

26 July 2007

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Why Do We Feel Guilty?

To promote prosocial behaviors...

"I'm never gonna dance again/Guilty feet have got no rhythm". Researchers say guilt is crucial in regulating social behavior (but when it comes to George Michael, we cannot see how...). The feeling of worry leads the way to redemption. Psychologists still consider that the role of this complex emotion is debatable. This auto-punitive feeling could prevent you from repeating the same transgressive behavior, the "withdrawal motivation." Some say that guilt makes people behave in line with the moral standards of their community, the "approach motivation." A new research made by New York University psychologists tried to combine the two hypotheses. Guilt could be initially linked with withdrawal motivation, which then turns into approach-motivated behavior when the right opportunity is given. The team made the tests in the context of decreasing racial prejudice. The scientists presented the subjects with images of White, Black, or Asian faces, while their brain activity was assessed by EEG. The team then relayed randomized scores to the subjects, to see if they responded positively or negatively to the White, Black and Asian faces. Subjects receiving results showing they had reacted negatively toward Black faces experienced significantly higher guilt, anxiety and sadness. But the guilt feeling was dominant over other sentiments, as revealed by the EEG, showing significant decrease in left-sided frontal asymmetry (linked to approach motivation) following feedback. Thus, the subjects initially experienced the punitive withdrawal motivation. During another test, the subjects had to read a variety of magazine headlines. Amongst the headlines, there were three titles connected 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 subjects were told they responded negatively toward black faces and they experienced activity changes in the left-sided frontal cortex while reading those articles, pointing towards approach motivation. Thus, when given the opportunity for reparation, guilt made people act in prejudice-reducing behavior. Emotions have been regarded as relatively fixed and basic, while the new research reveals them as dynamic and engaged in regulating behavior. And overall, the role of guilt seems to promote prosocial behavioral shifts.