

The Role and Application of Guilt in Adolescent Development

Xinyi Huang¹

¹ International Joint Audit Institute, Auditing, Nanjing Audit University, Nanjing, China

Correspondence: Xinyi Huang, International Joint Audit Institute, Auditing, Nanjing Audit University, Nanjing 210000, China. E-mail: 2280270724@qq.com

Received: April 6, 2024 Accepted: April 26, 2024 Online Published: April 30, 2024

doi:10.5539/jedp.v14n1p187

URL: <http://doi.org/10.5539/jedp.v14n1p187>

Abstract

Adolescents encounter challenges in their development primarily encompassing psychological, ideological, and moral aspects. As time evolves, conventional methods to address these issues have been gradually weakened in practice, necessitating the introduction of new approaches. This paper provides an overview of the role of guilt in the growth of adolescents. Based on existing research results, this study introduces the definition, generation mechanism, moral attributes, and driving force of guilt through methods including citation introduction, summarization, analysis, and inference. Subsequently, the positive and negative effects of guilt are summarized. On the one hand, guilt brings negative emotions such as self-loss and anxiety, and may lead to an anti-social personality. On the other hand, it enables a more stable mental state in adolescents, promotes beneficial behaviors, and improves ideological and moral levels. The analysis results show that guilt, with the assistance of “conscience”, urges adolescents to take responsibility for their actions, correctly deal with the adverse consequences of their behavior, and make positive changes, thereby providing impetus for the development and improvement of adolescent personality. Consequently, it is recommended to introduce educational strategies centered on guilt into adolescent education and guarantee their rationalized application.

Keywords: guilt; adolescent education; ideology and morality cultivation; pro-social behavior; mental health

1. Introduction

Frequently, we encounter situations where a child's academic struggles prompt their mother to remark, “Child, you need to work hard. Mom and Dad work very hard, and everything we do is for you.” Such words can evoke a sense of guilt within the child, compelling them to immerse themselves in their studies. Children aspire to alleviate the discomfort of guilt by diligently striving to meet the expectations of those who evoke such feelings within them. They may even introspect, believing they must not disappoint their parents and must excel in their studies. When children conform to their parents' expectations, their behavior becomes restrained by their parents. This is what is known as guilt-based education.

Previous research has primarily focused on the negative impact of guilt and proposed corresponding measures. However, it's worth considering whether guilt can also have positive effects. Is it conceivable to distill its essence and leverage it, rather than entirely negating its influence? It is reported that guilt could prompt people to reflect on their behavior, improve their self-awareness and self-management abilities, and make their behavior conform to social moral norms, thereby making people progress (Zhang, Fang, Jiang, Yu, & Ouyang, 2014). Guilt can improve interpersonal relationships, enhance social adaptability by taking care of the interests and feelings of others, and taking the whole situation into account. Guilt also has a behavioral orientation effect (Zhang, & Sang, 2012). We can draw a conclusion: guilt is the driving force for individual growth and maturity. It is worthy of further study on the positive effects of guilt.

Adolescents are the future of a nation and the hope of a society, which requires them not only to have good moral cultivation but also to possess strong psychological qualities. Promoting the healthy growth of adolescents is an important and urgent task facing the whole society. However, currently, moral education in schools is superficial, communication in family moral education is lacking, and negative social trends are subtly influencing the shaping of adolescent ideology and morality (Chao, 2005). Furthermore, mental health problems among adolescents are becoming increasingly prominent, manifesting in various ways, including low self-happiness, low self-satisfaction, severe psychological confusion, high levels of psychological stress, high incidence of delinquent behavior, increasingly evident destructive psychological state, and prominent emotional issues.

In summary, there are mainly two problems in the current adolescent development: the neglect of ideological and moral conditions and the lack of emphasis on mental health status (Chen, 2009; Lei & Ye, 2015). The current methods to address these two issues mainly involve schools and families establishing correct guidance mechanisms, relevant government departments purifying and rectifying the environments adolescents are exposed to, fully leveraging the integrated role of social education to change adolescent ideologies and moral outlooks through cultural infiltration, and promoting adolescent mental health through more care and regular psychological counseling.

However, as time progresses, conventional methods are gradually losing efficacy, necessitating the search for new educational methods to address these issues. In recent years, research has found that guilt plays a very important role in adolescent development (Chao, 2005; Cao, 2017). In this paper, we investigate the concept of guilt, analyze the negative and positive effects of guilt in adolescent development, advocate the positive effects of guilt, and recommend for the application of guilt-based education.

2. Research and Analysis

2.1 The Nature of Guilt

2.1.1 Definition of Guilt

Guilt refers to the painful emotional experience an individual feels when they recognize that their past actions have violated their moral standards and that they should be held accountable for them (Duhachek, Nidhi, & DaHee, 2012; Leith & Roy, 1998). It typically occurs when a person believes they have made a mistake, acted negligently, or harmed others. This emotion is often accompanied by a sense of responsibility and self-blame, leading to discomfort and distress.

2.1.2 Mechanisms of Guilt Generation

Guilt is an internal feeling stemming from a correct self-awareness. Evaluating and understanding oneself is already challenging, and it is even more difficult to engage in negative self-assessment, which can lead to pain and elevate moral standards (Colasante, JambonM, Gao, & Malti, 2021; Colasante, & Malti, 2017; Colasante, Zuffianò, & Malti, 2019). When individuals judge themselves, especially when it comes to negative assessments, they tend to habitually shift or deny responsibility, such that even Confucius lamented, "It is all over. I have not yet seen one who could perceive his faults, and inwardly accuse himself". In the *Analects of Confucius* - Gongye Chang, it is also noted, "Few are those who know they could perceive their faults; rarer still are those who can inwardly accuse themselves. If they can accuse and reflect themselves, then they will surely repent deeply and can change themselves." As mentioned earlier, a mother's words give the child a mindset: "I must study hard to be a good child and make my parents proud, so they won't be disappointed." Why would a child arrive at this conclusion? Because the mother's words facilitate the child's sense of guilt, the child realizes the adverse consequences of poor academic performance and believes that "I could have" and "should have" prevented or avoided these consequences. However, the fact that the child did not prevent the consequence from occurring has led to a painful emotional experience and active self-blame (Chen, Zhang, & Zheng, 2000; Fan, Ye, Zhang, & Liu, 2003; Hu, 2008; Qian, Andrews, Zhu, & Wang, 2000).

2.2 Moral Attributes of Guilt

"Compared with other emotions, guilt is the most necessary emotion for morality to occur." If a person deviates from moral standards and causes harm to others, they will feel guilty and believe they should be responsible for their wrongful behavior. When individuals engage in actions contrary to moral standards, injuring others, it immediately becomes an irreversible fact, but how one views its significance and value is still subject to multiple factors.

While guilt does not have an external "audience" like other emotions, it has a "conscience" as its audience (Yang & Fan, 2008; Kochanska, 1997). Guilt originates from individuals violating their self-established moral precepts. Consequently, individuals will then engage in "self-accusation" and "self-perception". From a positive perspective, guilt can encourage people to correct their behaviors and actions. It should be viewed as a "compass" rather than punishment. Guilt should be seen as a moral sentiment conducive to moral behavior and the harmonious development of moral relations.

2.3 Driving Force of Guilt

One characteristic of guilt is that it often accompanies reflection and doubt about one's actions. People may continuously recall past behaviors and consider how to remedy or repair their mistakes. Why do individuals endure the pain of self-blame and attribute factors leading to adverse consequences for themselves? This is where the

power of morality and conscience comes into play. Conscience is the individual form of internalized basic social norms (Kochanska, 2003; Wang, Zhan, & Yan, 2010). Basic social norms are hidden deep within individuals, in the form of “conscience.” When individuals analyze the factors leading to adverse consequences, they associate their past improper behavior with the current adverse consequences, feeling that their past actions have caused these consequences to occur.

3. The Negative and Positive Effects of Guilt on Adolescent Development

3.1 Negative Effects of Guilt

Parents and teachers often believe that if children feel guilty, it indicates that children recognize their mistakes, successfully shaping their moral outlook. However, children often do things against their will to eliminate guilt, that is, they are led by guilt to “please” their parents, easily losing themselves in the process. This has adverse effects on the children’s mental health, such as undermining their sense of self-esteem and confidence, fostering a people-pleasing personality to meet the needs of others, and inhibiting their ability to express their feelings in interpersonal relationships (Wu & Liu, 2008; Zhang et al., 2014). Children who study diligently out of guilt may appear obedient and mature, but it is important to recognize that the motivation behind their studies has been tainted. They are driven by guilt over their parents’ sacrifices, which control their behavior and compel them to study for the sake of their parents. Some studies have found a strong correlation between guilt and anxiety, neurosis, and antisocial personality traits. Guilt can lead to excessive anxiety and stress, impairing adolescents’ learning efficiency and focus, thereby resulting in academic performance decline. While parents and teachers may take comfort in the appearance of their children studying diligently, they may fail to realize that the children lose themselves. While children may seek to compensate for their perceived faults due to feelings of guilt, persistent guilt can lead to a negative self-evaluation, causing them to feel undeserving of acceptance or love, with no substantive benefits. In social relationships, including parent-child relationships, equitable interactions are the optimal choice.

3.2 Positive Effects of Guilt

Researches indicate that guilt serves as a self-adhesive, promoting psychological resilience among adolescents. Psychologists have found in experiments that a “sense of responsibility” originates from guilt and conscience, and even jealousy and anger can help maintain sensitivity to inequality. They argue that in the face of any setback, guilt prompts individuals to introspect and attain a rational self-awareness, gradually restoring harmony within themselves. Therefore, the significance of “guilt” should be acknowledged. Adolescents need to recognize setbacks in the process of personal growth, consistently adhere to self-cohesion, and help themselves navigate through confusion. Once the general patterns of personal development are understood, adolescents will comprehend their parents and accept themselves. Moreover, they will confront their issues, recognize the dangers lurking behind confusion, acknowledge their strengths and weaknesses, evaluate themselves reasonably, and realize the fact that their confused selves are seeking excuses to evade responsibility. Consequently, they will gradually break free from patterns of self-attack and attacking others, entering a state of self-coordination and self-correction, rejuvenating their overall demeanor.

Guilt promotes the generation of positive social behaviors among adolescents. Studies have found that individuals’ feelings of guilt can lead to compensatory and pro-social behaviors such as assistance (Zhan & Sang, 2012; Barr, 2004). Pro-social behavior refers to actions or behaviors beneficial to others or society as a whole. Such behaviors typically manifest as caring, helping, supporting, cooperating, and other positive social interactions aimed at promoting the well-being of others or societal development. With the vigorous construction of a harmonious society, pro-social behavior is widely advocated due to its alignment with the core socialist values. From an individual perspective, pro-social behavior is a crucial aspect of the social competence development of adolescents, enhancing individuals’ self-esteem and serving the function of self-fulfillment. From a societal perspective, pro-social behavior, as a beneficial behavior, is strongly encouraged in the current efforts to construct a harmonious society. Additionally, at the interpersonal level, pro-social behavior undergoes rapid development during adolescence, enhancing interpersonal relationships, promoting harmony, and aiding individuals in integrating into society (Berndsen & McGarty, 2010; Bolino & Grant, 2016; Brown & Cehajic 2008).

Guilt also enhances the moral and ideological development of adolescents. As a potent tool for self-restraint, guilt can prevent adolescents from sinking deeper into errors. Studies have found that guilt can promote intellectual progress and the development of moral character, leading to more moral decisions and inhibiting the emergence and development of unethical thoughts and behaviors, assisting adolescents in continuously improving and elevating their moral and ideological standards. Guilt helps individuals enhance their abilities through the process of reflection, which not only serves as self-training but also provides a pathway for others to deepen their

positive impressions of themselves. This enhancement is a process of cultivation, compelling individuals to shoulder more responsibilities and driving their development and maturity. The individual improvement accompanying feelings of guilt is a trial-and-error process, learning and progressing through mistakes, aligning with “the spiral rise theory” in philosophy.

4. Rational Application of Guilt in Adolescent Education

4.1 Misapplication of Guilt in Education

Educational strategies centered around guilt can often be observed in daily life, but are frequently misapplied. For instance, parents or teachers may inadvertently instill guilt in children under the guise of care and love, potentially leading to adverse effects (Čehajic-Clančy et al., 2011; Cohen, 2010). Learning to utilize guilt correctly is an essential consideration for educators when conducting moral education.

4.2 Rational Application of Guilt in Education

The appropriate application of guilt in adolescent education lies in cultivating a certain degree of guilt without imposing burdens to them. It is well-known that adolescents are the main force for future social development. Only by taking on responsibilities can they fully unleash their potential to drive social progress, shape cultural trends, and lead social changes. With the continuous evolution of society, adolescents of the time are increasingly realizing themselves as integral components of society, possessing the capacity for independent thought and expression, thereby bolstering their subjective awareness. However, this awareness should not merely entail intuitive perception and understanding of self-existence, and self-experience, but should also strive for a balance between rights and obligations, recognizing one’s past, present, and future to form self-identity and self-worth. In the face of adverse consequences, adolescents should actively reflect on their responsibilities throughout the process, including legal and moral obligations. They should first assess the degree of their involvement in the event, reflecting on past actions to determine the potential for causing adverse consequences; considering measures to mitigate or prevent the recurrence of the adverse outcomes; taking proactive actions to effect positive changes; accepting the consequences of past actions; drawing lessons from them to avoid repeating the same mistakes; and expressing apologies to affected individuals or groups while attempting to rectify or compensate for their losses.

In cases where adverse consequences stem from one’s actions, the vast majority of adolescents experience a certain degree of guilt and exhibit a willingness to improve the current situation. They take responsibility for their actions, contemplate how to address potential adverse outcomes, and actively seek opportunities for learning and positive change (Cohen, Wolf, Panter, & Insko, 2011; Wan, 2012). This not only alleviates or even eliminates their internal guilt but also demonstrates the positive moral behavior triggered by guilt, thus serving as an example for others to follow.

5. Conclusion

Addressing psychological, ideological, and moral issues encountered during adolescent development, guilt, leveraged by the moral power of “conscience”, can foster psychological resilience in adolescents, leading to behaviors beneficial to society and an elevation of their moral and ideological standards. In present study, we found guilt plays a very important role in adolescent development, it is crucial to judiciously incorporate guilt into adolescent education, allowing it to exert a positive influence on fostering independence, autonomy, psychological well-being, and integrity in adolescents. However, this study is a review based on existing literature, and it is necessary for us to conduct experimental research to investigate the positive role of guilt in adolescent growth.

In summary, this article illuminates the important role of guilt in adolescent growth, suggest take full advantage of the positive effects of guilt in adolescent education.

Funding

None.

Informed Consent

Obtained.

Provenance and Peer Review

Not commissioned; externally double-blind peer reviewed.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request.

Competing Interests Statement

The authors declare that there are no competing or potential conflicts of interest.

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