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ARE GUILT AND SHAME MORAL OR MORALIZING EMOTIONS?

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Synopsis:

Our studies test the impact of two self-directed moral emotions like guilt and shame on responsibility attributions about moral scenarios. We found that both guilt- and shame-proneness increased severity of responsibility attributions, except for the behavioral dimension of shame. Moreover, contrary to what other theories predict, our data support a Nietzschean perspective. That is, self-directed emotions make people moralize more without necessarily making them more moral (i.e., they tend to be more severe for others than for themselves).

Are guilt and shame moral or moralizing emotions?

Guilt and shame are self-directed moral emotions intimately related to responsibility. They are negative emotions one experiences when feeling responsible for transgressing against some moral rules (Tangney et al., 2007). Current research on moral judgment tends to neglect self-directed emotions (Prinz, 2011), which have been tested for rightness and wrongness but not explicitly for responsibility attributions (Tangney and Dearing, 2002; Cohen et al., 2012).

We conducted two Internet-based studies in which we asked participants to report their judgments about morally ambiguous acts of killing in different conditions, three of which included mitigating circumstances (intoxication, coercion, false information) and a control condition. The subjects indicated their attributions of moral responsibility, causality, decision-making and punishment. In Study 1, the agent in the vignettes was presented in the 1st person, while Study 2 was presented in the 3rd person. Finally, subjects completed a new assessment – the GASP scale (Cohen et al., 2011) - to test their proneness to guilt and shame, which unlike previous scales (e.g., TOSCA-3, Tangney, et al., 2000) differentiates between the affective and behavioural components of each emotion.

Overall, we found that both guilt- and shame-proneness contributed to attributions of responsibility. We also found that the relationship between self-directed moral emotions and responsibility held for both dimensions of guilt, but only one dimension of shame (affective, but not behavioural), suggesting that some forms of shame do not increase assessments of responsibility.

While most theories predict that self-directed emotions would increase responsibility attributions more in the first-person than in the third, we found the opposite. Impact on responsibility was most pronounced when guilt- and shame-prone individuals considered the actions of a third-party. We call this moralizing. We conclude that self-directed emotions make people moralize more without necessarily making them more moral, which is consistent with a Nietzschean perspective (Nietzsche, 1887).

Keywords: guilt, shame, self-directed, responsibility, morality

Ethical Approval

The studies were approved by the Institutional Review Board at the City University of New York. All participants gave written informed consent.

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