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The Difficulty of Making Reparations Affects the Intensity of Collective Guilt

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Abstract

We examined how the difficulty of making reparations for the harm done to another group affects the intensity of collective guilt. Men were confronted with information documenting male privilege, and were told that they would have a chance to help women and reduce patriarchy by collecting signatures on a petition. We manipulated the difficulty of making reparations by asking participants to collect 5, 50, or 100 signatures. As predicted by Brehm's (1999) theory of emotional intensity, collective guilt was a non-linear function of the difficulty of making reparations. Men in the moderate difficulty (50 signatures) condition expressed greater collective guilt than participants in the low (5) or high (100) difficulty conditions. Results are discussed in terms of the implications for the theory of emotional intensity, collective guilt, and collective emotions more generally.

**KEYWORDS:** Collective Guilt, Intergroup Emotion, Emotional Intensity, Guilt, Emotion

### The Difficulty of Making Reparations Affects the Intensity of Collective Guilt

When our ingroup commits unjust acts of harm against another group, we can experience collective guilt (for a review see Branscombe & Doosje, 2004). Research suggests that collective guilt has a motivational quality. The more that people feel collective guilt, the more they support reparations for the harm done to the outgroup (Branscombe, Slugoski, & Kappen, 2004; Iyer, Leach, & Pedersen, 2004; Swim & Miller, 1999) and reject ideologies that reinforce an exploitative relationship with the outgroup (Powell, Branscombe, & Schmitt, 2005). We build on the insights offered by Brehm's (1999) theory of emotional intensity and predict that the perceived difficulty of making reparations influences the intensity to which collective guilt is felt in a non-linear fashion. Assuming that collective guilt represents the motivational goal of restoring a just relationship with a harmed outgroup, we argue that the intensity of that motivational state will increase to match the difficulty of achieving the goal of reparations. When reparations appear easy to achieve, collective guilt should be relatively low. As the difficulty of reparations increases, the intensity of guilt should *increase* as well, because more motivation is required to achieve the goal of reparations. At some point, however, the difficulty of achieving reparations will exceed the importance of achieving them, and increased difficulty will lead to a *decrease* in guilt.

#### *What is collective guilt?*

How is it that people can feel guilt on behalf of their ingroup, even when they do not perceive themselves as personally responsible for the ingroup's harmful actions? According to self-categorization theory (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987), the self can be experienced at different levels of inclusiveness. When people categorize themselves as individuals, they tend to focus on their unique qualities that differentiate them from other

individuals. In contrast, when people self-categorize in terms of a social category, they tend to *depersonalize* the self and view themselves as more similar to other ingroup members.

Accordingly, the ingroup's successes, failures, and wrongdoings are "shared" by individual group members as representatives of a common category membership. By defining the self at a more inclusive level, the group and its relationships to outgroups acquire emotional significance (Smith, 1993).

Based on the idea of depersonalization, people who self-categorize as members of a group that is responsible for illegitimate harm to another group will feel "guilt by association," even in the absence of a sense of personal responsibility (Branscombe, Doosje, & McGarty, 2002). Among high-status groups, the appraisal of the ingroup's advantage as illegitimate correlates with feelings of guilt (Montada & Schneider, 1989; Schmitt, Behner, Motada, Muller & Muller-Fohrbrodt, 2000). Experimental evidence suggests that the experience of collective guilt is more likely when justifications for the ingroup's high-status are undermined, compared to when those justifications are reinforced (Miron, Branscombe, & Schmitt, 2006). Similarly, when the ingroup is implicated in an unjust intergroup relationship, people feel more guilt compared to when attention is focused solely on the outgroup's plight (Powell et al., 2005).

In order for a person to experience feelings of collective guilt they must be willing to accept responsibility for the ingroup actions, even if they themselves had no part in the event. To the extent that people deny any form of collective responsibility and claim that only the individuals who perpetrated the harm directly can be assigned responsibility, then the experience of collective guilt is likely to be minimal. Branscombe et al. (2004) refer to this concept as "whole group accountability," and agreement with it is positively correlated with the extent to which people report feeling collective guilt. Thus, one way for people to avoid the negative

feeling of collective guilt is to reject outright the idea that whole groups can be assigned blame for the actions of some of their members.

Thus, collective guilt arises when people accept the notion of group accountability and they see the ingroup as responsible for perpetrating injustice against another group. In turn, collective guilt functions to urge reparations—meaning *the creation or restoration of a just relationship with the harmed outgroup* (Schmitt, Branscombe, & Brehm, 2004). Reparations can include behaviors aimed at making up for past injustices committed by the ingroup, *or* behaviors aimed at creating a new intergroup relationship that eliminates current injustices. Guilt resulting from an individual's wrongdoings appears to motivate people to repair the harm done (Baumeister, Stillwell, & Heatherton, 1994; Frijda, 1986), apologize, and accept punishment (Roseman, Wiest, & Swartz, 1994). Research on guilt resulting from the ingroup's actions suggests that collective guilt has similar motivational characteristics. Dutch students who experienced guilt about their country's exploitation of Indonesia were more likely than those who did not feel guilty to support financial compensation to the Indonesian government (Doosje, Branscombe, Spears, & Manstead, 1998). Guilt induced by perceptions of racial inequality motivates European Americans to reject racist ideologies (Powell et al., 2005) and support compensatory affirmative action policies (Branscombe et al., 2004; Iyer et al., 2004; Swim & Miller, 1999).

#### *Brehm's Theory of Emotional Intensity*

To explore the implications of collective guilt's motivational character we relied on Brehm's (1999) theory of emotional intensity. Like other theories of emotion (Arnold, 1969; Duffy, 1941; Frijda, 1986; Lazarus, 1991), this theory of emotional intensity begins with the assumption that emotions are states of motivational arousal--they "urge behavior designed to

promote or prevent important outcomes or urge adaptation to important outcomes that have already occurred” (Brehm, 1999, p. 4). Generalizing from previous work on motivational arousal (Brehm & Self, 1989), the theory assumes that the intensity of a given emotion is a non-linear function of the perceived magnitude of *deterrence* to attaining the goal of the emotion. A deterrent is “any factor that resists or opposes the function of the emotion” (Brehm, 1999, p. 5), and thus can take on many different forms depending on what the emotion urges one to do. Deterrents can be thought of as reasons for not feeling the emotion, or not engaging in behaviors that fulfill the object of the emotion. In the case of collective guilt, deterrents include reasons for not engaging in reparative behavior; thus the difficulty or cost of making reparations could serve as a deterrent to collective guilt.

Theoretically, the maximum potential intensity of an emotion is determined by the importance of attaining the function of that emotion, and when the level of deterrence is unknown, emotional intensity should rise to this maximum level as set by the importance of achieving the object of the emotion. The level of deterrence is likely to be unknown in situations where a person might know that something can be done to achieve the object of the emotion, but they do not know what deterrents might arise or what their magnitude might be. In an experimental context, the level of deterrence is assumed to be unknown in control conditions that provide no information about deterrents. When the level of deterrence known and perceived to be low, emotional intensity should also be low, because little motivation is required to achieve the goal of the emotion. As the perceived magnitude of deterrence increases, so too will emotional intensity, up to the point set by the importance of attaining the goal of the emotion. If the perceived level of deterrence increases beyond that point, emotional intensity should drop substantially.

A number of experiments have offered evidence supporting this approach to emotional intensity. For example, Miron, Parkinson, and Brehm (in press) found that the intensity of happiness varied as a function of deterrents to happiness. Happy participants were presented with reasons for not feeling happy (increases in graduation requirements) that varied in magnitude. Participants presented with a minor reason for not feeling happy (a small increase in graduation requirements) felt less happy than participants who were not presented with any deterrents. A moderate reason for not feeling happy led to relatively greater happiness. At a higher level of deterrence (a large increase in graduation requirements), however, happiness dropped to a relatively low level of intensity. The resulting cubic pattern of emotional intensity has also been found in studies of sadness (Silvia & Brehm, 2001), anger, and sympathy (for a review see Brehm, 1999).

In the case of collective guilt, an obvious deterrent is the *difficulty* of making reparations for the harm done. When reparations are perceived as fairly easy to achieve, the intensity of collective guilt should be relatively low. As perceived difficulty of making reparations increases, so too should the intensity of collective guilt, up to the point at which guilt reaches its maximal level set by the importance of making reparations. When the difficulty of reparations increases beyond this point, collective guilt intensity should drop to a low level of intensity. One of the interesting implications of this theory is that emotional intensity will be lowest when reparations appear rather easy *or* very difficult. Conversely, the intensity of collective guilt should be highest when the difficulty of reparations is either moderate or unknown.

### *Overview of the Experiment*

We tested our hypotheses regarding the effect of difficulty of reparations by examining mens' experiences of collective guilt in response to their collective advantages relative to

women. Inequality favoring men over women exists to some degree in essentially all contemporary societies (Abel & Nelson, 1990; Keegen, 1993; Peterson & Runyan, 1993; Wood & Eagly, 2002). Women are disadvantaged in the labor force compared to men (Bartol, 1999; Reskin & Padavic, 1994), are more likely than men to be poor (McClanahan & Kelly, 1999), and are the primary victims of sexual assault (Rozee & Koss, 2001). Although the form and extent of male privilege varies depending on social class, ethnicity, age, and sexual orientation (Connell, 1987), gender inequality clearly benefits *men as a group* at the expense of *women as a group*.

To invoke collective guilt, we presented men with detailed information regarding the ways in which gender inequality benefits their group and harms women (see Miron, et al., 2006, for the use of a similar manipulation to invoke collective guilt in men). We then told them that we would give them an opportunity to reduce gender inequality by collecting signatures on a petition. To manipulate the difficulty of making reparations, we told participants that they would need to collect 5, 50, or 100 signatures (a control condition did not mention the petition).<sup>1</sup> After participants learned about the petition, we measured collective guilt. We predicted that the intensity of collective guilt felt by men would be influenced by the difficulty of reparations as postulated by the theory of emotional intensity (Brehm, 1999). More specifically, we expected that when the difficulty of making reparations is low (5 signatures), guilt should also be low as compared to the control condition because little motivation should be required to complete the inequality-reducing behavior. However, when difficulty increases to a moderate level (50 signatures), we predicted that guilt should also increase compared to the low difficulty condition, because more effort would be required to carry out reparations. As difficulty further increases (100 signatures), we predicted that the intensity of guilt should decrease as compared to the moderate condition, because the difficulty of making reparations in this condition would



outweigh the importance of doing so.

## Method

### *Participants and Procedure*

Eighty men participated in partial fulfillment of a research requirement for an introductory psychology course. Participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions: low, moderate, and high reparations difficulty, or a no-information control condition.

All participants read an essay that made them aware of the disadvantages suffered by women in the U.S. (following Schmitt, Branscombe, & Postmes, 2003). Among other things, the essay described the gender wage gap, gender stereotypes about women's lack of competence, and the frequency of sexual assault against women. In part, the essay read "Equal pay has been the law since 1963, however, women are still paid less than men--even when they have similar educational backgrounds, skills and experience." In addition, participants read that "Men rarely worry about sexual assault, but women frequently think about the possibility of sexual assault when they go out at night alone, when they walk from a building to their car in an isolated parking lot, or when stranded in a broken down car." We included this form of privilege not because it represents the most pervasive difference in the treatment of men and women, but because previous research (Branscombe, 1998) found that college men report freedom from fear of sexual assault as a major privilege of being a man. Thus, much of the essay focused on how women often fear going out alone at night, but men rarely worry about sexual assault. We assumed that sexual assault would be a relatively difficult form of inequality for men to justify; consequently, including information about this particular form of disadvantage helped ensure that inequality between women and men would be seen as illegitimate, a necessary precondition for inducing collective guilt.

### *Manipulation of Reparation Difficulty*

After reading the essay on gender inequality, participants in the three experimental conditions went on to read about an ostensible opportunity to reduce inequality between women and men at their university. Participants read about a student-sponsored petition supporting improved lighting at the university, and a free accompaniment service to walk both women and men between buildings or between buildings and parking lots at night. Participants read that after completing the questionnaire, they would have an opportunity to take a copy of the petition and collect signatures. The collection of signatures was presented explicitly as an opportunity to help reduce women's disadvantages at the university. In order to manipulate the difficulty of making reparations, we varied the number of signatures the participants would be asked to collect before they could return the petition. Participants read that they would need to collect 5, 50, or 100 signatures in the low, moderate, and high difficulty conditions, respectively. Participants in the control condition read nothing about the petition, thus, the difficulty of making reparations in this condition was ambiguous. The dependent measures described below followed the manipulation of reparation difficulty. At no point in the study were participants asked directly to collect signatures; participants were only told they would be given an opportunity to do so after their participation in the study was complete. Participants were never asked to indicate their willingness, intent, or commitment to collect signatures.

### *Collective Guilt*

Collective guilt was measured in two ways. First, participants responded to four items adapted from Branscombe et al.'s (2004) measure of *collective guilt acceptance* using a 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree) scale: "I feel guilty about men's harmful actions toward women", "I feel guilty about the negative things other men have done to women", "I can easily

feel guilty for bad outcomes brought about by members of my gender group”, and “I feel guilty when I think about the unfair disadvantages women suffer”. Second, participants also responded to a measure of currently *felt guilt* by indicating the extent to which they felt guilty at the present time on a 1 (not at all) to 7 (very much) scale. We factor analyzed these 5 collective guilt items. The first two eigenvalues were 13.58 and 0.74 respectively. Furthermore, all five items loaded highly on the first factor, suggesting a clear single-factor solution. Thus, the five items were combined into a single measure of collective guilt,  $\alpha = 0.88$ .

#### *Whole Group Accountability*

The extent to which participants were willing to accept collective responsibility for the actions or inactions of their group was accessed with 5 items adapted from Branscombe et al. (2004). These items were measured on a 7-point scale (strongly disagree, strongly agree) at the general level and were not tailored to the specific intergroup context (e.g., “If a group harms members of another group, the whole group should feel guilty” and “Whole groups, like individuals, ought to be held accountable for their actions”;  $\alpha = .89$ ). Because willingness to accept ingroup responsibility is a necessary condition for feeling collective guilt, we measured this variable to use as a covariate in analyses of the intensity of collective guilt feelings.

#### *Legitimacy of Gender Inequality*

Beliefs about the legitimacy of discrimination against women were assessed on a 7-point scale (strongly disagree, strongly agree) with two items (i.e., “I find it perfectly legitimate to discriminate against women”, “Treating women negatively based on their gender is justifiable”). These two items were averaged to create a single index of legitimacy,  $\alpha = .89$ . This measure was included to rule out alternative explanations for our predicted findings, by demonstrating that the perceived legitimacy of gender inequality was not affected by our manipulation of reparations

difficulty.

## Results

### *Preliminary Analyses*

As intended, the men in this sample viewed the gender inequality as described in the essay as low in legitimacy ( $M = 1.65$  on a 1-7 scale). Thus, one of the necessary conditions was met for collective guilt to be experienced: men appraised their relationship with the outgroup as illegitimate. Perceptions of legitimacy did not differ by condition,  $F(3, 76) = .38$ ,  $p = .77$ , and were not related to collective guilt,  $r = -.13$ ,  $p = .24$ . Mirroring previous research, we found that the whole group accountability measure was positively related to participants' reports of how guilty they felt,  $r = 0.47$ ,  $p < .001$ . However, participants reports of whole group accountability did not differ by condition,  $F(3, 75) = 1.17$ ,  $p = .33$ . Thus, to control for individual differences in whole group accountability, a known necessary condition for the experience of collective guilt, this effect was added as covariate in all additional analyses. Using this covariate increases statistical power for detecting an effect of the experimental manipulation by partialling out variance in collective guilt that is not related to experimental condition (Frigon, & Laurencelle, 1993).

### *Effects of Condition on Collective Guilt*

Assuming that the function of collective guilt is to urge members of dominant groups to create a more just relationship with the outgroup, we predicted that guilt would be low in intensity when the difficulty of reparations was low or high, and relatively more intense when the difficulty of reparations was unknown or at a relatively moderate level. In order to test these predictions we submitted the collective guilt index to the following cubic contrast: control condition (1), low difficulty condition (-1), moderate difficulty condition (1), high difficulty

condition (-1). The predicted contrast was significant,  $F(1,74) = 6.79, p = .01$ , demonstrating that guilt was reliably higher in the control and moderate difficulty conditions than in the low and high difficulty conditions.<sup>2</sup> As shown in Figure 1, guilt was lower in the low difficulty condition compared to the control condition,  $t(37) = 1.98, p = .025$ , one-tailed. In addition, guilt was higher in the moderate difficulty condition compared to both the low difficulty condition  $t(38) = -1.71, p = .046$ , one-tailed, and high difficulty condition  $t(38) = -1.68, p = .048$ , one-tailed. Thus, these results confirmed our hypotheses.

### Discussion

The prediction that the intensity of collective guilt is influenced by the difficulty of reparations as postulated by the theory of emotional intensity (Brehm, 1999) was supported. The observed variations in the intensity of collective guilt are consistent with predictions derived from the assumption that collective guilt is a motivational state, and a reflection of the differential levels of motivation required to enact reparations. This pattern of results is difficult to explain without assuming that collective guilt functions as a motivational state. For instance, one might suggest that the perceived difficulty of making reparations affected perceptions of the degree of injustice, and levels of guilt increased as the perceived degree of unjust harm increased. However, this notion would predict a continued linear increase in guilt as difficulty increased, and thus, cannot explain why guilt would be lower in the high difficulty condition relative to the moderate difficulty condition. Moreover, we measured perceptions of the illegitimacy of gender inequality and found that it did not reliably differ by condition.

#### *Implications for the study of emotional intensity*

This study offers additional support for the applicability of the theory of emotional intensity to a wide variety of emotions (Brehm, 1999). The predictions for variation in emotional

intensity have been supported in the past using emotions such as happiness, sadness and anger. However, this study is the first to demonstrate the predictions of emotional intensity theory also hold for guilt. Second, support for the theory of emotional intensity typically comes from studies finding that emotions with opposing valences can deter one another (e.g., reasons for feeling happy can deter sadness; Brehm et al., 1999). However, this is the first work to support the theory of emotional intensity by directly manipulating the difficulty of implementing an action tendency associated with a particular emotion. Third, these data are the first to test the theory of emotional intensity using an emotion based on a collective representation of self and not the personal self. Not only do these results further confirm the general applicability of the theory of emotional intensity, but they also confirm that collective emotions, like emotions more generally, have motivational properties. Thus, this research is consistent with the notion that collective emotions are “real emotions”.

*Implications for the study of collective guilt*

Deterrents to collective guilt are not limited to the difficulty of reparations. Other deterrents to collective guilt (i.e., reasons for not engaging in reparations) might include the costs that reparations incur in terms of the social identity of dominant group members. Establishing egalitarian intergroup relations is likely to result in real material costs (in terms of resources and power) to high-status groups, and reductions in the privileges and status that some groups hold over others are likely to result in costs to the social identities of high-status groups. Establishing intergroup equality is not just a matter of increasing the collective power and resources of disadvantaged groups, but also reducing (at least, in a relative sense) the collective power and resources of dominant groups. Social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) suggests that when a dominant group's social position is threatened, group members will be motivated to protect the

group's collective interests. For example, Branscombe, Schmitt, & Schiffauer (2006) found that highly identified White Americans expressed increased racism when forced to confront the advantaged of their ethnic group membership, but that low identifiers expressed decreased racism, potentially reflecting increased collective guilt. Future research could investigate whether such threats to the social identity of dominant groups function as deterrents to collective guilt.

In addition, future work on collective guilt could fruitfully examine an assumption of the theory of emotional intensity that we have not fully explored—that the importance of achieving the object of an emotion determines its maximum intensity. When the goal of creating just relationships with harmed outgroups is relatively high in importance, the maximum potential intensity of collective guilt should be also high. Therefore, assigning importance to reparations as a goal increases the costs the dominant group is willing to incur before costs to the ingroup outweigh the importance of reparations. The present results suggest that a full understanding of collective guilt requires a consideration of factors that make just, fair relationships with lower status outgroups an important goal—one that can stand up against deterrents like the material and symbolic costs to the ingroup that would likely result from social change. Prior work suggests that perceived illegitimacy of the intergroup relationship is a predictor of collective guilt (Miron et al., in press); perhaps the greater the moral transgressions of the ingroup, the more important it is to make reparations. In addition, Wohl, Branscombe, and Klar (in press) have argued that people feel greater collective guilt for harming groups with which they share a meaningful superordinate identity (e.g., nationality). By applying a similar standard of justice to both the ingroup and outgroup, a common superordinate category might increase the importance of reparations.

This perspective also leads us to consider general beliefs, ideologies and lay theories

relevant to intergroup relations in terms of their implicit level of deterrence to collective guilt.

Interestingly, the theory of emotional intensity suggests that belief systems which have opposite meanings can have similar implications for collective guilt. For instance, the theory suggests that collective guilt should be low if one's theory of intergroup relations suggests that establishing more egalitarian relations require very little effort or cost, and if one's theory of intergroup relations suggests that egalitarian relations are impossible to achieve. Thus, the theory of emotional intensity may offer some insights into the ways in which apparently contradictory social beliefs can result in similar psychological (and political) ends. Political discourse regarding contemporary intergroup relations often contains implicit or explicit deterrents to collective guilt (e.g., "We can't turn back the clock", "If we apologize, they'll want financial reparations"; see Augoustinos & LeCouteur, 2004). More generally, a number of variables central to intergroup theorizing (e.g., the stability of intergroup status discrepancies, appraisals of ingroup strength, group identification) might be fruitfully conceptualized as deterrents to collective emotions.

### *Conclusions*

The current research illustrates the empirical and theoretical benefits of considering the implications of collective guilt's motivational properties. We have demonstrated that the difficulty of making reparations acts as a deterrent to the experience of collective guilt, and affects the intensity of collective guilt in a non-linear fashion as predicted by the theory of emotional intensity (Brehm, 1999). We hope that these findings will motivate additional research that examines other possible deterrents to guilt so that we may better understand this important social emotion.



*Footnote*

<sup>1</sup> Because the level at which the difficulty of making reparations will outweigh the importance of reparations needs to be determined a priori, we conducted a pretest to establish the levels of difficulty to use in our experiment. Men from the same population as our participants were asked the maximum number of signatures they would be willing to collect for the described petition. Because the average maximum was close to 50, we chose that level for the moderate difficulty condition, and then chose numbers well above and below that for the high and low difficulty conditions respectively.

<sup>2</sup> The result of the cubic contrast for collective guilt *without* whole group accountability included as a covariate was similar,  $F(1, 76) = 5.70, p = .02$ .

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*Figure Caption*

*Figure 1.* Men's experience of collective guilt as a function of the difficulty of making reparations for gender inequality.

