsible than people like sociopaths, who are relatively immune to guilt feelings (e.g., Zahn-Waxler & Kochanska, 1990), our results extend that argument by replicating the effect within subjects. All our subjects (except one) wrote both a guilty story and a not-guilty story, and as a general pattern they learned and changed more when they had felt guilty. In other words, guilt is linked with learning and changing in socially desirable ways, and this link obtains both in comparisons of guilty versus not-guilty people and in comparisons of guilty versus not-guilty episodes within the same individual's experience.

The fact that guilt leads to behavior change is of course particularly important in laying the foundation for the influence function we have proposed. That is, guilt will only serve as an effective influence technique if it does cause people to alter their behavior. Study 2 has examined the interpersonal manipulation of guilt feelings directly.

Several findings of lesser importance can be briefly mentioned. As compared with the not-guilty stories, guilty stories were more likely to suggest that the author still felt bad about the incident, more likely to include having apologized, less likely to cite mitigating circumstances, less likely to place some causal blame or responsibility on the other person, less likely to contain self-justifications, more likely to portray the author's action as selfish, less likely to portray the author as happy with the outcome, less likely to indicate that things had gotten back to normal, and less likely to suggest that the author had foreseen the outcome. The last point corroborates McGraw's (1987) ironic finding that people tend to report more guilt about unintended actions or unforeseen consequences.

**MAKING SOMEONE FEEL GUILTY**

Our second study (Baumeister, Stillwell, & Heatherton, in press, Study 2) was directly concerned with the interpersonal manipulation of guilt. Specifically, we asked people to describe incidents in which they caused someone to feel guilty or in which someone made them feel guilty. The sample for this study was comprised of adults of all ages, as most of them were drawn from among visitors to the Ontario Science Centre. (Others came from an upper-level psychology course.) Most of our results involved comparing the two sets of accounts based on the two situational roles: guilt inducers and their targets. Comparing accounts based on different situational roles has been a standard way of using this methodology (e.g., Baumeister et al., 1990; Baumeister, Wotman, & Stillwell, 1993). Table 10.2 presents the main comparisons.

A set of hypotheses about the interpersonal manipulation of guilt follows directly from our theoretical exposition. When one person harms, frustrates, upsets, or disappoints another, the latter may be motivated to make the former feel guilty, especially because of the relationship-enhancing effects of guilt. Making the other feel guilty should involve displaying one's suffering or misfortune and emphasizing the other's responsibility for it. Simple disclosure may be enough, but people may understandably be tempted to facilitate the induction of guilt by exaggerating their suffering. Thus, one person portrays a vivid or enhanced image of one's suffering to the other and then relies on the other's concern to induce guilt. The attempted induction of guilt should ostensibly serve some relationship-enhancing function, particularly getting the other to affirm his or her commitment to the relationship.

Successful guilt induction should have several consequences. It should lead to behavior change on the part of the guilty person. It should make the victim/manipulator feel better in some way, thereby redistributing the negative affect (i.e., transferring it from victim to transgressor). In some cases, however, the affective improvement may be tempered by "metaguilt"—that is, guilt over inducing guilt. Also, in some cases guilt may succeed in eliciting behavioral compliance but may generate resentment or other

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Target</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reference to other's standards</td>
<td>55.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metaguilt</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Target did something wrong</td>
<td>22.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Target failed to act (sin of omission)</td>
<td>70.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Target resents</td>
<td>37.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpersonal neglect as offense</td>
<td>58.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-justifying statements</td>
<td>62.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-blame</td>
<td>34.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reproacher was frankly manipulative</td>
<td>14.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Differing expectations as cause</td>
<td>49.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Target apologizes, regrets</td>
<td>20.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reproacher used past</td>
<td>18.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reproacher lied or falsified</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reproacher felt better afterward</td>
<td>4.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Target felt bad</td>
<td>49.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Target overreacted</td>
<td>4.1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reproacher overreacted</td>
<td>44.9</td>
</tr>
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*Note. n = 93–104 stories.*
negative reactions, which should be more apparent to the person who is made to feel guilty than to the manipulator.

Before we proceed to describe how the accounts by inducers differed from those of their targets, we want to emphasize a basic issue that was already raised in our previous study—namely, the relationship context of guilt. We wanted to see whether guilt induction would be linked to close relationships as clearly as simple accounts of feeling guilty (in Study 1) were. And they were. Although subjects were free to describe episodes of guilt induction between themselves and strangers, they overwhelmingly chose instead to describe incidents between themselves and intimate partners such as family members, lovers, and close friends. We coded whether the other person in the guilt story was (1) an intimate, such as a relative, lover, or close friend; (2) a casual acquaintance or work/business associate; (3) a stranger to whom the author had some role relationship; or (4) a stranger with whom the author had no relationship. The fourth category was completely empty. Only one incident fell into the third category, and that incident involved a lifeguard making a child feel guilty for heedless behavior that might have hurt someone. Six incidents fell into the second category; these involved four teacher-student relationships, one coach-athlete relationship, and one relationship of a businessman to a long-term client. The remaining 95 (not counting two ambiguous ones, which also seemed to suggest long-term relationships) fell into the first category because of overt references to close relationships. Apparently those whom people deliberately cause to feel guilty are mainly friends, relatives, and lovers.

Guilt may therefore be considered an influence technique that is particularly suited to close relationships. There are several possible reasons for this. First of all, many influence techniques are exploitative or coercive, or may rely on deceptive manipulations that cannot be repeated or sustained indefinitely (see Cialdini, 1984), and so these may not be suitable for long-term relationships. Indeed, explicit coercion may be sustained in a relationship if one person is clearly more powerful, but the greater the assumptions of equity and equality, the more costly direct coercion becomes. Guilt may seem preferable to coercion because the other person seemingly compiles freely rather than under duress, although, as we have suggested, this is probably an illusion; guilt has its costs, but they are simply hidden. Guilt is also available to the person with less power in the relationship. Perhaps most importantly, guilt depends on empathy and on the mutual commitment to the relationship, and so it is really most viable in the context of a long-term, emotionally intense relationship.

The first function of guilt we have described is to motivate people to affirm their social bonds by expressing commitment or affection, or at least paying attention to relationship partners. Consistent with the hypothesis that guilt serves this function, the single biggest category of causes of interpersonal guilt induction was neglecting one’s partner. Although this was substantial in both samples, it was more common in the accounts of the targets than in those of the reproachers. Targets may have preferred to describe such incidents because there was little moral wrongdoing on their part and because many of them were able to justify having neglected others because of devoting themselves to their work or other preoccupations. Still, it is apparent that people are quite aware of being made to feel guilty for not paying enough attention to others.

Neglecting to attend to someone is a sin of omission rather than a sin of commission, which is of particular interest, insofar as previous studies have largely focused on sins of commission (as noted by Zahn-Waxler & Kochanska, 1990). Indeed, Tangney (1992) has suggested that guilt is overwhelmingly associated with sins of commission rather than omission. Our results differed from that view, however: Over half the reproachers’ accounts and two-thirds of the targets’ accounts referred to sins of omission. It appears that the interpersonal manipulation of guilt is often associated with failure to act rather than with actions. Possibly when people are asked to recall an incident that evoked guilt, they recall a sin of commission, but when they are asked to recall an interpersonal induction of guilt, the sins of omission come more readily to mind.

Our model suggests that people may sometimes be tempted to exaggerate their suffering in order to generate guilt in others, and these accounts confirmed that pattern. A significant minority of reproachers referred to bare-faced attempts to make others feel guilty, and some even acknowledged having dissembled, distorted, misled, or used falsehoods in order to generate guilt. In this sample, none of the targets’ accounts referred to such bare-faced or hypocritical tactics in the attempt to generate guilt, although many targets did feel that the reproachers had overreacted (which could have a similar meaning). These findings suggest that people sometimes do successfully deceive others, such as by exaggerating or misrepresenting their suffering, to make others feel guilty.

Negative reactions by the target have been proposed as one potential cost of the use of guilt as an influence technique. The most important among these reactions may be resentment, which was apparent in our sample. Target resentment was significantly more common in the targets’ own accounts than in the reproachers’ accounts. This suggests that many targets may keep their resentment more or less to themselves, indeed often complying overtly with the wishes of the reproachers. The lack of references to resentment among the reproachers’ accounts suggests that they may often be unaware of (or choose to ignore) this negative reaction among the people they manipulate with guilt. This important cost of guilt as an influence technique may not be immediately apparent to guilt inducers.

A second possible cost of using guilt as an influence technique is metaguilt—that is, feeling guilty over making others feel guilty. This cost was also apparent in our sample, although, like resentment, it was only apparent in one of the two sets of accounts. Although the targets’ accounts made no reference to the notion that reproachers might feel guilty, a significant
minority of reprochers did indicate that they felt guilty about their manipulation.

The fact that some reprochers felt guilty about inducing guilt helps to explain one surprising result, which was that both groups of authors included self-justificatory statements at approximately the same rate. One might assume that people who feel guilty would be moved to justify themselves, and thus that statements of self-justification would be more common in the targets’ accounts, but many reprochers felt it necessary to justify their actions too. Apparently, deliberately making someone feel guilty violates some norms (especially norms of not making others feel bad), and so inducers had to justify what they did.

Our third hypothesized interpersonal function of guilt is the redistribution of negative affect, and this too was apparent in our sample. Not surprisingly, targets generally were made to feel bad and feel guilty as a result of the reprochers’ efforts. Of greater interest is the finding of significant affect improvements by the reprochers: Almost half the reprochers’ accounts indicated that they felt better after the incident. These affective improvements suggest that a transfer model describes guilt induction better than a contagion model, because the contagion model would entail that one person would feel worse and the other would continue feeling bad. Instead, we found that one’s feeling worse was linked to the other’s feeling better, as if some of the negative affect had been transferred out of one person and into the other.

Furthermore, we have reasoned that one cause of a reprocher’s affective improvement would be the positive expressions of guilt and remorse by the partner, whose visible remorse should presumably operate as a symbolic indication of his or her commitment to the relationship and caring about the other. Consistent with this finding, a significant number of accounts included references to the targets’ remorse or overt apologies. What was especially striking was that these references were more common in the reprochers’ accounts than in the targets’ own accounts. In a recent study of accounts involving anger, offenders were far more likely than their victims to mention apologies (Baumeister et al., 1990). That pattern also conforms to a more general property of autobiographical narratives, which is that people refer to their own feelings and actions more than to those of other people. Yet in the present study the opposite pattern emerged: Reprochers’ accounts featured the apologies of their targets more than the targets’ own accounts did.

One plausible explanation for this remarkable salience of the apology to its recipient is, again, the relationship-enhancing message that it conveyed. If a reprocher were indeed to feel better as a result of the guilt induction and the other’s guilty affirmation of the relationship, then that would explain why the apology would be sufficiently important as to be included in many reprochers’ accounts. A related reason was that reprochers were describing their efforts to make someone feel guilty, and so the targets’ apologies were a form of proof that their efforts had been successful.

It is also worth mentioning that targets’ accounts had a relatively high number of references to differing expectations and to the other persons’ (i.e., the reprochers’) standards. Such discrepancies between one’s own standards or expectations and the other person’s may be especially salient to a target, for they form the basis for the guilt induction. Furthermore, appealing to such discrepancies may allow the target to feel justified and decent while still acknowledging that another made him or her feel guilty, as if the target were to say that his or her behavior was objectionable in another’s view but nonetheless correct in his or her own estimation. This finding underscores our argument that guilt is not necessarily or even primarily a result of a self-evaluation process. Contrary to Mosher’s (1965) exclusive focus on one’s own internalized standards, it is quite apparent that people do feel guilty in response to the standards of others, and even feel guilty despite discrepancies between their standards and others’ standards. Indeed, Mosher’s hypothesis that guilt is an expectancy of self-mediated punishment (1965, p. 162) received no support in either of these two studies, for no subject referred to an expectancy of self-mediated punishment.

Following Locke and Horowitz (1990), we have suggested (Baumeister et al., 1994) that part of the value of redistributing negative affect is that it brings the partners into similar emotional states, which facilitates communication between them; and of course the improved communication may be beneficial for the relationship. Our data cannot assess relationship outcomes in any systematic fashion, but there were some indications that guilt inductions did have that effect. Here is a good example stating explicitly that guilt induction helped the two people communicate better:

When I was about 18–19 years old, I was still living at home with my parents and I stayed out all night at a party—got home 8–9 A.M. the next day. I didn’t call—it didn’t even cross my mind to call home. When I did get home, kind of hung-over, tired—my mother was waiting for me with the biggest guilt trip known to man. She started the “you don’t love me—you make me worry so much—I thought you were dead” routine. She told me—worst of all—that she was disappointed in me! This is my mother, who fawned over every little achievement I had from kindergarten to getting my driver’s license. The way she made me feel stuck with me. We made up, of course, after lots of crying and explaining. But, to this day, I can still picture the look of disappointment on her face and the tone of her voice. I hope to God I never make her feel like that again.

Thus, this story about guilt testifies to redistribution of negative affect, to improved communication, and to positive and lasting behavior change.
GUILT, OTHER EMOTIONS, AND INTERPERSONAL RELATIONS

The studies we have described shed light on the likely interpersonal dynamics of guilt, but they were not designed to address the basic question of how interpersonal a phenomenon guilt is. The instructions in the preceding studies specifically asked people to describe interpersonal incidents, and so episodes of solitary guilt would be left out. To be sure, there was no pressure to describe incidents involving close relationships, and the high frequency of such relationships in these samples of stories does suggest that guilt is mainly linked to them, but there remains the possibility that guilt is often felt in connection with solitary transgressions and reflections.

One of us participated in some research that was directly concerned with examining the solitary versus interpersonal nature of guilt (Baumeister, Reis, & Delespaul, in press). In one of the studies in that project, subjects were asked to provide the most recent incident in which they had felt guilty. They were also asked to describe their most recent experiences of anxiety, sadness, frustration, fear, and anger or irritation (the sequence was varied). These were then coded for whether the episode was solitary versus interpersonal. In this way, guilt could be compared with other emotions with regard to its “interpersonalness”; after all, even if most incidents of guilt were found to be interpersonal, this might be trivial if most reports of incidents involving any other emotion were equally interpersonal.

The results of that study indicated, however, that guilt seems to be one of the more interpersonal emotions. Indeed, among the six emotions included in the study, guilt ranked the highest on interpersonalness. There were fewer solitary guilt episodes than episodes of any of the other emotions, and the degree of close or intimate relatedness was higher in the guilt stories than in any of the other emotion stories. Sadness was the only emotion to score close to guilt on interpersonalness. Frustration, anxiety, and fear were often associated with being alone.

In that study, the stories were also subjected to content analysis, in order to determine what sorts of things led to guilt. Consistent with the evidence we have already reported, this study found that neglecting a relationship partner was the single largest category of incidents that caused guilt. Failing to live up to an interpersonal obligation was another large category (indeed, these two categories combined accounted for about a third of the total causes of guilt in this sample). Romantic infidelities and other betrayals also accounted for quite a few of the stories. Thus, transgressions against close relationships predominated.

To be sure, a number of solitary transgressions were reported, and so it would be excessive to claim that other people are always centrally involved in guilt. People reported guilt over neglecting their studies (especially for procrastinating on an assignment), failing to exercise, and overeating (especially breaking a diet). Although there may have been some interper-

sonal concerns in the background of these incidents, such as the feeling that one is letting one’s parents down by not studying, these do seem to indicate that guilt can be felt on a fairly solitary basis. Still, cases of solitary guilt appear to constitute a small minority. Most guilt is interpersonal.

Further light on the interpersonal nature of guilt was shed by the other study in this investigation (Baumeister, Reis, & Delespaul, in press). This study used an experience-sampling methodology: Subjects carried a beeper that went off at random intervals, and they were instructed to stop and record their thoughts, feelings, and activities whenever they were beeped. This study found that people often happened to be alone when they felt guilty—but that the guilt usually referred to interpersonal problems or concerns.

One of the beeper study’s analyses looked at the relation between the subjects’ thoughts and feelings and their reporting of guilt. It was surprising how little relation there was; evidently, subjects could feel guilty when engaged in almost any activity or thinking about almost any topic. Forty-five large categories of thoughts and activities were constructed, and the frequency of guilt reports in each of them was computed. Only one of these categories departed from the overall mean (using a 1% confidence interval) frequency of guilt: People were especially likely to feel guilty when they were thinking about themselves in relation to other people. In other words, there is almost no relation between what a person is doing or thinking and the likelihood that the person may feel guilty—with one big exception: namely, that people are extra likely to feel guilty when thinking about themselves in relation to others. The fact that this exception stood out from the typical pattern seems very consistent with the hypothesis that guilt is rooted in interpersonal relatedness.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

We have suggested that guilt should be understood as something that happens between people as much as it happens inside them. Instead of studying guilt by examining how people judge their own actions, we propose studying guilt by examining the exchanges within close relationships. Inequities and transgressions can cause guilt, and if the transgressor does not seem to feel guilty enough, the partner may do or say things to stimulate and increase guilt feelings. By manipulating the target’s feelings of guilt, the partner seeks and often finds confirmation of the target’s continuing investment in the relationship.

The need for an interpersonal understanding of guilt is supported by recent accumulating evidence. Hoffman (1982) has argued that guilt is based in empathic distress, which is an affective response to another person’s suffering. Tangney (1992) concluded that all categories of guilt-inducing incidents she examined were interpersonal except one—namely, breaking a diet. We would even question that one exception; dieting, after all, is guided
and motivated by interpersonal concerns (such as being attractive to others), and we doubt that people living in extreme solitude would be dieters. Lastly, our own data attest to the importance of the relationship bond for causing guilt. In our work, transgressions that led to guilt were linked to important social bonds, whereas transgressions toward unimportant other people were less likely to cause guilt. In addition, reports of making someone else feel guilty were overwhelmingly presented in the context of close relationships.

Three interpersonal functions of guilt have been suggested. The research we have described provided some support for each of them. The first function is that guilt directly strengthens relationships by stimulating relationship-enhancing patterns of behavior. Guilt makes people learn lessons and change their behavior so as to avoid doing things that will threaten their social attachments, such as hurting, distressing, or upsetting partners in relationships. Guilt also apparently functions as a form of pressure to make people pay positive attention to their partners, which presumably will benefit a relationship. It would be foolish to contend that guilt is invariably effective, but its general function seems to be to make people know not to repeat actions that have hurt, disappointed, or distressed an intimate partner.

The second function of guilt is as an influence technique. People make use of others’ capacity for guilt in order to get their way. The apparently high rate of behavior change following guilt confirms that guilt induction can be an effective way of altering a partner’s behavior. It is apparent that people sometimes exaggerate their suffering or distress in order to increase a partner’s guilt feelings, presumably with the goal of altering that person’s future behavior.

The third function of guilt is to redistribute emotional distress within the dyad. We have described evidence that guilt makes the transgressor feel worse and the victim feel better, thus effectively transferring the negative affect from the victim to the transgressor (who was responsible for causing it in the first place). We have also provided some evidence that interpersonal guilt manipulations sometimes bring people into similar emotional states, thereby facilitating communication and enhancing the relationship (cf. Locke & Horowitz, 1990).

Further research is needed to illuminate the interpersonal implications of guilt. A particularly fruitful area may be the negotiation of guilt over long periods of time in close relationships; one may speculate that transgressions and inequities are tracked by both partners, resulting in a kind of guilt accounting. A return to the laboratory study of guilt would also be desirable, once the underlying mechanisms that result in guilt are better understood. More data on metaguilt would also be valuable.

For the present, however, it appears that guilt does serve important functions for strengthening and maintaining close relationships. The undeniable importance of maintaining close relationships in human social life may help explain why our society continues to cultivate people’s capacity for feeling guilty. Psychological theory may gain a better understanding of guilt by analyzing the interpersonal context in which guilt is created, negotiated, and resolved.

REFERENCES


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