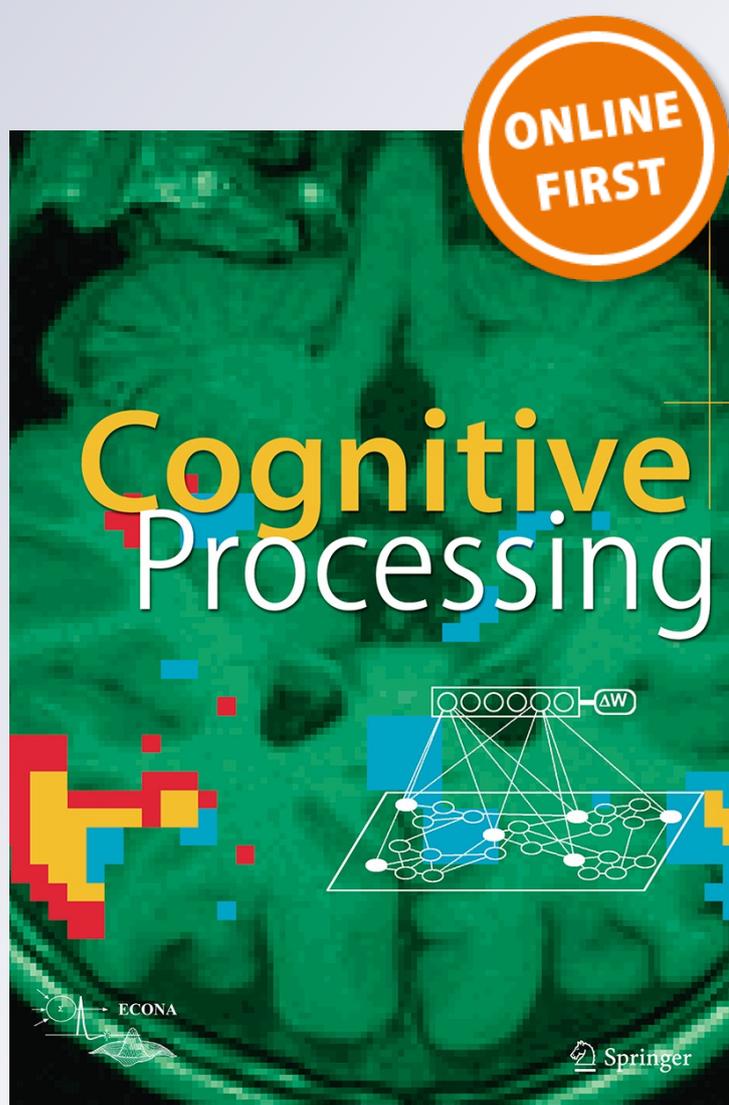# Intrapsychic and interpersonal guilt: a critical review of the recent literature

Serena Carnì, Nicola Petrocchi, Carlamaria Del Miglio, Francesco Mancini & Alessandro Couyoumdjian

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REVIEW

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

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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 protecting 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 Skowronski 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

common experience, agree that guilt should be considered as an emotion (Elison 2005; Ortony 1987). Some hold that the functions and effects usually attributed to guilt may be associated with other emotions, such as shame and remorse (Ortony 1987). In general, two main approaches emerge from the review of the scientific literature on guilt, and we will describe and analyze them in the following chapters.

Intrapsychic guilt: punishment

The psychoanalytic literature describes guilt as a self-punitive process that takes place entirely within the individual through sanctioning or censuring all violations of moral standards (Tomkins 1963; Mosher 1965; Lewis 1971), identifying ethical norms dictated in part by universal moral laws and in part by specific regulations of a given culture. The behavioral correction is carried out by fear of guilt, which warns people that what they are about to do is wrong.

Freud (1924/1961a, 1930/1961b, 1923/1959) assumed that guilt was a necessary precondition in the development of the Super-Ego (interiorized social rules that also guide the individual's behavior in adulthood) and a consequence of the Oedipus Complex. According to this view, guilt, with its unpleasant feeling, has the function of punishing impulses considered unacceptable, which violate interiorized norms. Therefore, guilt is fed by a conflict between the Ego and the Super-Ego and has the function of keeping human behavior in line with moral standards.

Rank (1929) also held that the infant–mother attachment and the consequent fear of losing the loved object generates guilt, which operates as a force that perpetuates that relationship. Mosher (1965) proposed that guilt is a generalized expectation of self-inflicted punishment accompanied by an unpleasant feeling of having violated one's internal standards of behavior. Subsequently, other authors have considered guilt a negative affective component, which, following a violation of personal standards, punishes individuals for their transgressions (Piers and Singer 1953/1971; Lewis 1971, 1992).

A definition that focuses less on the individual's internal processes holds that guilt warns of the negative aspects of behaviors that are incompatible with external or internal norms or both (Scherer 1984). This model, however, is still focused on the punitive role. According to various authors, this justifies its implications in psychopathology (Kugler and Jones 1992; Harder 1995; O'Connor et al. 1999).

Freud (1924/1961a) has probably been the first to state that excessive guilt is at the base of all neuroses. According to his view, guilt not only has the function of punishing individuals who err, but also motivates them to desire punishment when they feel they are in the wrong. Guilt induces people to engage in self-punishing conduct that can lead to failure in normal daily activities (Freud 1923/1959, 1924/1961a, 1930/1961b). The self-punishment function has been widely upheld in psychoanalytic literature, in which it is associated with masochistic behaviors (Menninger 1934/1966; Panken 1983). Unlike the preceding authors, Fromm (1947/1985) held that the fear of being guilty should not primarily be ascribed to the possibility of losing the love of someone close. What dominates is the fear of having outraged an authority, even an unreal interiorized authority, and guilt is a sort of power that authority has over people. People who feel guilty are particularly willing to do anything to obtain authority's approval to mitigate their guilt. This mechanism could clarify the possible role of guilt in cases of homicides followed by the killer's suicide. Indeed, the extreme guilt experienced after killing someone can result in the desire to deserve an equally extreme punishment and, therefore, in suicide (for a review see Baumeister et al. 1994).

Although some studies have reported that guilt is associated with the expectation or the fear of being punished (Wicker et al. 1983), none of them demonstrated that the person who feels guilty always desires to suffer or be punished; this seems to happen, instead, only when specific conditions occur, as demonstrated by Nelissen and Zeelenberg (2009). They called Dobby effect the tendency for self-punishment associated with the experience of guilt. The desire of expiation arises from guilt just if the individual cannot repair his/her own wrongdoing. In a scenario study, the authors manipulated whether subjects felt guilty or not and whether it was possible or not to repair the harm done; they found that guilt evoked self-punishment (in that case, higher levels of self-denied pleasure) only if participants could not compensate for the transgression that caused the guilt experience. The authors thus highlight a functional relevance of guilt-induced self-punishment behavior (or intention) that may be considered as a signal of acceptance and future compliance with violated standards.

There is another aspect of the psychoanalytic argumentation about guilt that needs to be addressed. In fact, to some authors within the psychodynamic approach, it is not clear how guilt is distinguished from other emotions. The idea that the individual is induced to prevent specific behaviors to avoid unpleasant feelings clearly indicates the possibility that he is experiencing just fear to be guilty. Moreover, in adulthood, fear of guilt associated with moral violations emerges not only after individuals have acted in a nonethical way, but also as a simple anticipation of the intention or the possibility of transgression: Therefore, this emotional state could be better understood as anticipatory anxiety rather than guilt. Prinz and Nichols (2010), for example, state that "guilt could be a learned by-product of

other emotions, like fear or sadness. We propose that guilt is actually a form of sadness or sadness mixed with a little anxiety. When young children misbehave, parents withdraw love. Love withdrawal threatens the attachment relationship that children have with their parents, and losing attachments is a paradigm of sadness. It can cause anxiety, insofar as attachment relations are a source of security. The threat of losing love leads children to associate sadness with transgression, through associative learning. The anxiety-tinged sadness about wrongdoing is then labelled guilt" (pp. 136–137). In accord with this view, guilt should be considered as a consequence of a combination of anxiety and sadness, rather than a pure emotion.

Beyond the many critics that could be done to this particular view, it is interesting to underline how, to these authors, it is the very nature of this emotion that seems to be brought into question. Currently, guilt is broadly considered as a specific emotion, but, as the matter of fact, some questions related to the role of guilt in moral behavior still remain to be addressed. In particular, future research should better investigate the different emotional states that precede and are subsequent to moral transgressions in order to better differentiate among them.

Interpersonal guilt: the social-adaptive role

The psychoanalytic approach describes guilt and the psychological distress that characterizes it as not necessarily related to others. From this theoretical perspective, all of the actions of people who experience guilt are aimed toward diminishing their discomfort, regardless of whether there is any real repair of the damage or whether pardon is received from the person who suffered it. Thus, we can feel guilty and act to alleviate our guilt but not necessarily another's suffering.

More recently, literature has shifted its interest from individuals' internal states to the relational consequences of their actions or omissions. In the area of social psychology, guilt is considered an adaptive emotion able to improve social relationships through the development of an empathic preoccupation for the well-being of others (Hoffman 1982, 1998; Baumeister et al. 1994; Tangney and Dearing 2002). According to this view, guilt originates in the relationship with others when one believes he has damaged another person. Therefore, it is perceived as a prosocial phenomenon that has the goal of maintaining, reinforcing and protecting important interpersonal relationships, particularly with loved ones (Tangney 1992; Baumeister et al. 1994; Barrett 1995; Hoffman 1998; Leith and Baumeister 1998). From this perspective, this emotion arises from the fear of losing a relationship with someone

we love and that we have hurt, and it should motivate us to ask for forgiveness and express empathy toward the offended.

Therefore, in the interpersonal perspective (Tangney 1991, 1995), guilt has the positive function of improving interpersonal relationships by generating preoccupation for others' well-being. For this reason, it has a key role in our relationships with others, both those close to us and those we do not know but are in our community. Thus, the function of guilt is to maintain in-group cohesion (Allport 1954), inciting humans to carry out reparatory acts, help their neighbor, communicate their affection and be attentive to others' feelings (Niedenthal et al. 1994; Baumeister et al. 1994; Tangney 1998). Affect remains a crucial factor, however, because it allows incrementing the level of guilt experienced (Kubany and Watson 2003) in a way that is directly proportional to the level of intimacy between the persons involved. We feel more guilty about harming components of the in-group than of the out-group, and guilt is most intense when the victim of our transgression is a loved one.

This effect has been shown by Baumeister et al. (1994) in a study highlighting the social function of guilt. Subjects were asked to write a story about a situation in which they made someone angry. Interpersonal transgressions were guaranteed by the occurrence of angry. Half subjects were instructed to describe a situation in which they felt guilty, the other half an event in which they did not feel guilty. Results showed that harming behavior was followed from feeling of guilt significantly more in stories that involved loved people than in stories without it.

Berndsen et al. (2004) have analyzed the differences between guilt and regret and, in particular, interpersonal and intrapersonal factors which could elicit these emotions. The authors demonstrated that while regret is primarily characterized by the preoccupation for negative events regarding the self, guilt, with its link to empathy, is defined by the preoccupation for negative outcomes regarding others. In this perspective, the belief of having perpetrated an interpersonal transgression, and not only a violation of a norm, is a core feature of guilt (Leventhal and Scherer 1987; Lazarus 1991a, b).

Many other authors have demonstrated that people experiencing guilt are motivated to act prosocially. Ketelaar and Au (2003), for example, induced guilt through a two-round ultimatum bargaining game. Results showed that participant experiencing guilt was more likely to engage generous behavior in the second part of experiment, compared to subject that felt no guilt. In another study, De Hooge et al. (2007) induced guilt or shame using autobiographic recall. Participants played a social dilemma game that tested the extent to which they acted cooperatively with another individual. In this case, results showed

that guilt motivated cooperative behavior, while shame had no effect on this type of behavior.

Also, Prinz and Nichols (2010) sustain an interpersonal and prosocial view of this emotion. By exploring the difference between guilt and survivor guilt, the authors reject the hypothesis of two forms of guilt: one elicited by causing harm and the other elicited by inequitable benefits. They suggest that every experience of guilt ultimately originates from transgression; for example, people who experience survivor guilt feel responsible for the suffering of others, erroneously believing that they have violated the norm to protect their loved ones or someone they have been connected with, for example, during the same flight that ended in the air crash (Prinz and Nichols 2010).

It could be possible to reinterpret Freud's theory in an interpersonal perspective: Being the Super-Ego a psychic need constituted by norms and rules learned through interaction with authority figures, it could be considered an adaptation to social life (Freud 1933/1961c). Therefore, although the way people react to guilt and try to defend themselves from it derives from their own beliefs and is associated with internal phenomena, it always originates in their interactions with others and its role is to bind people together, not to punish (Baumeister et al. 1994). Baumeister et al. stated, in fact, that social norms psychoanalytic models refer to are acquired during social interactions and have, therefore, a social root. Nonetheless, these authors do not specify in which conditions guilt can elicit altruistic behaviors instead of individualistic ones. Hereinafter, some of the main models that have tried to explain this dynamics will be described.

Still within the interpersonal view of guilt, some authors have described this emotion as a complex construct consisting of five factors that interact with each other (Kubany and Watson 2003). According to this multidimensional model, guilt is composed of distress and four interconnected beliefs about responsibility, lack of justification, violation of values and foreseeability. According to these authors, the magnitude of guilt is proportional to the relative importance of each variable in the model. Situational factors (i.e., infliction of harm, physical proximity, damage to a loved partner, being blamed by other and irreparability of the harm) play an important role because they reinforce the beliefs associated with this emotion and consequently increase its magnitude. This conceptualization of guilt, stressing the situational variables, reasserts the interpersonal nature of this emotion and its relevance for the regulation of human relationships.

The "social" nature of guilt has been shown also by researches on the so-called vicarious or group-based guilt, a feeling experienced not in reaction to one's own misdeed but in response to the transgressions of other individuals (Mancini 2008; Tangney et al. 2007). It is the case of relatives of people who have committed crimes who ask for forgiveness from the victims or their families. Even if guilt is only vicarious, it induces certain actions aimed at repairing the harm done by another individual: Also in this case, the level of guilt experienced is linked to the degree of interdependence with the perpetrator (Lickel et al. 2005). This seems to show how the emotion of guilt is connected to the maintenance of social identity and intergroup processes, and it is not only banished to the intrapsychic realm. For example, some authors (Turner et al. 1987) have hypothesized that when people consider themselves as a part of a group, this "in-group representation" is a fundamental component of their self-image. Therefore, they feel group-based emotions that are linked to the actions of the group and that activate several behavioral patterns. According to this view, people experience collective guilt when the social group they belong to has illegitimately taken advantage of a situation to the detriment of another group (Branscombe et al. 2007). Zebel et al. (2009) have highlighted how the intensity of this emotion is proportional to the sense of belonging to the group. In a research with Dutch participants, Doosje et al. (1998) showed that the degree of collective guilt experienced mediated the impact of ambiguously presented information about their nation's history on reparation behaviors to members of their nation's former colony (Indonesia). These results show that people may experience collective guilt, but whether this reaction occurs or not depends on how strongly the self is defined in a particular context. Different intensities of emotional experiences can result, depending on whether the self is construed at the personal or the social identity level. Nonetheless, according to other authors (Iyer et al. 2003), collective guilt is a self-focused emotion based in self-focused beliefs rather than an other-focused emotion, which places emphasis on the suffering of the disadvantaged. In this theorization, collective guilt, given its self-focused nature and its narrow attention to compensation, may provide a worse basis for support for general efforts against inequality compared to emotions more focused on the suffering of others, which have been shown to increase efforts to help them.

Another example of the contrasting features of guilt comes from studies on historical victimization (Wohl and Branscombe 2008; Branscombe 2004). In their theorization, group members experience collective guilt only when in-group responsibility is accepted for the harm committed against another group and the harmful actions perpetrated by the in-group are not legitimized (Branscombe 2004; Leach et al. 2006). At the same time, though, when the in-group is reminded of the in-group's historical victimization, harmful actions committed by the in-group during a current conflict are less likely to result in feelings of collective guilt. Moreover, even though some might expect

that reminders of historical victimization would make in-group members more sympathetic to the victimization experiences of another group, when the other group is in direct conflict with the in-group, reminders of historical victimization of the in-group appear to promote social identity protection that precludes prosocial intergroup responses (Branscombe and Wann 1994; Stephan and Stephan 1996; Eidelson and Eidelson 2003).

Despite these contrasting features, according to the interpersonal view, guilt loses its negative tone to give space to positive characteristics: It not only brings an unpleasant feeling associated with transgression into people's lives but also a push to act appropriately, with the advantage of being well accepted in the group they belong to.

Similarities and differences between guilt and shame

An aspect that must be carefully taken into account in this argumentation is what differentiates guilt from another emotion with which it is often associated: shame. People intuitively link the terms guilt and shame to different emotional states, but in some cases, these emotions have common characteristics, which sometimes makes it difficult to distinguish them. Moreover, guilt and shame are often experienced together in real life, particularly in situations in which people believe they have violated norms they consider just or desirable (Lewis 1971).

In fact, for a long time the two terms were used nearly interchangeably. According to Freud (1924/1961a, 1930/1961b), shame is a transformation of guilt, fed by unacceptable impulses of a sexual or aggressive nature; guilt, in fact, originates in the conflict between the Ego and the Super-Ego when the individual violates an interiorized moral standard. After this first theorization, other authors started to consider the two emotions as distinct (Piers and Singer 1953/1971; Lynd 1956). They associated guilt with rigid, inviolable obligations (controlled by the Super-Ego) and shame with values considered important, which delineate the ideal Ego.

Currently, authors tend to consider shame as the emotion associated with the discrepancy between what one is and what one would like to be. By contrast, guilt arises when individuals understand the difference with respect to how they *should* be (Piers and Singer 1953/1971; Lynd 1956; Lewis 1971; Teroni and Deonna 2008). It follows that guilt always arises from situations involving transgression of a moral value, whereas shame can be experienced in both moral and nonmoral contexts (Lewis 1971).

Furthermore, in certain situations, people experience guilt even in the absence of an actual moral transgression, such as the guilt of the survivor experienced by people

even if they have made no ethical violation (Neiderland 1961; Lifton 1967) and the guilt associated with reporting bad news (Tesser and Rosen 1972; Johnson et al. 1974). From various studies it can be deduced that even if guilt and shame manifest in situations involving morals, they can also be experienced when there are no ethical values to protect, but rather one's image or others' good.

The functionalist approach underlines the importance of the self and others in analyzing evaluation processes and considers as relevant variables peoples' evaluations of themselves and their own actions, which make an emotional event significant (Barrett and Campos 1987). The general idea is that in shame this kind of evaluation is focused on the self and people believe they have been bad, whereas in guilt attention is focused on the wrong action and the evaluation is concentrated on a single behavior not on the individual (Lewis 1971, 1987; Tangney and Dearing 2002; Lewis 1995). In this view, the distress associated with shame is more pervasive and painful than that associated with guilt; it is a global judgment made by the individual, which is stable and difficult to change. By contrast, in guilt there is a specific and transitory evaluation of a single behavior; an action considered wrong is easy to avoid in the future. Briefly, it is more painful to accept that you are a *bad person* than that you have committed a *bad action* (Janoff-Bulman 1979; Barrett and Campos 1987; Tangney 1998). This model explains why shame is associated with feelings of disparagement and lack of power (judgments of characteristics of the self), whereas guilt is often accompanied by remorse and regret. People who experience guilt also wish to confess, excuse themselves and repair the damage caused by their behavior (Lindsay-Hartz 1984; Tangney et al. 1989; Tangney 1992; Baumeister et al. 1994). By contrast, in the case of shame people want to hide and they try to defend the self because they feel impotent and subject to others' judgment, which sometimes generates anger reactions (Lewis 1971, 1985; Wicker et al. 1983). In line with this theorization, anger seems to be a protective emotion and, therefore, it should be more present in shame, in which the integrity of the self is threatened, than in guilt. That is what Tangney et al. (1992) found in an study using real-life stories: They showed that greater feelings of anger are present in memories regarding shame than guilt. However, according to other studies, anger is associated with both emotions, but with qualitatively different content and consequences (Tangney 1992). It is believed that people in whom shame constitutes a distinctive personality trait have a tendency toward maladaptive anger reactions associated with suspicion, resentment and lack of empathy. Instead, when anger is associated with a tendency toward guilt, it is expressed in a more direct and adaptive way (Tangney 1990, 1992, 1996). In a recent experiment, Lutwak et al. (2001) showed

that people who feel shame have difficulty repressing anger, whereas those who feel guilt are able to control it and present themselves less aggressively.

Various experiments also show that these emotions are characterized by motivational drives and tendencies toward different actions. Guilt induces people to ask for forgiveness, to confess and to try to make amends for their own errors in order to alleviate their pain and protect their social relations. Thus, guilt is associated with prosocial and helpful attitudes (Tangney 1993; Baumeister et al. 1994, 1995; Tangney and Dearing 2002). Many experimental studies have also shown a correlation between guilt and increased self-esteem (Leith and Baumeister 1998; Tangney 1998), improved interpersonal skills (Covert et al. 2003), improved control of anger (Lutwak et al. 2001) and an inclination toward empathy (Fontaine et al. 2001). Instead, shame makes people to feel small, incapable and awkward and leads them to avoid social interaction to protect themselves from further pain and humiliation. According to this view, shame induces behaviors that help safeguard the individual from "punishment" (Gilbert 2003). It seems to be connected with low self-esteem, anxiety, depression and psychosis (Tangney et al. 1995; Tangney and Fisher 1995; Averill et al. 2002; Tangney and Dearing 2002; Woien et al. 2003). This view, although it is generally accepted into the moral emotion research field, has been recently challenged by new research data. De Hooge et al. (2010, 2011), for example, have shown that shame activates both approach and avoidance behaviors. In particular, they found that shame primarily motivates approach behaviors to restore the damaged self: Avoidance behaviors become predominant only when situational factors make this restoration too risky or difficult and the restore motive decreases.

In the effort to explain the different behavioral patterns (approach vs. avoidance) associated with shame, Gausel and Leach (2011) have proposed a new conceptual model that distinguishes the appraisals (of self-defect and other's condemnation) and feelings (of rejection, inferiority and shame) embedded in the shame concept. In their conceptualization, when people appraise their moral failure as damaging their social image to such a degree that others will condemn them, they are likely to defend their social image from further damage by hiding and avoiding others. However, this should not be considered as shame but rather as a feeling of rejection and inferiority. Instead, shame is elicited only when people appraise a moral failure as indicating a *specific* self-defect and show a concern for their self-image that is only *partially* damaged. Since the self-defect is specific, it is potentially alterable (Tangney et al. 1996; Ferguson 2005; Ferguson et al. 2007). This is why these authors consider the feeling of shame as important to the motivation to improve the self and social

relations. On the other hand, when people appraise a moral failure as indicating a *global* self-defect, a feeling of inferiority is activated: One believes that one's whole self-image is severely damaged. Since a global self-defect is viewed as unalterable (Lewis 1971), this feeling of inferiority is more debilitating than the feeling of shame. These authors highlight also the main differences between shame and guilt. Guilt focuses more narrowly than shame on the appraisal of agency (i.e., causality, responsibility) for moral failure. Thus, in their conceptualization, the concern in guilt is the moral failure rather than the self-image of the failed. Given this focus on the agency for moral failure, guilt is more easily dealt with by improving the social consequences of the moral failure for which one appraises oneself as an agent (Leach et al. 2002, 2006). Instead, since shame shows a greater concern for self-image than guilt, it is a greater motivation for the improvement of self-image. In fact, one's identity is not implicated in the same way in guilt as in shame. Nevertheless, these two emotions can be interconnected in complex ways: For example, being a "right and proper agent" could be also considered as a goal regarding the self-image. An appraisal of a "wrong and inappropriate" agency can therefore elicit both guilt and shame that, in this case, interact.

Following another line of reasoning, guilt and shame are negative emotions that punish individuals when they act inappropriately. In fact, according to various researchers, a distinction should be made between the two emotions based on what they castigate. On the one side, shame indicates which behaviors are held to be socially unacceptable; on the other side, guilt warns individuals that they are not acting in line with their own values (Ausebel 1955; Smith et al. 2002). Therefore, shame has the function of safeguarding individuals' public image and guilt than of maintaining their idea of moral integrity.

In summary, the various approaches suggest that guilt can include the violation of an ethical, moral or religious norm (Izard 1977), personal responsibility for one's own actions (Lewis 1971), empathic preoccupation for people (Baumeister et al. 1994) and self-punishment (Freud 1924/1961a, 1930/1961b). By contrast, shame involves perception of the self as unsuitable for the situation (even if it does not necessarily involve damaging morals) (Izard 1977), the perception that one's own defects are at the center of attention of an audience (Lewis 1971) and the tendency to defend oneself by means of social withdrawal and anger (Lewis 1971, 1985). It has also been shown that attempts to differentiate the two emotions on the basis of particular characteristics are not always confirmed by experimental data and daily life situations. There may be various reasons for this difficulty; for example, in real life the two emotions are often co-present, and this can affect experimental results. Furthermore, the instruments used to

evaluate emotions are often constructed according to a given model that conceptualizes each emotion rather rigidly. The difficulty has also been pointed out of defining some emotions in a way that is acceptable to various researchers and authors. In particular, the literature on guilt demonstrates that different points of view are contrasting, especially regarding its connection with shame; in fact, at certain conditions guilt and shame seem to have very similar characteristics. For example, when a moral standard is violated, guilt seems particularly linked to fear of punishment and the tendency to avoid the consequences by social withdrawal, which is a behavioral pattern generally ascribed to shame (Sheikh and Janoff-Bulman 2010).

Before we are able to make a clear distinction between the two emotions, we have to expand our understanding of guilt. In fact, given the great variety of studies published on this emotion, it seems an oversimplification to arbitrarily choose one approach instead of another. Future research should more directly compare hypotheses deriving from two or more theoretical models in order to facilitate the development of an integrative model which can fully harmonize the several aspects proposed in the description of guilt and its distinction from shame.

Methodological issues

The study of guilt has somewhat made difficult by the complexity of the experimental procedures required to induce, measure and differentiate it from other emotions in the artificial context of the laboratory. Research on emotions has been mainly concerned with basic emotional states (sadness, anger, fear and happiness) rather than moral ones, probably because of the methodological procedures required by the latter (Tracy and Robins 2004). The stimuli usually adopted to study basic emotions evoke activation linked to physiological needs connected with survival. The study of moral emotions, which are linked to the protection of socialization or self-evaluation, requires a more complicated methodology. It is always more difficult to identify these emotions than basic ones, because they are less characterized by physiological indexes or characteristic facial expressions. This seems particularly true in the case of guilt but not for all moral emotions, for example, when people experience shame they blush, which is a peculiar index rarely considered in ad hoc studies.

Despite methodological difficulties, in the past 10 years researchers have begun to investigate in these emotions, which are able to shape human behavior by inhibiting transgressions and promoting prosocial acts (Tangney 1991; Monteith 1993; Baumeister et al. 1994, 1995). The mostly used experimental procedures include simple recall of life events, which seem effective but do not permit

controlling for confounding variables, such as the arousal of other emotions.

To identify and measure guilt, researchers often use several questionnaires. The Guilt Inventory (GI; Jones et al. 2000) is an evaluation scale that measures separately trait guilt, state guilt and moral standards. The instrument is based on the concept that guilt is an emotion that does not coincide with moral standards and therefore requires separate measurement instruments. The Interpersonal Guilt Questionnaire-67 (IGQ-67; O'Connor 1995) evaluates four different types of guilt and measures them separately: survivor guilt, separation guilt, omnipotent responsibility guilt and self-hatred guilt. The Guilt And Shame Proneness (GASP) scale measures individual differences in the propensity to experience guilt and shame across a range of personal transgressions (Cohen et al. 2011). The GASP asks the subjects to read the description of an event, trying to imagine themselves in that situation. This test assumes guilt as "private emotion," connected to negative evaluations of one's behavior and action tendencies aimed to repair the transgression, whereas shame is linked to the social evaluation of one's behavior and avoidance tendencies.

The Test of Self-Conscious Affect (TOSCA; Tangney 1990) was created to measure shame, blame, detachment/indifference and pride as well as guilt. Guilt proneness is measured using transgression sketches in which moral violations consist of treating another person unjustly. In fact, the authors considered this emotion strictly linked to relations with others and to the empathic reaction others' suffering can trigger.

Nevertheless, using questionnaires to evaluate guilt can lead to incorrect conclusions, because they are often biased due to the theoretical model they are based on. Furthermore, the constructs measured may not be directly involved in guilt. For example, TOSCA proposes situations in which responsibility is determined in a subjective and exaggerated way by the individual, similar to survivor guilt. Consequently, high scores on guilt proneness may be due more to responsibility than to the emotion of guilt; in fact, guilt and responsibility are not always simultaneously present. For example, several studies have adopted vignettes in which responsibility was modulated by the description of intentional or accidental occurrence. The results showed that individuals experienced greater guilt in the accidental than in the intentional damage condition (Baumeister et al. 1995; Kubany and Watson 2003). Moreover, Berndsen and Manstead (2007), using different scenarios to manipulate the controllability and interpersonal harm of negative outcomes, found that responsibility increased as a function of guilt, but that the reverse relation did not emerge. Even though responsibility was mediated by guilt, guilt ratings were not mediated by perceived

responsibility, which implies that differences in guilt cannot be accounted for entirely in terms of responsibility (see also Baumeister et al. 1994; Frijda 1993). Cohen et al. (2011) have also highlighted that some questionnaires (as TOSCA) do not differentiate between emotional responses to transgressions and subsequent behavioral tendencies. Evaluations of one's behavior (in the case of guilt) or of one's self (in the case of shame) are often considered together with reparation and avoidance (behavioral tendencies), without any clear distinction (see also Schmader and Lickel 2006; Wolf et al. 2010). Defining an emotion only on the basis of its behavioral tendencies is problematic because, for example, it assumes that desire for reparation means one is feeling guilt.

Another methodological issue regards the validity of vignette- and recall-based methodologies in capturing the concomitants of online experience. Parkinson and Manstead (1993), for example, have raised the possibility that nonconcurrent reports about emotion may reflect more people's implicit theories of emotion than the actual correlates of emotional experience. Emotion reports obtained in the absence of concurrent experience could correspond to generalized beliefs to a greater extent than do online reports: Therefore, both retrospective and prospective reports are often exaggerated in intensity.

Even though Robinson and Clore (2001) have shown the high degree of correspondence of online and simulated accounts of emotion (and the validity of this methodology), studies must always be considered in light of the methodological limits of the instruments used. Future studies should also focus on developing methods to induce guilt to be able to study it more effectively and determine the characteristics that describe it in more detail, with the least possible "confounding" interference due to the activation of other affective states.

Guilt and psychopathology

The different ways guilt has been defined have also determined the existence of different points of view regarding the correlation of this emotion with psychopathology. Considering guilt as an internal sanction has led psychodynamic researchers to focus on its negative characteristics and to emphasize its involvement in the development and maintenance of psychopathology (Freud 1924/1961a, 1930/1961b, 1923/1959; Menninger 1934/1966; Piers and Singer 1953/1971; Panken 1983). By contrast, the interpersonal approach has re-evaluated the adaptive role of this emotion by showing its motivational drive toward prosocial behaviors, thus bringing into question its direct link to psychopathology (Tangney 1992; Baumeister et al. 1994, 1995; Barrett 1995;

Hoffman 1998; Leith and Baumeister 1998; Kubany and Watson 2003).

Traditionally, guilt was considered an "uncomfortable" emotion leading to mental disorders. From this perspective, guilt is something to be avoided, to fear and to keep at a distance. This consideration has its historical roots in the psychoanalytic approach, which considers the emotion closely connected with the development of several psychopathologies (Freud 1924/1961a; Hartmann and Loewenstein 1962; Blatt 1974; Jones and Kugler 1993). As already underlined, in the psychoanalytic literature guilt is considered a negative emotion associated with the violation of one's internal norms and the fear of punishment. In his clinical practice, Freud (1930/1961b, 1933/1961c) often observed a strong guilt associated with sexual fantasies about one of the parental figures at the base of his patients' psychopathology (Oedipus complex). The Super-Ego uses guilt as a means of punishment to avoid succumbing to the unacceptable impulse: This process can easily lead to psychopathology when guilt becomes excessive (Weiss 1983; Weiss and Sampson 1986; Bush 1989; O'Connor et al. 1999). Lewis (1971) specified that proneness to guilt might only be connected with some psychopathologies. For example, shame proneness might cause greater vulnerability to affective disorders, whereas guilt proneness might lead to vulnerability to disorders associated with thought, such as obsessive–compulsive disorder (OCD) or paranoia.

The role of excessive guilt in some disorders is emphasized also in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV). Among the symptoms characterizing Major Depressive Episodes are "feelings of worthlessness or excessive or inappropriate guilt (which can be delirious) nearly every day" (APA 2000, p. 327). The manual also points out that a disproportionate sense of guilt can be pervasive in people with post-traumatic stress disorder: "Individuals with Posttraumatic Stress Disorder may describe painful guilt feelings about surviving when others did not survive or about the things they had to do to survive" (APA 2000, p. 428). In fact, one common irrational belief that accompanies this disorder is that if people receive something good, they are directly responsible for another person who did not receive it. The descriptive characteristics of obsessive–compulsive disorder also include "feelings of guilt and pathological responsibility" (APA 2000, p. 430).

A strong sensitivity to guilt is considered a basic element also in the pathology of OCD, particularly in cognitive-behavioral models (Salkovskis 1985, 1995; Rachman 1993; Shafran 1995). In accord with these models, obsessions and compulsive behaviors are carried on to avoid situations that can trigger guilt, which is held to be strictly connected with the perception of being responsible for the occurrence of negative events (Shaver and Down 1986;

McGraw 1987; Miceli 1992). Finally, some studies have shown the connection between proneness to guilt and eating disorders (Dunn and Ondercin 1981; Rodin et al. 1984; Fairburn and Cooper 1984).

In recent years, much evidence has been reported on the relationship between guilt and an ever greater number of psychological disorders, confirming the interest in this emotion also for clinical purposes (Bybee et al. 1996; Ghatavi et al. 2002).

One guilt or two guilts?

The literature on guilt discussed in this paper shows that it can be characterized by many different and at times contradictory characteristics depending on the situation. On the one side, its adaptiveness in reinforcing relationships and encouraging helpful and protective behaviors has been described (Hoffman 1981, 1998). According to interpersonal models, guilt arises from the awareness of having unjustly caused another person to suffer, thus evidencing the basic role of empathy or the ability to understand emotions, in this case others' suffering (Hoffman 1981, 1998). Therefore, the goal of guilt is to maintain reciprocal altruism (Trivers 1971): Individuals act to produce benefits for other individuals without expecting an immediate return, but with the expectation of benefiting from the same support when the occasion presents itself.

On the other hand, other authors have accentuated the unpleasant tone (i.e., punishing and pathological) this emotion can have. Many religious practices and legal penalties are based on the idea that guilt must be expiated by means of sanctions. It has also been verified that this is often true also for guilt, which is a self-punishing emotion (Tomkins 1963; Mosher 1965; Lewis 1971) and from which a certain fear of punishment derives (Wicker et al. 1983). As already pointed out, these two approaches show important contrasting elements at the level of motivations and action tendencies. According to the psychoanalytic approach, this emotion inhibits transgressive behaviors through fear of punishment, which induces avoidance behavior. By contrast, according to the interpersonal approach, guilt promotes prosocial and altruistic behaviors that induce people to get closer to the individuals they feel guilty toward.

What still needs to be clarified, however, is what induces people to give their help or engage in escape behaviors when they are overwhelmed by a guilt. As yet, there are no models able to fully explain the behavioral asymmetry associated with this emotion. Indeed, it is quite interesting to consider that in certain situations guilty behavior is similar to the behavior associated with shame, whereas in other situations it is associated with the empathic feelings of pity and sadness. Is guilt a single emotion that activates different behavioral outcomes depending on different situational variables, or should we consider the existence of two distinct senses of guilt? Research data seem to support both the described conceptualizations; we therefore suggest that this issue still needs to be appropriately addressed.

Amodio et al. (2007), for example, in line with the former conceptualization, proposed a dynamic model of guilt (considered as a single emotion) that describes the two facets of this emotion as placed on a temporal continuum. In a study on 47 white American students, after having excluded subjects with racial prejudices (based on scores at the *Attitude Toward Blacks* scale), the researchers induced guilt using a deceit paradigm, in which a "negative EEG response" to black faces was presented. In this case, guilt arose from transgression of a moral standard: the prejudice. Guilt, immediately after the guilt induction, was associated with a reduction in approach motivation and the deterrence of transgressions. Only in a second phase, guilt seemed to induce in the participants the motivation to repair their own mistakes (i.e., approach motivation, in the form of a clear preference of the participants toward articles about prejudice reduction). The model suggests that interpersonal and intrapsychic theories could be reconciled considering the motivational systems that accompany emotion over the course of time.

Another model that is increasingly supported by research data (Basile and Mancini 2011; Basile et al. 2010) and that could harmonize the various theories and aspects of guilt is Mancini's (2008). In his perspective, intrapsychic and interpersonal models are not considered as mutually exclusive, but as two views that focus on two different, independent emotions (i.e., *altruistic guilt* and *deontological guilt*), which at times occur simultaneously. The two senses of guilt are not activated by different types of event but differ only by virtue of the interpretation of an event in the context of individual goals, beliefs or desires. Considering that emotions could be differentiated in terms of experiential categories (e.g., by feelings, thoughts, action tendencies and goals, Roseman et al. 1994), the proposed model hypothesizes that the two types of guilt derive from the frustration of different goals and can be associated specifically with other affective states (e.g., pity vs. shame). In particular, guilt defined as altruistic guilt (AG) is an affective state experienced when people are convinced they could have acted differently and feel they have not been altruistic because they caused damage or suffering to others who deserved altruism. This emotional state is strictly connected to empathy and the goal of altruism, soliciting altruistic attitudes in the attempt to expiate for errors or lacks. This type of guilt is also similar to the one described by interpersonal models and, as shown also in other studies (Baumeister et al. 1995; Kubany and

Watson 2003), is experienced when those suffering are close. On the other side, deontological guilt (DG) is not linked to altruistic tendencies and reinforced by affection toward the suffering person. It "arises out of the assumption of having slighted moral authority or norms, or of having overturned the natural order, thus violating the 'Do not play God' principle. It implies that one could have acted differently, and brings feelings of unworthiness and expectations of punishment" (Gangemi and Mancini 2011, p. 169). While in altruistic guilt there is always a victim suffering harm and the belief of not having been altruistic, in deontological guilt there could be no victim at all (e.g., incest between consenting siblings), but there is the assumption of having violated the "Do not play God" principle (Mancini 2008). Further researches are needed to test which one of the suggested models can better describe the complex nature of this emotion and explain the asymmetry of its behavioral outcomes.

Conclusions

Two main approaches emerge from the review of the scientific literature on guilt. From the psychoanalytic perspective, guilt is a process within the individual that has the aim of punishment for bad actions. In line with this first theorization, guilt is activated in relation to fear of punishment for having transgressed social norms and it is the result of a past history of negative reinforcements fostering the internalization of moral standards (Mosher 1965). According to this point of view, guilt triggers a sort of expectation of punishment that mortifies the individual, motivating him to avoid transgressing ethical and moral norms in the future (Mosher 1965; Izard 1977; Monteith 1993; Wertheim and Schwartz 1983). By contrast, the interpersonal approach emphasizes the social role of the emotion; guilt is able to warn the individual about behaviors that can threaten relationships with the people around them. In this perspective, guilt is strictly connected to empathy (Tangney 1989, 1991), elicits empathic preoccupation and acts of reparations toward the suffering other and is favored when the other is someone close (Baumeister et al. 1994).

In fact, when people are experiencing guilt, they can show a motivation to give their help or engage in escape and self-punitive behavior. Current existing models seem not to be able to fully explain the behavioral asymmetry associated with this emotion. In particular, models exist that consider guilt a single emotion that activates different behavioral outcomes depending on different situational variables, together with new theoretical approaches, supported by data, suggesting the existence of two distinct senses of guilt which at times can occur simultaneously.

Considering the existence of data supporting both the described conceptualizations, future studies are needed to unveil the various inconsistencies of such proposals in order to fully comprehend the nature of this moral emotion.

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