Intrapsychic and interpersonal guilt: a critical review of the recent literature

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Abstract Various authors hold that some emotions (i.e., moral emotions) have the function of orienting people toward ethical actions. In addition to embarrassment, shame and pride, the moral emotion of guilt is believed to affect humans’ behavior when they carry out transgressions that violate social and cultural standards. Over the past century, many studies (including controversial ones) have been conducted on guilt. In this study, we analyzed and summarized mainly the most recent literature on this emotion. On one side, the destructiveness of guilt is emphasized. It inflicts punishment and pain on individuals for their errors and can lead to psychopathology (e.g., depression). On the other side, it is described as a “friendly” emotion that motivates behavior adapted to social and cultural rules. How can this asymmetry be explained? Different existing views on guilt are presented and discussed, together with recent proposals, supported by research data. Finally, we discussed some systematic models that try to incorporate these different views in a single framework that could facilitate future researches.

Keywords Guilt · Altruism · Morality · Self-conscious emotions · Shame

Introduction

Recently, investigating the psychological and neurobiological bases of moral emotions has become increasingly important because of the relevance of these ethical issues in Western civilization. Despite the difficulty in investigating these aspects of the mind, a shared belief exists that the experience or avoidance of negative affective states connected with the moral sphere, such as guilt and shame, characterizes many moments of our life. Common experience also suggests that these affective states may or may not foster individuals’ adaptation to the moral and cultural norms of a society, influencing their judgments, decisions and attitudes. The aim of the present study is to present a review of the most recent findings in this area. According to some authors, guilt is the most important emotion in the moral sphere (Lamb 1983), but the literature on this emotion depicts a nonhomogeneous picture of its several features. On the one side, guilt inflicts punishment and pain on individuals for their mistakes and can lead to psychopathology. On the other side, it is described as a prosocial emotion that motivates behavior adapted to social and cultural rules. In order to explain this asymmetry, different existing views on guilt must be discussed, starting from a definition of what an emotion, in particular a moral emotion, is. Our aim was to describe the different (and often contrasting) features of this emotion. We also wanted to present some of the conceptual models that have suggested the existence of two kinds of guilt in order to better comprehend these contrasting features.

Emotions, moral emotions and guilt: definitions and functions

It is difficult to formulate a comprehensive definition of emotion. Research on the role and function of emotions provides partial and fragmentary knowledge; thus, the debate is still open. It is generally agreed that emotions
mediate the relationship between the individual and the surrounding environment and guarantee its survival. Indeed, they prepare us to face situations in which it is important to act quickly, as in the presence of danger. For example, fear and anger trigger a series of behavioral patterns that are critical in hostile situations.

However, emotions have much more complex goals. For example, they permit communicating needs, objectives and desires through a series of expressive patterns of the body, especially the face. This ability is particularly useful when the emotions help regulate a socially desirable behavior, promoting adaptation to religious, moral and cultural norms. In general, the concept of goal seems to assume a particular relevance when analyzing emotions and, especially, the differentiation among them. In fact, according to appraisal theories (e.g., Scherer 2001), emotions differ by virtue of the interpretations of an activating event in the context of individual goals, beliefs or desires.

Goals, in particular, are a series of desires, aims and ambitions that induce people to persist with a certain behavior. The function of emotions is to guide our attention and to prompt action in relation to events that have implications for our goals. For example, the function of fear is to provide a predisposition to run away from a danger (Frijda 1988; Oatley and Johnson-Laird 1987; Lazarus 1991a, b; Scherer 1999).

Also in functional models, goals have a basic role in theories of emotions: The emotions signal that an event is important for achieving a given goal and therefore give rise to attitudes and actions that are appropriate in the situation (Frijda 1988; Izard and Ackerman 2000; Keltner and Gross 1999). Moreover, throughout life, we put a series of plans into action to achieve specific goals and, as all goals cannot be satisfied simultaneously, our emotions determine the priorities. Thus, emotions originate in the evaluation of situations (appraisal) in relation to our plans (goals; Oatley and Johnson-Laird 1992).

The link between goals and emotions is particularly relevant when analyzing the emotion of guilt. According to several theorists, some emotions have an important role in projecting ethical goals, helping people recognize that certain actions are morally wrong and motivating appropriate responses when such actions are identified. Some authors state these emotions have the function of facilitating the individual’s integration into the community they belong to and of motivating them to adhere to normative standards and thus avoid social rejection (Keltner and Buswell 1997; Sedikides and Skowronska 2000; Kroll and Egan 2004). Smith (1759) argued that emotions like guilt can exert a powerful influence on judgment that could prevail on rational deliberations in determining behaviors. Frank (1988) suggests that this type of emotional state could motivate cooperative behavior, and Haidt (2003) proposes that emotions like guilt could have different prosocial action tendencies.

Thanks to their key role in the promotion of ethical actions, these emotions have been defined as moral emotions (or self-conscious emotions; Tangney et al. 2006). They include guilt, shame, embarrassment and pride and have been likened to an emotional moral barometer that provides information on the social and moral acceptability of human behavior (Tangney et al. 2007). Each of these emotions has a different goal for defense against situations in which a value is threatened. Shame has been defined as an acutely painful emotion that is typically accompanied by a sense of shrinking or of “being small,” and by a sense of worthlessness and powerlessness. Shamed people also “feel exposed” (Tangney 1999, p. 545). The goal of shame is to protect the ideal image the person would like to show others. This emotion is triggered when a conflict is emerging between the representation of the ideal self and one’s real image (for reviews, see Gilbert and Andrews 1998; Tangney and Fisher 1995). Embarrassment is an aversive state of mortification that follows public social predicaments (Miller 1995). This emotion may serve to appease others for one’s transgressions of social convention by eliciting light-hearted emotion (Keltner 1995). In general, while shame can arise also from an act only known to oneself and seems to have a more pronounced moral implication than embarrassment, in order to feel embarrassment one’s actions must be exposed to others (either real or imagined; Miller 2007). Moreover, according to Tangney et al. (1996), embarrassment follows events that are more unexpected and for which people feel less responsible. Pride seems to have the goal of informing people that certain behaviors are desirable and it motivates them to prefer these behaviors. However, it seems more difficult to define the final goal of guilt. On the one hand, it alerts people when moral or social norms or personal values are being violated, indicating that their actions are endangering an important goal. Therefore, guilt is the emotion most linked to the moral domain and the prevention of bad actions (Ferguson et al. 1991; Sabini and Silver 1997; Smith et al. 2002) and the development of moral faculties (Eisenberg 2000; Hoffman 2000; Tangney and Dearing 2002). On the other hand, people can also experience guilt in the absence of transgression. As Baumeister et al. (1994) highlight, people may feel guilty when they fare better than other people, even if they are not responsible for the inequity. The most famous example of this is survivor guilt. In this case, the aim of guilt seems linked to altruistic tendencies (Mancini 2008).

Recently, various questions about the conceptualization and explanation of guilt have been investigated in the scientific literature. Just to have an idea of the heterogeneity of the views upon this topic, not all authors, beyond