

**Emotion and the Moral Lives of Adolescents:  
Vagaries and Complexities in the Emotional Experience of Doing Harm**

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## **Emotion and the Moral Lives of Adolescents: Vagaries and Complexities in the Emotional Experience of Doing Harm**

### ***Emotion and the Moral Life: Introductory Remarks***

Far from being unthinking energies or irrational impulses that control or push people around, emotions are intricately connected to the way people perceive, understand, and think about the world.<sup>1</sup> As such, emotions are also an inextricable part of people's moral lives. As people go about making moral judgments and decisions, they do not merely apply abstract principles in a detached manner. Their emotions—their loves and sympathies, angers and fears, grief and sadness, guilt and shame—are inseparable from how they make sense of and evaluate their own and others' actions, the way things are, and the ways things ought to be. While this is not to say that emotions have a privileged role in morality, it does mean that emotions cannot be reasonably sidelined from the study of people's actual moral lives. Thus, an important part of formulating a theory of moral development is to articulate a framework for capturing children's relevant emotional experiences in the context of morally-laden events, and for understanding how these sometimes turbulent or bewildering experiences inform, enrich, and change their thinking about what is right and wrong and about themselves as moral agents.

In this chapter, we first consider briefly the existing research on the relation between emotion and moral thinking. Next, we offer a perspective that aims to broaden and complicate our understanding of the connections between emotion and morality in adolescence, and set a new agenda for research on this topic.

### ***The Typical Affective Consequences of Moral Transgressions***

The centrality of feelings of empathy or sympathy about the distress experienced by victims of moral transgressions is woven into the fabric of vastly different theories of moral development.<sup>2,3</sup> There is also some empirical evidence that starting at a very young age children recognize that victims feel sad or angry,<sup>4</sup> and that systematic difficulties recognizing others' emotions and systematic deficits in empathy (i.e., in the capacity to be aroused by others' emotions) are strongly associated with psychopathology, aggression, and delinquency.<sup>5</sup> In spite of this, and even as the consensus about the importance of

integrating emotion into the study of moral development continues to grow,<sup>4, 6, 7</sup> research on these issues has been scarce and quite narrowly framed. Very few studies<sup>8</sup> have assessed the actual emotions that children display during socio-moral events or the meanings that children make of their own and others' emotions in the aftermath of such interactions. Rather, the main focus of the extant research has been on children's expectancies of the typical affective consequences of socio-moral events.

The main idea behind this type of research, consistent with the broader literature on affect-event links<sup>9</sup>, is that children remember the emotional consequences of morally-laden interactions and in future situations rely on those generalized affect-event links for anticipating the potential emotional outcomes of diverse courses of action. The emotion expectancies of moral transgressions are thus deemed important inasmuch as they are thought to inform children's subsequent moral judgments and behavior.<sup>6, 7, 9</sup>

The widely accepted—though somewhat unexamined—assumption of this research paradigm has been that the typical affective outcomes of moral transgressions are sadness or anger for the victim and guilt for the perpetrator. The lion's share of this research has dealt with very young children, in an effort to parse a somewhat surprising finding. For although most children expect victims of moral transgressions to feel sad or angry, children under the age of 5 tend to expect that successful acts of victimization (e.g., getting another child's toy, seizing a turn on a swing) will make the victimizer happy, and it is not until the age of 7 or so that children recognize that perpetrators may feel guilt or a mixture of guilt and happiness.<sup>9, 10</sup>

Studies using this method have generated important insights into the normative age-related shifts that characterize the emotion expectancies of children between the ages of 4 and 10. Because the affective expectancies considered normative are well established by middle childhood, the scant research involving adolescents has focused on assessing individual differences in affective expectancies and on ascertaining the prospective effects these individual differences have on youths' moral decisions and behavior. Overall, this research has shown that deviations from the normative affective expectancy—in the form of adolescents who expect perpetrators of moral transgressions to feel happy—are associated with victimization, aggression, and delinquency.<sup>4, 11, 12, 13, 14</sup>

In what follows we suggest that, in normative populations, and especially when dealing with adolescents, the examination of the relation between emotions and morality in terms of the typical

affective expectancies of moral transgressions may be too rigid and may neglect some key considerations that frame how youth make sense of their own experiences of harming. To illustrate this, in the following section we rely on hundreds of narrative accounts drawn from a number of studies in which youths between the ages of 15 and 17 were asked, in individual interviews, to describe an instance when they themselves had caused hurt or distress to a peer, a friend, or a sibling.<sup>15, 16, 17, 18</sup>

### ***Adolescents' Emotional Experience in the Context of Their Own Wrongdoing***

Even a cursory examination of adolescents' accounts makes it plainly evident that emotion talk is pervasive in the way they narrate their own moral transgressions. Given previous research<sup>9</sup> it may seem unsurprising that adolescents almost always speak of the distress experienced by the victims. Nevertheless, what is noteworthy in the accounts below is that adolescents are actually speaking not about the distress caused by a hypothetical perpetrator to a hypothetical victim, but rather about the distress they themselves caused to a specific person they know well. As might also be expected from past research, many of their accounts include references to their own negative emotions. Consider the following example (this and future examples have been edited for length where indicated with a [...]; all names are pseudonyms but everyone's gender is unchanged):

My brother used to be on this really competitive soccer team, and uh, and he worked really hard at it, like he'd drive down two hours a day and everything to get to practice. [...] And they were in the championship and I went down and I saw the game and they played pretty poorly, I mean I'm just saying. It was a pretty demoralizing loss and the team was pretty upset. Anyways, so we were driving back, and then we go to this restaurant and so we're just eating and talking about the game. [...] And I just say, "Like okay wait, you guys were just worse than the other team. Just a fact. Can we stop talking about this?" And uhhh it really, really upset my brother, and to be honest it was really insensitive. It was pretty uh mean spirited. And so actually my parents kind of made me apologize to him, but I felt like I should, and so, I, I apologized to him and I talked to him about it and we ended up making up so. (Tom)

Tom's account illustrates a common scenario in which a teen notices that his or her actions upset another person, feels badly about it, and acts to repair the relationship. Tom makes it quite clear that although his parents made him apologize, the motivation to do so was internal, as he seemed to have recognized that his statements were insensitive and mean-spirited. Thus this narrative serves as a good instantiation of the "typical affective expectancies" inasmuch as, following a transgression, the perpetrator notices the victim's distress and guilt ensues. Still, although one might read Tom's account as implying

that his regret was a direct outcome of his brother's distressed reaction, other examples underscore that guilt is not merely a knee-jerked reaction to distress. Consider the following example:

I was hanging outside during lunch in the court yard with a couple of my friends and I made a joke, like um just a joke about a kid named Larry. He makes jokes about everybody but if he's made a joke to him then he takes it real personal. So [...] I did a joke at him and I kind of made him feel bad. [...] When I said that, he heard it, he got down about it and I was like "Well, you make fun of everybody else, why can't anybody make fun of you?" He's like "Well dude that's just going over the line." and I'm like "Dude you have been over the line too much!" and he kind of just took it personal like he normally does. (Frank).

In this rather typical "you can dish it out but you can't take it" event, Larry claims that Frank's joke hurt him, but Frank rejects Larry's plight as unreasonable and unjust, even as he recognizes that "I kind of made him feel bad". Previous research shows that even preschoolers distinguish between legitimate hurt complaints and the complaints of "cry-babies", and judge the latter to be spurious.<sup>19</sup> Evidence that neither children nor adolescents take another's expression of distress at face value suggests that guilt is not likely to be a simple automatic reaction to distress. Furthermore, it is also often the case that youths feel guilty about what they have done even in the absence of the victim's distress. Our narrative corpus includes many instances of teens who report feeling guilty about having excluded a friend or peer from an activity, even when—in their own telling—the person excluded did not display any overt signs of sadness or anger ("she just turned around and started talking to those other kids"). And adolescents also often report feeling guilty about having lied to or betrayed a friend, even when that person never found out, and therefore presumably never even experienced distress, about the lie or betrayal ("Me and my friends were hanging out with some girls and one of our friends called us and was like 'where are you guys?' and we were really close to his house [...] but we told him that we were at Henry's house and he's like 'oh, all the way out there' [...]. We were just lying [...] I felt kind of bad").

Overall, these examples go to show that a guilt response is not merely a function of a victim's distress. For adolescents, in particular, who are so attuned to the psychological landscape of their experiences, feelings of guilt often result from an evaluation of their own psychological states. Consider the following two examples:

My old friend Karen was like kind of nerdy I guess you could say. Then I made a new friend, Diane. And like ever since then, I've always been like, quote unquote popular, you know. But me and Karen always had like, we always had that link, I guess you could say. And, but once I got to be friends with Diane, we would always make fun of her. Like not really like, "You're ugly," or whatever. Just like, "Why did you do that. That was dumb," or something. And, like at the time, I feel so bad that I did this, but at the time, like we just laughed about it and we thought it was funny. And then I, I was like thinking about it and I was like, "How could I do that to my former best friend," you know. 'Cause she was a person too and just

'cause I wanted to fit in with other people, I shouldn't have done that. So I like, this went on for a while. And after that I apologized to her and she accepted my apology although, I don't think I would have if someone would have done that to me. I would have been really hurt. And I found out that she cried all the time. And that just made me feel really bad that I did that. So ever since then, I don't make fun of people any more. (Linda)

Um, I remember the first time I punched Rita, I have no idea what we were in an argument about, but it was apparently really important at the time (laughing). And we just got into a fight and whenever we got into a fight we always just like walked away from each other and locked ourselves in our room but I think she hit me first and then I really hurt her, punching her, and I felt so bad after hurting her, like I was like crying, I was like "I didn't mean to hurt you!" but she wouldn't talk to me and I remember going to my parents' bathroom and locking myself in there so that they couldn't find me because I felt so bad. [...] I remember she started crying and that's when I felt really bad, cuz I didn't really mean to hurt her but I was just so mad. (Nicole)

Though both Linda and Nicole took note of the hurt each of them caused to her friend, the above accounts suggest that their experience of guilt was connected not merely to what they did or to how their friend responded, but to their evaluations of their own psychological state – Linda's callous intentions, Nicole's overwhelming feelings of rage. Similarly, in Tom's case above, we might understand his regret to result not merely from his brother's upset reaction but from his realization that his own comments had been tactless. In each case, therefore, it appears to be the teens' appraisals and judgments of their own actions that gave rise and meaning to their sense of guilt or remorse. The fact that guilt is so intricately linked to the perpetrator's beliefs about herself or himself--who she is ("I wanted to fit in with other people") and who she strives to be ("how could I do that to my former best friend")—is unsurprising given that guilt is a self-conscious emotion. It also explains why someone might feel guilty even when the "victim" does not express distress or is not aware of what happened. But this important fact is not often explicitly addressed in assessments of affect-event expectancies as measured via hypothetical stimuli, where it may seem as though guilt is the more or less direct or automatic outcome of doing harm or witnessing a victim's distress.

As indicated by their own accounts, teens' emotional responses in the aftermath of wrongdoing are also intimately connected to, and moderated by, their understandings and interpretations of relevant features of the events. In many cases, their appraisals of the facts and meanings of events give rise to a more mitigated sense of guilt or responsibility. Consider the following examples:

My best friend and I, I had invited him to come to the dance with me. And he's [...] into fashion [...] he's not feminine or anything but he likes to look good. And it was probably about 5 or 6 at night and he came to my house and it was dark outside and he was wearing sunglasses. And I was like, "Why are you wearing sunglasses? It's dark and you're inside?" And I said it, there were two other people there. And I didn't think it would hurt his feelings. I was just like, "That's kind of odd." And then we were talking the

next day and he's like, "Yeah, that wasn't really nice." And I was like, "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to hurt your feelings. I was just curious about that, 'cause not many people wear sunglasses inside at night." [...] But he was just like, "Yeah, sometimes you say things that you don't really think about. I know they're not meant to intentionally hurt me, but sometimes they do." And so I'm like, "Well, ok I'll watch out for that." (Hope)

[...] I remember him taking some of like my stuff, and so I was upset and so then I'd like take one of his games or something. And then throughout the day [...] he'd like trip or something and I'd be like, "Oh Henry you're so clumsy". And then he'd say something, "Oh Patty you're so stupid". [...] And then like at first it was just joking and then it got more heated so by the end of the day we were pretty angry at each other. And so then [...] we were getting ready for bed, I don't even remember what I said. But I was like "this we'll be such a good comeback" or something. So then I like said it to him after he had said something really mean to me and it like really hurt my feelings. And so then after he was like, "Patty, I'm sick of you making fun of me all day". And I was like "Well Henry you were making fun of me too". So we just walked away, and he went in bed, you know, and he was crying, and then I was crying in the bathroom. [...] He was faking being asleep, I knew he wasn't. [...] so I walked over to Henry's bed, and I whispered in his ear, I'm like "Henry, I'm really sorry about what happened, I didn't mean to hurt your feelings, you know, and I'm sorry that we've been fighting, it's supposed to be a fun time on our vacation but I know it's my fault but also, it, we're both at fault". Because we had both been contributing to the arguments and I know that we can be better. And I was like, "I love you and I want to make this better and I hope that you'll forgive me". So then I just went to bed and then the next morning it was okay. (Patty)

Me and my friends were going snowboarding one time and another friend wanted to come, but he had never been snowboarding before, and we didn't really feel like teaching him or whatever so [...] we just kinda blew him off that day [...] because we wanted to go and have fun and not teach him, like, how to do it [...] So I don't feel real good about leaving him there but I don't know. It just seemed that we would have a lot more fun if it was just us four [...] but having you know to hang out with this other kid and teach him all the stuff we already knew [...] At the time it seemed like a good idea [...] but now that I think about it, it wasn't that cool [...] Once we blew him off and stuff, like [...] I didn't feel really cool. I felt like I was being a bad friend. (Duncan)

These accounts illustrate that adolescents might recognize, acknowledge, and regret the distress or hurt they caused in others, while at the same time considering other features of the situation that mitigate their sense of guilt. Hope regrets having hurt her friend's feelings and apologizes for it, and even articulates what she has learned from the situation ("I'll watch out for that") that will presumably guide her future actions. But she also construes the harm as unforeseeable, as the result of her friend's unanticipated misinterpretation of her own benevolent, or perhaps ambiguous, behavior ("And I didn't think it would hurt his feelings. I was just like, 'That's kind of odd.' [...] I was just curious about that, 'cause not many people wear sunglasses inside at night".) Patty, too, recognizes that her brother felt distressed, acknowledges her role in it, and expresses regret about it; furthermore, she acts deliberately so as to repair the relationship. But, all the while, Patty also constructs the situation in a way that conveys her unwavering belief that her brother shared in the responsibility for what had happened, that they were both at fault. And Duncan regrets having ditched a friend when he went snowboarding with his other peers, but also states that his motivation behind not inviting that friend along had been legitimate, or at least had

seemed legitimate to him at the time. The fact that Duncan recognizes that wanting to enjoy himself is not an intrinsically harmful motivation—though one that, in his telling, ended up conflicting with being a good friend—ends up helping mitigate his sense of guilt. In these varied ways, all of these examples illuminate the processes whereby adolescents might account for their own wrongdoing and mitigate their sense of guilt (i.e., via construals that represent the harm as being unforeseeable, provoked, or motivated by incompatible though legitimate goals). While it is true that these types of construals may not always be necessarily factually accurate, they typically reflect what youths believe to have happened, rather than being merely self-protective distortions or disengagement.<sup>17, 20, 21</sup> Importantly, it is worth noting that none of these narrators in the above examples relies on these construals to undo the negative consequences of their harmful behavior or to transform it into acceptable behavior. We return to this issue below.

### ***Concluding Remarks***

The collection of excerpts discussed above represents a far from exhaustive illustration of the ways in which emotions are implicated in teens' moral lives. Importantly, this review leaves out a slew of other emotions (affection and aversion, jealousy and resentment, pity and anger) that play a crucial role at various stages of teens' morally laden interactions. Nevertheless, the goal of the few examples presented here was to show that the affective outcomes of moral transgressions may be more diverse and nuanced than expected, and closely linked with adolescents' appraisals of fact and value. In fact, our examination of teens' accounts and sensemaking of their own emotional responding in the aftermath of wrongdoing suggests several conclusions.

First, teens' own accounts underscore that guilt is not an internally unintelligent indicator—a bell that goes off upon causing or seeing suffering, forcing us to recognize the moral nature of a situation.<sup>1</sup> Guilt, like other emotions, is intertwined with and acquires its meaning from judgments of fact and judgments of value. Implicit in the paradigm examining the typical emotional outcomes of moral transgressions is the expectation of a relation between the doing or noticing of distress and the experience of guilt. The examples reviewed above suggest that this relation is neither rigid nor automatic: it requires certain judgments and interpretations linking the two—and judgments and interpretations can vary widely. Thus we suggest that discussions surrounding the typical affective expectancies of moral

transgressions might benefit from exploring the interpretive processes that undergrid youths' emotional responses.

But the examination of teens' own accounts of their moral transgressions also suggests that the common assumption that guilt is the most typical well-adjusted emotional outcome of moral wrongdoing may be predicated on an overly constricted view of what it means to be a moral person. While it is often taken for granted that being a moral person involves doing good deeds and refraining from hurting others (and therefore that guilt serves to guide and support future attempts at avoiding wrongdoing), in the course of everyday social interactions people of all ages will inevitably act in ways that hurt or upset others. People will sometimes engage in behaviors while knowing (or suspecting) that their actions may harm or distress others because everyone's legitimate goals are bound to clash with those of others from time to time. People's actions can also result in unanticipated harm because misunderstandings and differences in interpretation are bound to occur in the course of normal interactions. Being a moral person, therefore, also entails grappling with and making sense of these experiences, and reconciling the fact that one has hurt another person with the sense of oneself as imperfect but fundamentally a good and moral person.<sup>17, 21, 22, 23</sup> Unmitigated feelings of guilt may not be warranted in all such situations, and may also not be adaptive.<sup>21</sup> Guilt mitigated by an understanding of the complexity of social interactions and the inevitability of conflict and misunderstandings may be conducive to grappling with one's wrongdoing in ways that facilitate repairing the injury, learning future-oriented lessons and, importantly, constructing a mature and realistic sense of one's moral agency. Thus our work suggests that it may be essential for research on the connections between emotional experience and moral judgment to recognize the complexity and variability of youths' morally-laden experiences, and to consider how youths' patterns of sense-making across different types of events may contribute in distinct ways to moral-developmental outcomes.

Importantly, the work presented here also suggests that the absence of guilt is not necessarily the same as "happiness" or moral disengagement.<sup>24</sup> As shown in the excerpts above and in previous work,<sup>15, 16, 17, 18, 25</sup> in the aftermath of their own wrongdoing, youths are often able to maintain a complex perspective that includes a consideration of their own more or less justifiable motives and intentions and of mitigating circumstances along with a concern for the victim's feelings and a sense of regret at having

caused harm. We propose that this more mitigated sense of guilt can be best understood not as moral disengagement, but as indicative of the complexity of morally laden events—a complexity that teens are particularly good at recognizing. This ability to appreciate that they may have had some legitimate reasons for behaving the way they did while simultaneously remaining concerned about and engaged with the harm they caused to others suggests that youths' emotional experience in the midst of their own moral wrongdoing is considerably more complex than, and not likely to be captured by, the dichotomous expectancy of self-censure (in the form of guilt) or self-exoneration (in the form of happiness or a disregard for the victim's feelings). And while teens' complex accounts do not, in any way, contradict or invalidate individual differences findings related to adolescents who do attribute to perpetrators (or to themselves in the hypothetical role of perpetrators) positive emotions, they do suggest that, at the very least in the larger normative population, absence of guilt should not be seen as necessarily predictive of moral maladjustment.

Altogether, our work suggests that to understand the role of emotions in moral life we may need an approach to conceptualizing the relation between emotions and morality that allows for variation within individuals and flexibility across situations. Just as the exclusive absence of guilt would surely be maladaptive, we suggest that feeling overwhelming guilt every time one inflicts harm is also likely to be maladaptive. Our analysis suggests a different pattern of what may be healthy – one characterized by flexibility and recognition of the unique features and dynamics of different events and relationships. It also suggests the need for a different, more flexible, research paradigm. Rather than assessing emotional experiences solely in the context of prototypical moral events implicating deliberate harm, it may be necessary to examine teens' responses to a variety of morally-laden events. And rather than viewing variation solely in terms of individual differences (such that deviations from the typical affective expectancy are thought to spell trouble), it may be important to examine individuals' varied pattern of responses across different situations and circumstances.

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