

My Bad! Why We Feel Guilt in the First Place

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Guilt plays a vital role in the regulation of social behavior. That worried feeling in our gut often serves as the impetus for our stab at redemption. However, psychologists have trouble agreeing on the function of this complex emotion. On one hand, the punitive feeling of guilt may keep you from repeating the same transgressive

behavior in the future, which psychologists call “withdrawal motivation.” Conversely, some researchers view the function of guilt in a societal context, in that; it keeps people’s behavior in line with the moral standards of their community. This view emphasizes a more positive emotional experience and is associated with “approach motivation.”

In a new study appearing in the June issue of *Psychological Science*, published by the Association for Psychological Science, New York University psychologist, David M. Amodio, and his colleagues, Patricia G. Devine, and Eddie Harmon-Jones, sought to combine the two camps. The researchers believe that guilt is initially associated with withdrawal motivation, which then transforms into approach-motivated behavior when an opportunity for reparation presents itself. Furthermore, the researchers sought to test these questions about the functions guilt in the context of reducing racial prejudice.

To test their theory, the researchers showed participants pictures of White, Black, or Asian faces, while monitoring their brain activity using EEG. The researchers then relayed randomized scores to the participants, telling them whether they responded positively or negatively to the White, Black, and Asian faces.

After receiving feedback indicating that they had responded negatively toward Black faces, subjects reported significantly increased guilt, anxiety, and sadness. The increase in guilt was larger than the change in any other emotion. Their reports were confirmed by the EEG, which showed significant reduction in left-sided frontal asymmetry following feedback. A large body of literature contends that left-sided asymmetry corresponds to approach motivation. So, in this case, the participants were initially feeling the punitive effects of guilt, or withdrawal motivation.

The participants then completed another study in which they read a variety of magazine headlines. Interspersed among some filler headlines, were three titles pertaining to prejudice reduction (“Improving your interracial interactions,” “10 ways to reduce prejudice in everyday life,” and “Ways to eliminate your own racism in the new millennium”). The participants that were told they responded negatively toward black faces, revealed a large left-sided shift in frontal cortical activity while reading the prejudice-reduction titles, indicating approach motivation.

So, when subjects were given the opportunity for reparation, their feelings of guilt predicted their interest in prejudice-reducing behavior. Previously emotions have been considered relatively unchanging, basic, feeling states. Amodio’s research presents a new idea of emotions serving a dynamic motivational function for regulating behavior. These findings also suggest that although it feels bad, guilt plays a critical role in promoting prosocial changes in behavior, and Amodio’s research demonstrates these effects in context of reducing racial prejudice.