

Guilt: an emotion under suspicion

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Nowadays, both among psychologists and in large social groups, there is a wide acceptance of the idea that guilt feelings are something culturally conditioned, with mostly negative effects on the individual, without any other function apart from that of social control. It is seen as something, thus, that we would be better off without and replace it -in any case- with a rational judgment on actions. In this article by reviewing the main studies regarding its effects, its functions, and the influence of culture upon it, we will analyze to what extent this outlook on guilt is justified.

Cultura y Culpa: la culpa, una emoción bajo sospecha. En la actualidad, tanto entre los psicólogos como entre diferentes grupos sociales, se acepta ampliamente que los sentimientos de culpa están condicionados culturalmente, que producen efectos mayormente negativos para las personas, sin ninguna otra función que la de control social. La culpa se percibe como un fenómeno con el que se viviría mejor sin el cual se podría reemplazar con un juicio racional de las acciones. Mediante la revisión de los principales estudios sobre los efectos y las funciones de la culpa, así como sobre la influencia cultural en los anteriores, analizaremos hasta qué punto la concepción antes descrita de la culpa es adecuada.

Nowadays, feelings of guilt have quite a bad press. Both among psychologists and in large social groups, the idea that guilt feelings are something culturally conditioned, with mostly negative effects on the individual, without any other function apart from that of social control; is widely accepted. These feelings are seen as something with which we would be better off without, and in any case could replace them with a rational judgment on actions. This negative point of view on guilt has outstanding defenders. Among those who have had most influence on this issue in psychology, is Freud himself.

From a Freudian point of view (Freud, 1923/1973, 1930/1973), as a result of the resolution of the Oedipus Complex, social norms and coercions become internalized —constituting a new agency, the *super-ego*— and start to act from inside the individual. This implies a fundamental change: internal coercion is added to external coercion, which makes the last one less necessary. From that moment on, the ego, as well as taking reality into account, has at the same time to respect a new representative of it, which is often irrational and much stricter: the *super-ego*. When it does not, it will suffer the *super-ego*'s recriminations and feel guilty. Guilt feelings, the anxiety in the face of *super-ego*'s severe vigilance, make the ego defer to the requirements of this one. Thus, guilt feelings constitute an important cultural factor. However, according to Freud, although these guilt feelings can be beneficial for society, they are strongly negative for the individual.

Indeed, following Freud, guilt feelings act as an inhibitor factor of personality. They inhibit not only transgressions of the individual's moral norms but also many other aspects of her/his life, including the most productive and creative ones. Guilt feelings create an «intimidation» in the person, with more serious effects in children, since it is in opposition to their natural curiosity and research interest. Moreover, guilt feelings create a need for punishment, which tends to turn into self-punishment and can lead the person to failure in many daily activities —including professional ones— and, in certain extreme circumstances, to suicide itself. In addition, as long as they constitute an unpleasant emotion, the person will activate many defense mechanisms against them (repression, projection, reaction-formation, etc.). In this way, guilt feelings emerge in many different forms, often difficult to recognize: they can be found both under the loosest moral behaviour or in the strict behaviour of the obsessive neurotic. They can be both the consequence as well as the cause of criminal behaviour, they can be found both in paranoid syndromes and in hysterical ones... Guilt feelings are present in most of the psychological pathologies, acting to a greater or lesser extent on all of them.

Taking into account guilt's negative effects in the individual, Freud poses the need to confront its disturbing dynamism. It is necessary to eliminate the negative effects of a sense of guilt, which is mostly unconscious and, other times excessive and equally disturbing, even if it is conscious. Having this aim in mind, it is necessary to help the person recognize the underlying conflict and come to terms consciously with it in both cases (displacement of guilt from an object or situation which originally was bound to another one, an extremely strict *super-ego*...). And it is as well necessary —though also more difficult — to try and replace those guilt feelings, through emotional reeducation, with a «conscious condemnatory judgment», always referred to the real fault and proportionate to it. Besides this therapeutic solution, Freud also points

out the need to conduct preventive work. This would consist in guiding appropriately children's upbringing, giving up too coercive educational procedures and replacing them with other methods: methods that, without leaving an open path to an indiscriminate satisfaction of the child's drives, would not allow an excessive reinforcing of super-ego and guilt feelings.

Many other psychoanalysts have pointed out the negative effects of guilt. Fromm (1947/1985, 1950/1987), in particular, especially insists in the power of «authoritarian» guilt to get the person to bow to the orders of diverse authorities (more or less interiorized). «Authoritarian» guilt is confused with fear of authority —externalized or internalized in consciousness (as we can see, this guilt shows strong similarities with freudian guilt). The person who feels this kind of guilt is particularly prone to bow to authorities' demands, in order to obtain their approval and calm those guilt feelings. S/he is a dependent and easily manipulated being.

This outlook on guilt, as many other psychoanalytic ideas, has exerted strong influence on our culture. Through essays written in the context of left wing freudian thought and freudomarxism, this perspective on guilt feelings probed deeply into western progressive thinking. Especially from the nineteen sixties onwards, for large intellectual and social groups, guilt looked as an emotion clearly teamed with social order, which did not have any other function but to disturb the individual and to obstruct his/her freedom. Probably, this outlook on guilt has also had a great deal of influence on the strong «temptation of innocence» that characterizes our culture nowadays, «that illness of individualism that consists in escaping from the consequences of one's own acts» so accurately analyzed by Bruckner (1996, p. 14).

In this article by reviewing the main studies conducted regarding its effects, its functions, and the influence of culture upon guilt, the extent in which this outlook is justified will be analyzed. Before that, let us make some remarks about the whereabouts of research in this area.

Not long ago, Baumeister and colleagues expressed their perplexity in the face of the little attention paid to guilt by personality and social psychology during the nineteen eighties (Baumeister, Stillwell y Heatherton, 1994). Well, unfortunately, this neglect of guilt can be observed not only in these areas of psychology, but in the psychology of emotion itself. Research on emotion, after decades of neglect, is now clearly speeding up. However, there is still an important gap here. Until very recently, remarks by theoreticians of emotion on the subject have been, mainly, merely collateral or anecdotal. Analyses like those by Baumeister and colleagues (1994), Tangney (1995a, 1996) or the whole contributions edited by Tangney and Fischer (1995) and Bybee (1998) seem to indicate that something is changing. However, the attention paid to guilt is still not comparable to that paid to other emotions.

In spite of what have just been said, theoretical and empirical contributions on guilt, although scattered, are quite numerous in the whole (Baumeister et al., 1994; Etxebarria, 1989, 1991, 1994a, in press; Tangney, 1995a). As is known, psychoanalysis has devoted great attention to guilt feelings, since it attributes them a basic role in its explanations of normal and pathological psychic life, as well as in individual's moral functioning and in social dynamic. Besides Freud's works (1923/1973, 1930/1973), other noteworthy contributions are those proposed by authors such as Klein (1948, 1973), Grinberg (1971), Lebovici (1971), Piers and Singer (1971) or Lewis (1971). Also —even though those who are not familiar

with the work of theoretical writers in moral learning might be surprised—, authors such as Eysenck (1964/1970, 1976), Aronfreed (1964, 1976) or Grusec (1966) have made important contributions on guilt. Finally, in moral psychology and referring to guilt, we should not forget Hoffman's work (1982, 1998). At an empirical level, as it will be seen further on, there are also numerous studies on the subject. These studies, most of them developed from a view which sees moral development as an internalization, have focused, above all, on the influence of diverse socialization variables —especially, parental disciplines— on guilt feelings and in the effects that those feelings have.

Bearing in mind the state of research into guilt that has just been sketched, the proposed review requires to go further on into what is usually considered as the area of psychology of emotion. Adding to contributions in this area, it requires to consider those carried out from other areas as well, especially from psychoanalysis and moral psychology.

Guilt and culture

The influence of culture on guilt experience seems unquestionable. It is not necessary to review much empirical research to prove it. It is enough, for example, to think about guilt related to homosexuality in Classic Greece and nowadays. However, let us see more in detail in which sense and to what extent culture has an influence on guilt.

Starting with the work of Margaret Mead (1937) and Ruth Benedict (1946), anthropologists have classically distinguished between «guilt cultures» and «shame cultures»: cultures that, in the socialization of their members, promote guilt or shame, respectively. Shame cultures are said to regulate their members' behaviour via external sanctions, whereas in guilt cultures behaviour would be regulated via internal sanctions —sanctions the person would apply her/himself once social norms were internalized. Usually, «primitive» cultures are considered to be «shame cultures» and modern western cultures «guilt cultures».

From this point of view, it is supposed that some cultures will tend to experience guilt feelings more than others. Some studies seem to support this idea. For example, Grinder and McMichael (1963) compared Samoan and American Caucasian children, and found that Samoans tended significantly less than Americans to resist temptation and to show remorse, confession or restitution —the three indicators of guilt used in the study— after transgression. On the other hand, Biaggio (1969), with a sample of adolescents, tried to analyse if guilt feelings were more internalized among Americans than among Brazilians. In this study, the measure of guilt internalization was obtained through the answers that the subjects gave to several incomplete stories in which the main character had committed a transgression. The answers were evaluated according to the criterium proposed by the author to distinguish between «internalized» and «externalized» guilt: there was «internalized guilt» when the main character's reaction facing a transgression took place in the absence of any external threat; other indicators of internalized guilt were the presence of remorse or spontaneous confession and reparation; there was «externalized guilt» when the main character's reaction seemed to be motivated by some external punishment, immanent punishment or fear. Confirming the hypothesis previously established by the author, analyses showed that American adolescents had more internalized guilt feelings than Brazilians.

A reflection that immediately arises from these studies is that perhaps the transgressions used to measure guilt did not have the same meaning in the cultures that were compared. This variable was not controlled in any of the studies mentioned. Thus, although the supposition of some cultures having a greater tendency to experience guilt than others can still be maintained, the results from those studies probably would have been quite different if reactions concerning real transgressions and clearly considered as such in each culture (of course, comparable ones) had been analysed. That, certainly, presents obvious methodological difficulties. However, while those problems are not solved in this or another way, it does not seem that the previous conclusions may be taken as definitive.

Thus, already in 1955, Ausubel criticized the ethnocentrism of previous studies and conclusions in the same line. Starting from a careful analysis of the criteria and data that led Benedict and Mead to establish the distinction between guilt and shame cultures, Ausubel concluded that people from cultures prone to shame, as Navaja or Japanese, are as controlled by moral obligations and probably feel as much guilt as Americans and people from similar «guilt cultures». According to Ausubel, the only difference is the way those emotions are shown. The capacity to experience guilt is so basically human that, under slightly favorable social conditions, it should develop in all cultures.

Although Ausubel's ideas may be correct in many aspects, the hypothesis of some cultures tending to promote guilt feelings more than others continues making full sense. Moreover, in spite of the fact —pointed out by Barrett (1995)— that research on cultural differences about guilt and shame is still scarce, some more recent studies seem to support this idea.

A study conducted by Chiang and Barret (1989) supports that hypothesis. In this study, the authors compared American and Taiwanese 2-3 year old children's reactions to a transgression more or less similar for all them. In the study, a rag clown of many colors, the «favourite doll» of the experimenter, was given to the child, so that s/he could play while the experimenter left the room and, when the child was playing with it, the clown's leg loosened off. The analysis of the children's answers showed a greater tendency to feel guilt among American children than among Taiwanese ones.

An ambitious study directed by Wallbott and Scherer (1995), in which the experiences of shame and guilt in subjects from 37 countries were compared, also seems to support the classic distinction and —what especially is of interest for us here— some cultures' tendency to make of guilt a particularly intrusive experience.

Two issues were analysed in this study: on the one hand, the differences between the emotions of guilt and shame, and, on the other hand, the cultural differences in the experience of these emotions. Subjects were given a questionnaire, asking them to recall situations in which they had experienced diverse emotions, among them, those of guilt and shame. After a free description of the situations remembered, the subjects had to answer 15 questions concerning the situation and their reactions. Topics covered by the questions included the subject's evaluation of the situation, his/her attribution of causation, physiological symptoms experienced and various reactions expressed during the emotion, the intensity and duration of the emotional experience, and the amount of control used to regulate the emotional experience. After analysing the profile of each emotion in the whole sample (2921 subjects), the analysis of cultural differences showed that what we could consi-

der «authentic» shame —insofar as more adjusted to that emotion's general profile— prevailed in collectivistic, high-power-distance and high-uncertainty-avoidance cultures, whereas in individualistic, low-power-distance and low-uncertainty-avoidance cultures shame experiences tended to present characteristics very similar to those of guilt. According to the authors, these cultures, in which shame becomes guilt or where shame experiences include some components of guilt, could be considered «guilt cultures».

Wallbott and Scherer, considering which countries were included in the categories of individualistic, low-power-distance and low-uncertainty-avoidance cultures (Sweden, Norway, Finland, New Zealand and the U.S.A.) and which ones in those of collectivistic, high-power-distance and high-uncertainty-avoidance cultures (Mexico, Venezuela, India, Brazil, France, Chile, Spain, Greece and Portugal), suggest that their results could be explained by the influence of the «Protestant ethic», shared by all the countries of the first group, which has little influence on those of the second group. «Protestant ethic» seems to mix any self-conscious emotion with components of guilt.

If collectivistic cultures are more empathic, and empathy —as will be seen further on— relates to guilt, how is it possible that those cultures appear less prone to guilt? In fact, although Wallbott and Scherer speak of individualistic cultures as «guilt cultures», what their data support is that in these cultures shame experiences are not so clear, and that they tend to mix with guilt more than in collectivistic cultures. The data does not indicate that members of individualistic cultures experience guilt more often or with more intensity than those of collectivistic cultures. It could be the case that some types of guilt —for example, for having caused harm to others— were more intense in collectivistic cultures.

Indeed, although in the studies mentioned before it seems as if cultural differences appeared only in the intensity or the type of emotion that is experienced, it is quite normal to suppose that there will also be differences in the events that cause it. It happens that a culture's values largely determine the meaning their members grant to events. Recalling the example previously mentioned, homosexuality does not have the same meaning in all cultures and historical moments. Also, some culturally determined personality features make subjects belonging to diverse cultures experience events in quite different ways. About this matter, some authors (Markus and Kitayama, 1991) have pointed out the need of taking into account the influence of the predominant type of self —*independent/interdependent*— among the members of a given culture. In a study by Stipek, Weiner and Li (1989) in which this dimension was considered, it was found that whereas the cause of guilt that subjects belonging to cultures with an independent self more frequently mentioned was the violation of a rule or a moral principle, the Chinese, with a more interdependent self, mentioned causing psychological harm to others.

A study by Liem (1997) shows how events that cause guilt can differ in different groups as a result of the influence of different cultural values and conception of self. This study examined shame and guilt experiences in European Americans, second-generation Asian Americans and first-generation Asian Americans through interviews. In it, whereas the first-generation Asian Americans spontaneously reported experiencing guilt for having caused shame to others by virtue of one's own actions, the author's concerted efforts to probe this kind of emotion scenario in interviews with the other two groups were not successful. The author (a second-generation Korean-American himself) related this difference

to the system of ethical principles that serves to induce a sense of moral transgression. In his own words, «European American and second-generation Asian American respondents appear to employ more personalized values systems akin to the psychodynamic notion of conscience, whereas first-generation Asian Americans responded in terms of internalized duties and obligations. A chief distinction between these standards of evaluation is the abstract, decontextualized nature of conscience in contrast to the more situation/role-specific character of duty and obligation. For example, one does not cheat, lie, or steal as a general rule versus one cares for elderly parents, does not disgrace the family name, and defers to one's teachers. The first coheres with a cultural milieu of interacting, autonomous equals, whereas the second implies positioning within hierarchically ordered systems of relationships. In the latter case, membership within groups with particular mixes of statuses is essential to defining the self and makes moral behaviour situation specific. Mutual interdependence of identity within the group also accounts, I believe, for members' capacity to shame the other and to experience guilt as a consequence (Liem, 1997, p. 385).

These studies suggest that in some Eastern cultures guilt might be experienced in the face of events that do not elicitate it—not, at least, in the same grade—in Western cultures. This does not necessarily contradict Benedict's analyses, which—although having been object of great criticism—are still seconded by different authors (Creighton, 1990; Okano, 1994). However, it does seem to support De Vos's point of view, who believes that the Western ethical biases precluded Westerners from recognizing some specific Japanese patterns of guilt (De Vos, 1973).

In any case, it can be said that guilt feelings reveal a strong sociocultural influence, to the extent that certain guilt feelings are probably limited to a given culture and to a certain historical period. But, does this mean that *all* guilt experience is limited to a given culture and that therefore guilt can not be considered an universal emotion? Many authors do not think so.

Besides Ausubel (1955), authors like Eibl-Eibesfeldt (1971) or Izard (1977) have supported the idea of guilt as an universal emotion. Izard affirms that there are 10 innate and transcultural emotions, one of which would be guilt. According to Izard, whereas the *feeling* of guilt, like that of any other emotion, is the same anywhere in the world, its causes and consequences can vary a lot from an individual to another and from one culture to another. Nevertheless, there are certain areas in which relations between transgression and guilt are practically universal. Thus, there are only a few cultures—if there is any—in which the violation of strict sexual taboos as incest does not cause guilt. Exactly the same can be said referring to murder, particularly the murder of members of one's own family or group. Adding to norms referred to these extreme behaviours, all cultures have some ethical and moral norms referred to other sexual and aggressive acts. According to Izard, this is probably the reason why guilt is especially associated with actions, emotions and cognitions related to these areas of behaviour.

On this matter, Hoffman's analyses (1982) also deserve to be underlined. According to this author, there is a type of guilt—in his own words «true» or «interpersonal» guilt in order to distinguish it from Freudian guilt—that is deep-rooted in the empathic response: it arises due to the conjunction of empathic affection in the face of other people's suffering and the attribution of personal responsibility for that suffering. If this is the case, as long as the

empathic response is a preprogrammed, universal response, guilt—derived from it—will also be. From this point of view, we can speak of a natural, universal guilt.

To what extent can it be stated that guilt is derived from empathy? Although other authors (Eisenberg, 1986; Zahn-Waxler and Robinson, 1995) have also pointed out the special connection between empathy and guilt, empirical research on the issue is rather scarce. However, some studies—although they do not prove that guilt is derived from empathy—support that connection and suggest that guilt can be intensified by activation of empathic feelings towards the victim of one's own actions. Among others, it is interesting to mention here an experiment carried out by Hoffman himself (Thompson and Hoffman, 1980). In that experiment, children of different ages were presented a series of semiprojective stories in which the main character caused some damage to another person; then, they were requested to say how they would feel if they were the agents of those actions. Before giving them the guilt measures, half of the subjects were asked to say how they thought the victim in each story would feel. The results revealed that subjects who had been previously stimulated to empathize with the victim showed more intense guilt feelings than those who had not received any stimulus in such sense. Besides research such as the one mentioned, studies which show a close relation between guilt and inductive disciplines (techniques that show the child a victim's pain and his/her causal role in it) also provide indirect empirical support for the connection between guilt and empathy (Etxebarria, 1994b; Hoffman, 1994). Likewise, recent studies by Tangney on the differences between guilt and shame experiences provide new support. This author, in a study in which she analysed the relation between empathy, guilt and shame, found a positive correlation between the tendency to experience guilt and the tendency to experience «other-oriented» empathy (Tangney, 1991). In another study in which autobiographical stories of guilt and shame experiences were analyzed, Tangney and colleagues found that, whereas shame experiences tended to imply concern about other people's judgments about oneself, those of guilt tended to imply concern about the effects of oneself in other people (Tangney, Marschall, Rosenberg, Barlow, and Wagner, 1994).

Hoffman's analyses regarding the relation between empathy and guilt are very interesting, since they suggest the existence of a certain natural base in morality. Obviously, accepting them does not mean denying the existence of many factors that can interfere both in the elicitation of empathic response (characteristics of the victim, attributions referring to the responsibility of oneself in what happens to him/her, geographic distance with the victim, etc.) and in that of guilt (multiple defense mechanisms: negation, projection, etc.). It simply means—and this is by no means petty—that among other positive and negative human dispositions, there is one to feel guilty when a damage is inflicted to others.

The effects of guilt

As has previously been stated, Freud and other psychoanalysts assign to guilt feelings some very negative effects in psychic life. Considering the diverse theoretical analyses on the effects of guilt, two different positions can be distinguished. On the one hand, following Freud, a wide clinical tradition has emphasized the pathogenic nature of guilt, insisting on the role of this emotion in the origin of a large range of symptoms (Fenichel, 1946/1971; Freud, 1923/1973; Grinberg, 1971; Harder, 1995; Harder and Lewis,

1987). On the other hand, mainly in the last years, developmental and social psychology and, particularly, the research on morality and altruism, have emphasized the adaptative functions of guilt in relation to moral behaviour and social adjustment (Barret, 1995; Baumeister et al., 1994, 1995; Eisenberg, 1986; Hoffman, 1982; Tangney, 1990, 1995b; Tangney, Burggraf and Wagner, 1995). Taking into account the empirical research on the effects of guilt, what can we say about these analyses?

As will be seen, many of the effects pointed out by Freud and the psychoanalysts have found a strong empirical support.

Indeed, there are numerous empirical studies that support the idea that guilt acts as an inhibition factor of behaviour in many different areas: that of antisocial behaviour, drug consumption, aggressive behaviour, sexual behaviour, etc. (Mosher, 1979, 1998).

Likewise, diverse studies have shown that subjects who feel guilty tend to show more self-punitive behaviours than those who do not feel guilty. According to some studies, such effect does not take place unless the fault has been socially detected (Wallace and Sadalla, 1966). Nevertheless, according to others, guilt leads to self-punishment out of the consideration of other people's reactions (Wertheim and Schwarz, 1983). The issue, at the present time, is not clear enough. In their review of the empirical research on the subject, Baumeister and colleagues (1994) conclude that there is no solid empirical support to assure that guilt leads to self-punishment.

As for the relation between guilt and submission, diverse experimental studies suggest that guilt increases submission not only to the demands of the victims of one's actions, but also to demands made by other people, even by people who have no idea that the subject has committed a transgression (Brock and Becker, 1966; Carlsmith and Gross, 1969; Freedman, Wallington and Bless, 1967; Wallace and Sadalla, 1966; Yinon, Bizman, Gohen and Segev, 1976). Baumeister, Stiwell and Heatherton (1995) have found strong evidence in support of the effectiveness of guilt as a technique to obtain other people's submission to one's own desires. According to some authors, this effect would be explained by the subject's desire to retribute to him/herself an image of being a «good person». Nevertheless, the submission of subjects who feel guilty when facing clearly negative demands has also been obtained. In some cases extreme situations have been provoked, situations that deny people's innermost convictions and tendencies (Helson, 1964). Therefore, another explanation seems to be necessary. A more appropriate interpretation seems to be that the person, with his/her conformity to other people's demands, would be looking for obtaining their approval, in order to balance the implicit disapproval of guilt feelings in this way.

Certainly, many of the effects set out by Freud have found empirical support. However, besides such effects, other psychoanalysts have pointed out other clearly positive ones too. Thus, as opposed to «persecutory culpability», very similar to freudian guilt, Klein (1948, 1973) distinguishes a «depressive culpability», which does not consist as much in the anguish in the face of the feared object as in the grief for having inflicted a damage to the loved object. This type of guilt promotes repairing tendencies. The person who feels depressive culpability tends to repair the damage caused to others. This thesis can be considered an intuition or a precursor idea of the later analyses of Hoffman (1982) about «true» or «interpersonal» guilt, which —according to Hoffman— tends to promote reparation and altruistic behaviours, constituting, together with empathy, a fundamental altruistic motivation.

The positive effects pointed out by these authors have also found support in the empirical research. Indeed, there is empirical support to affirm that guilty subjects are motivated to make repairing actions —behaviours that try to compensate the victim in some way (Freedman et al., 1967). On the other hand, it has been confirmed too that guilt generates a tendency to do something good for any person, not only for the victim: subjects who feel guilty donate more blood (Darlington and Macker, 1966), show greater will to help friends in difficult situations (Rawlings, 1968), greater disposition to help human rights organizations in boring bureaucratic tasks (Carlsmith and Gross, 1969), to contribute to charity funds (Cunningham, Steinberg and Grev, 1980; Regan, 1971), etc. Baumeister and colleagues (1994), conclude that there is a strong enough basis to affirm that guilt leads to reparation and helping behaviour in general.

Certainly, it can be discussed whether motivation of subjects carrying out such behaviours is altruistic, and some authors have actually done so (Cialdini, Kenrick and Baumann, 1982). In any case, empirical data suggests that guilt implies some component of moral self-corrective character. The suspicion that underlying that component there is the need to lighten oneself from the weight or burden of guilt, to recover self-esteem, to regain approval of other people or any other more or less egoistic motivation, does not change the subtle paradox that guilt feelings hide inside themselves: guilt, that is usually the result of an immoral or egoistic action, can subsequently act as a prosocial, moral motive. This conclusion is also supported by the common experience, pointed out by Hoffman (1982) and confirmed by Baumeister, Stiwell and Heatherton (1995), of guilt leading people to a reconsideration of their own behaviour.

In this debate on the negative versus positive effects of guilt, special attention must be devoted to the large amount of work on the differences between guilt and shame which has been developed during the last years by Tangney and colleagues (Tangney, 1995a, 1996). According to this author, if guilt has been considered a disadapative emotion until now, it is largely due to the fact that this emotion has not been often sufficiently distinguished from shame. Starting from the distinction proposed by Helen Block Lewis (1971) —according to whom in shame the attention would be focused in the self (*I made that horrible thing*), whereas in guilt it would be focused in the behaviour (*I made that horrible thing*)—, Tangney maintains that these two emotions constitute different phenomenologic experiences, with very different effects too —clearly positive in the case of guilt. Tangney brings forward numerous empirical results in favour of the aforementioned distinction and the different effects of one and other emotion.

As far as the effects of guilt are concerned (here we will not refer to the ones of shame), Tangney indicates that diverse studies show that the tendency to experience guilt or *dispositional* guilt is positively associated with the capacity to experience empathy oriented to others, constructive strategies of anger regulation, and benevolent interpersonal perceptions; but, contrary to what Freud maintained and is often supposed, it does not reveal a significant association with pathological symptoms (Harder, 1995; Petersen, Barlow and Tangney, 1995; Quiles and Bybee, 1997; Tangney, 1991, 1994, 1995b; Tangney, Wagner, Barlow, Marschall and Gramzow, 1996; Tangney, Wagner and Gramzow, 1992). Along with these results, Tangney emphasizes another one, which seems to contradict the common idea about people prone to guilt feelings. In a study with college students (Tangney, 1994), the ten-

dency to experience guilt, although it showed a high positive correlation with moral behaviour (measured through self-reports), revealed a negative correlation with the moralistic attitude towards people with weaker moral inclinations. On the other hand, Tangney indicates that the empirical studies on guilt *state* (guilt that is experienced in a given situation) show that guilt experiences tend to imply concern about the effect of oneself in other people, favour empathic connection and maintain the person bound in a constructive way to the interpersonal situation, indicating him/her the way towards the corrective action; instead of an avoidance answer, guilt rather gives rise to desires for confession, apology and/or reparation of the damage caused (Baumeister et al., 1994; Tangney, 1991, 1995b). From these studies, Tangney concludes that guilt emerges clearly as a more moral emotion than shame, as long as it favours the constructive way of responsibility, reparation and restitution.

However, Tangney (1996) does not deny that, in some cases, guilt can be disadaptative. This is the case of when it is combined with shame or, also, when the subject tends to assume responsibility for events that are beyond his/her control.

The distinction between guilt and shame proposed by Tangney seems very promising in order to advance in the understanding of the varied effects, often contradictory, that have been attributed to guilt. However, it is not so clear that there can not be forms of guilt referred to the self as a whole. In fact, it is very easy for an affective reaction originally referred to a concrete behaviour to end up extending itself to the self responsible for it. This extension of the attention focus will not only occur quite easily in people with low self-esteem; it will probably occur in people with a high tendency to perceive themselves as subject agents too, and even when any of these circumstances do not take place. For example, in the case of a person who, in a fit of violence, ends up inflicting an irreparable damage to a fellow human being, will the attention focus stop in his/her behaviour or will it include all the subjects, recriminating him/her for his/her impulsive character? And how will the subject experience this torture?, would it not continue to be a guilt experience? At the present time, the distinction between guilt and shame cannot be taken as definitely settled yet.

The functions of guilt

In summary, society determines guilt feelings to a great extent, but these feelings have important implications in individual and social dynamics as well. The analysis of this dialectical relation allows us to appreciate guilt's function of social control. This function has been especially emphasized by psychoanalysis and social constructivism and that is probably one of the main reasons which explains guilt's bad press at the present time.

According to Freud, guilt feelings constitute a decisive element in the control of the ego by the super-ego. Guilt feelings generated by the super-ego when the ego contravenes its orders, assure the submission of individuals to social values and norms. This way, they have a clear function of social control. In this sense, Freud, despite his acute conscience of the negative effects of guilt feelings, considers them at the same time —not without sorrow— inevitable and necessary, since, from his point of view, a civilization is not possible without coercion. Therefore, the aim should not be to annul these feelings, but to control their more harmful effects.

After Freud, this function of guilt feelings has been analysed by many other psychoanalysts too. All of them maintain that guilt exerts a social control function; the difference between them lies in the valuation they do of this fact. While Lebovici (1971) considers that the benefits that culture provides to its members largely compensates the unhappiness that guilt entails for them, freudomarxists are much more critical referring to such benefits and, consequently, to the guilt feelings. For Marcuse (1968, 1970) every civilization requires a certain constriction of drives, but, besides that «basic repression», there is a «leftover repression», only necessary so that certain social strata can dominate society in the whole. Marcuse points out the need to ignore guilt feelings that do not serve the interests of «civilization» but those of domination.

More recently, social constructivists have also insisted on guilt's function of social control. For authors such as Armon-Jones (1986), guilt exemplifies with special vividness the social function of emotions: it serves to regulate socially undesirable behaviour and to promote attitudes that reflect and maintain social values and practices. When we analyse in relation to which behaviours the society prescribes guilt (homosexuality, adultery, highly assertive behaviours in women, etc.) this emotion's social control function becomes quite clear. Through guilt experience —an emotion of clearly inhibiting nature— it is aimed to control such behaviours.

Guilt's function of social control seems, in fact, quite obvious. However, the functions of guilt do not end here. When its effects are analysed (see previous section), we realize that guilt has other functions too —and clearly positive ones. Other many authors also think so. Some will emphasize that guilt constitutes a basic element of the corrective control of action, both *a priori* and *a posteriori*: guilt makes the person question him/herself —more or less consciously— what s/he tries to do or what s/he has already done, and often reconsider the course of his/her actions (Berscheid, 1986; Frijda, 1986; Mandler, 1975, 1984); guilt feelings, by inhibiting behaviours that contravene the subject's values, give these more capacity of control on behaviour (Etxebarria 1994a; Etxebarria and De la Caba, 1998) (1). Other authors, as we have seen previously, emphasize the relevance of guilt in prosocial behaviour and interpersonal relations (Hoffman, 1982; Tangney, 1995a). On the other hand, Baumeister and colleagues, stressing the basic function of guilt in the interpersonal field, try to articulate both previous points of view. These authors postulate an interpersonal conception of guilt according to which this emotion is deep-rooted in two basic affective reactions (the empathic activation and the anxiety in the face of others' rejection), it basically appears in relation to actions or omissions that imply a real or possible damage to others —especially to those which are closer—, and it plays a decisive role in the control and reparation of such actions (Baumeister, Reis and Delespaul, 1995; Baumeister et al., 1994).

Nowadays many other authors defend, in more or less coincident terms, this other functional, more positive, facet of guilt (see, for example, Barrett, 1995; Frijda and Mesquita, 1994). All of them conclude that guilt favours self-control and interpersonal relations.

Conclusion

As we have witnessed when examining the different analyses on guilt feelings, it becomes more and more obvious that neither all guilt feelings depend on culture, nor all of them are negative in the psychic life, and all of them do not act only as a form of social control. This may be said not only of certain universal experiences

of guilt, but, moreover, guilt feelings seem to have a basic function in human relations, fundamental in any culture, of a clearly positive nature.

Most of the authors interested in guilt have reached these same conclusions. Thus, Tangney (1991), in an article entitled *Moral affect: the good, the bad and the ugly*, concluded her analysis about the relation between empathy, guilt and shame saying that, according to her results, the ugliness of shame acquired a new dimension, whereas guilt did not seem that bad after all. Also, Baumeister and colleagues reach the conclusion that we face an emotion of great value: «despite its unpopularity, its aversiveness, and its current unsavory reputation, guilt may serve valuable functions to support self-control and interpersonal intimacy» (Baumeister, Reis and Delepaul, 1995, p. 1267).

These conclusions do not imply the denial of the most negative traits of guilt, pointed out brilliantly by diverse authors and that, as we have seen, have found solid support in the empirical research. The aim of the present review was only to draw attention to the risk of—as the saying goes—throwing out the baby with the bath water.

Notes

- ¹ In this way, guilt feelings favour consistency between cognition and action. However, sometimes they rather seem to favour some contradictions between them. This is what happens in some processes of change in values: when adolescents give up certain values they have held during their childhood (for example, some values referred to sexuality) in order to start positively valuing certain behaviours they considered negative before, they often experience guilt in such actions, and this makes their practice not always congruent with the values they defend (even ardently). The observable incongruencies in such situations do not contradict the important «bridge» role that guilt feelings play between cognition and action: they only indicate that the guilt conditioned in childhood still allows the old values to exert some control on behaviour. Guilt feelings *always* favour the consistency of behaviour with the values to whose transgression they are associated with (Etxebarria 1994a, 1994b).

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