GUILT

In contrast to the socio-legal meaning of guilt, which refers to the attribution of culpability regarding the commission of a blameworthy act, most emotion scholars view guilt as an adaptive psychological process that promotes social cohesion. This entry begins with a discussion of how the term guilt is defined by scholars who study guilt as a psychological process. The empirical research literature on this concept is then briefly reviewed.

Guilt as a Self-Conscious, Social-Moral Emotion

For social scientists who study the mind, guilt is defined as a self-conscious, social-moral emotion consisting of an unpleasant affective state, often accompanied by thoughts about the self having engaged in a blameworthy violation of a social norm (e.g., John felt guilty about not returning Mary’s phone call). Guilt also refers to instances in which an individual experiences unpleasant feeling states while merely contemplating the future violation of a social convention or rule, in which case we refer to this as “anticipated” guilt (e.g., Mary felt guilty when she thought about not leaving a tip for the waitress).

Guilt is a social-moral emotion in that it is intimately related to social welfare, in the sense that guilt is triggered by real or perceived violations of culturally valued conventions and rules. As such, guilt is part of a family of emotions known as “moral sentiments,” which serve as a sort of “social glue,” allowing social relations to function efficiently. According to 18th-century economist Adam Smith, moral sentiments such as guilt serve this social function by virtue of their capacity to compel individuals to do one of the following: (a) abide by social conventions (i.e., an ostensible function of guilt) or (b) to generate applause toward others who succeed (i.e., an ostensible function of the moral sentiment admiration) or approbation toward those who fail (i.e., an ostensible function of the moral sentiment contempt or reproach) to uphold such standards.

Because the experience of guilt entails a focus on one’s own adherence to social norms and conventions, guilt is seen as a self-conscious emotion rather than an other-focused emotion. Although other social-moral emotions such as contempt or reproach entail unpleasant feelings and thoughts generated in response to the blameworthy actions of others (e.g., John felt angry because Mary did not return his phone call), the emotion guilt always entails a focus on the actions (or inactions) of the self. Even in the case of “collective guilt,” whereby one incurs an unpleasant feeling while considering the blameworthy actions of a group with which one strongly identifies, the focus is ultimately on the self (e.g., John felt guilty when he learned that his firm was responsible for polluting the river).

Distinguishing Guilt and Shame

In everyday language, guilt is often confused with another self-conscious, social-moral emotion, shame. Guilt can be distinguished from shame in terms of the focus on evaluating one’s own actions or omissions (i.e., guilt) versus evaluating one’s personhood or self (i.e., shame). In this light, the term guilt more properly refers to a negative evaluation of one’s own behavior (e.g., feeling guilty because you accidentally bumped into another car in the parking lot), whereas shame refers to a negative evaluation of one’s personhood (e.g., feeling ashamed because you believe that you are a bad person). Another important distinction between guilt and shame centers on the contrast between the sometimes adaptive consequences associated with experiencing guilt and the often maladaptive correlates of shame proneness. Research by June Tangney and others has shown that guilt is an adaptive emotion that facilitates cooperation, whereas shame is often seen as a less adaptive emotion, promoting withdrawal or externalizing in the form of aggression. The next section briefly reviews the research on the social-behavioral consequences of guilt.

Behavioral Effects of Guilt

Because guilt can be experienced in situations where an individual is merely contemplating the future violation of a social norm, some economists have argued that the unpleasant affective state that accompanies guilt can serve as a commitment device. By referring to guilt as a commitment device, economists such as Jack Hirshleifer have argued that this psychological state (e.g., feeling guilty) serves as a powerful incentive to remove one’s unpleasant feeling state.
by acting to repair the damage to social relations caused by one's previous (or potential) actions or inactions. For example, when guilt occurs after the performance of an action that is perceived to have damaged some aspect of one's social relations, this psychological state can serve as a powerful incentive to remove one's unpleasant feeling state by performing some act of compensation directed toward the offended party. Several studies have found that inducing an irrelevant state of "guilty feelings" can compel individuals to avail themselves of the next available opportunity to cooperate with another. One early study showed that inducing individuals to accidentally break the experimenter's camera caused participants to be subsequently more inclined to help an unrelated third party. More recent research suggests that the tendency for guilty feelings to motivate helping behavior also occurs under more natural circumstances in which feelings of guilt are endogenous to the situation at hand. These findings suggest that guilty feelings may have their strongest impact on individuals with preexisting prosocial motives, the very same individuals who are least likely to engage in noncooperative behavior in the first place. Another focus of empirical research on guilt has been on "guilt proneness," or the tendency to experience this emotion across a range of situations as a stable feature of one's disposition. In this regard, guilt-prone individuals have been found to be less likely to respond aggressively when angered, compared to less guilt-prone individuals. Consistent with the ostensive prosocial functions of guilt, these studies reveal that guilt-prone individuals tend to experience more empathy toward others, which appears to serve as an important mediator to the link between guilt proneness and inhibition of aggression. In sum, guilt proneness, unlike shame proneness, appears to be associated with positive impacts on social functioning. Although there has been a trend toward an increasing focus on more pernicious moral sentiments such as anger and disgust, research on guilt continues to represent about 15% of all research on moral emotions.

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See also Emotion and Moral Judgment; Rationality of Emotion; Self-Consciousness

Further Readings


