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American Guilt: a challenge for contemporary emotions history

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American Guilt: a Challenge for Contemporary Emotions History

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Abstract

This article assesses the unexpected increase of references to guilt in American culture, from the mid-20th century onward. The increase came against a pattern of decline over the previous hundred years, and also runs counter to many interpretations of growing American individualism and self-indulgence. The article deals also with the increasing criticisms of guilt, as damaging and unpleasant, that became increasingly common from the 1920s onward. A focus on guilt associated with parenting brings these themes into clearer focus, helping to explain the rise in guilt references – with causes that are fairly clear in the area of parenting – but also the disconcerting combination with resentments about guilt as harmful and unfair. Several parental reactions, particularly by the 1990s, followed from the tensions over patterns of guilt.

Key words: guilt, United States, parenting, childhood, emotions history



La Culpabilidad Americana: un Reto para la Historia de las Emociones Contemporáneas

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Resumen

Este artículo evalúa el aumento inesperado de las referencias a la culpabilidad en la cultura estadounidense desde mediados del siglo XX en adelante. El incremento se produjo en contra de la tendencia a la disminución identificada en los últimos cien años y también se opone a muchas interpretaciones basadas en el creciente individualismo americano y la autoindulgencia. El artículo trata también de las crecientes críticas a la culpabilidad, como perjudiciales y desagradables, las cuales se hicieron cada vez más comunes a partir de los años veinte. Un enfoque sobre la culpabilidad asociado a la crianza aporta un enfoque más claro a la temática, ayudando a explicar el aumento de las referencias a la culpabilidad –con causas que son bastante claras en el ámbito de crianza–, pero también con la desconcertante combinación con los resentimientos sobre la culpa como perjudicial e injusta. Varias reacciones parentales, particularmente en los años noventa, surgieron de las tensiones sobre los patrones de culpabilidad.

Palabras clave: culpa, Estados Unidos, crianza, infancia, historia de las emociones

After decades of impressively steady decline, the relative frequency of references to guilt began to rise in the United States from the mid-20th century onward, stabilizing at the heightened levels through the early 21st century. Google N-grams, which demonstrate this trend, do not provide an incontestable index of culture change, to be sure; but new trends, like the recent guilt trajectory, are at least suggestive. And while this pattern has been dramatically understudied, a few scholars have begun to take note not only of the surprising prevalence of guilt of America, but the increasing incidence of references to this emotion (McClay, 2017). Even marketers have begun to pay more attention to guilt, with a recent study arguing that the emotion has become dominant in mainstream American culture, providing a fertile basis for advertising appeals (Hesz & Neophytou, 2010, pp.250-252).

Expanding emotional references, over time, suggest that the experience or expectation of an emotion is rising; OR that the emotion is becoming more problematic; OR both. In this still-exploratory article, we discuss the trend itself, including possible causation and consequences (both of which, again, have received little attention). But we also deal with a growing aversion to guilt, during the same timespan. Greater incidence AND increased tension can be explicitly explored in the important category of parental guilt, where new issues and growing discomfort combined, with predictably complex results. Considerable guilt became irrepressible, but it also generated resentments that were significant in their own right. What might seem the most normal pattern of emotional change – growing incidence combined with growing acceptance – does not seem to fit this particular case in contemporary American emotions history.¹

Exploring patterns of guilt involves various patterns in American society generally, but the patterns unquestionably apply as well to issues in schooling and education. To the extent, for example, that many American parents are encountering higher levels of guilt, but also tensions over the acceptability of the emotion, their reactions may well spill over into the ways they try to oversee their children's education. The increasingly intrusive parenting styles of many middle-class Americans, and their impact on interactions with schools and school officials, have been widely noted in

recent decades. The new findings about guilt reactions add additional perspectives to this equation.

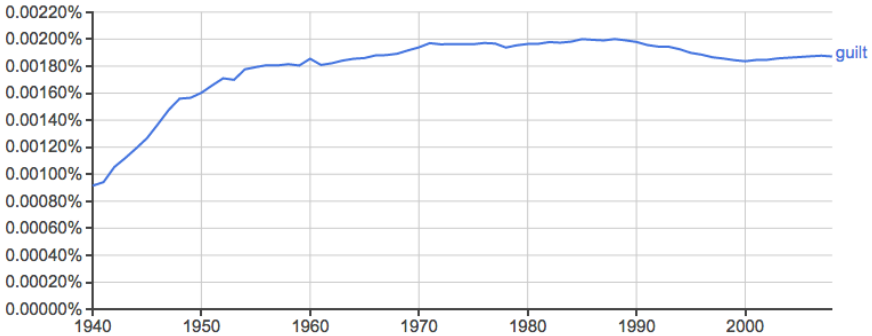


Figure 1. Frequency of “guilt” in American English between 1940 and 2008, Google Books Ngram Viewer (the online search engine charts frequencies of words found in Google Books, then plots them on a graph). The Ngram data end in 2008, unfortunately, making projections beyond that point speculative at best.

The 20th Century Pattern

The finding that guilt references declined in the United States for many decades in the 20th century is hardly a surprise. (The fact that the drop began in the 19th century does deserve more attention, for relevant historians have long urged that guilt fit Victorian culture and that the emotion was deliberately touted as an alternative to shame, and this indeed may have been widely agreed (Demos, 1970; Stearns, 2017). But a growing aversion to guilt by, say, the 1920s follows from a number of familiar trends. Most obviously, American society began to become more tolerant than ever, removing various behaviors from the guilt-inducing list. A recent Gallup survey demonstrates that Americans have become more accepting of a number of previously morally contentious issues including birth control, divorce, pre- and extramarital sex, and gay and lesbian relationships (Riffkin, 2014). And

while some of these developments are rather recent – particularly in areas like gay marriage – a number have been percolating for some time; even in the 1930s, for example, tensions over adultery were measurably easing, which could directly reduce guilt in this category (Lynd, 1929; Hoover, 1990).

With tolerance growing, it might seem that Friedrich Nietzsche’s famous prophecy was being fulfilled. Nietzsche had claimed, in his 1887 book *On the Genealogy of Morality*, that as a result of God’s decreasing prevalence in modern society, future generations would reside in a “second innocence” where more things would be permitted without emotional hindrance (McClay, 2017). He continued by asserting that guilt would be effectively eradicated, for guilt derived from a perceived relationship with God that was now dropping away. Nietzsche’s anticipation does not fully apply to the United States, where religious commitments persisted more strongly than was the case in many other industrial societies. But even in the United States, growing secularism and changes within many religions – as with the decline of beliefs in original sin in mainstream Protestantism – correlate strongly with the declining attention to guilt². Religious forecasts aside, a number of mid-20th century scholars claimed that guilt was a declining force within American society, including Ruth Benedict in her famous effort to contrast American culture with the shame-based Japanese (Benedict, 1946, p. 69). Even within American religion – though particularly in the mainstream Protestant and reform Jewish denominations – emphasis on guilt and sin measurably continued to decline – for example, in the increasingly enthusiastic embrace of consumerism; and for many Americans formal religion was losing ground in any event (Moran & Vinovskis, 1992; Allitt, 2003).

Add to this, finally, the many studies of American character in the 1970s and 1980s that uniformly posited a growing attention to self, with declining interest in group attachments and norms, and a reduction of guilt would seem an inevitable outcome. To be sure, the studies involved varied considerably in their evaluation: Christopher Lasch’s attacks on the superficiality of guilt-free narcissism contrasted obviously with studies that praised the expansion of American individualism but also its conversion to

the greater need for personal expression – the approach taken by scholars like Veroff and Yankelovich in the 1970s and 1980s. Both approaches, however, suggested that the growing attachment to self could easily override earlier beliefs in socially-determined moral guidelines. Thus, Yankelovich, citing a “startling cultural change,” described the new self focus through an interview quote, “I am my own work of art,” while another study, by Robert Bellah, explicitly noted how personal feelings increasingly substituted for any larger moral code, “Is this going to work for me now?” (Bellah, 1985, p.180; Yankelovich, 1981, p.47). And while David Riesman’s famous evaluation of the “lonely crowd” did pay explicit attention to the ongoing role of American guilt, even Riesman, noting the decline of an individual compass in American character, had trouble explaining guilt’s hold. Riesman does conjecture, interestingly, that other-directedness might generate a new kind of guilt, at not contributing enough enjoyment to one’s peer group, but he did not pursue this in any detail. (Riesman, 1961; Lasch, 1979; Veroff, 1981; Stearns, 2018).

Overall, when one adds the expansion of American tolerance, possibly wider shifts in overall national character toward greater self-indulgence, and – as a final point – the well-known, consumer-based movement toward a higher preference for positive over negative emotions (another common finding from the early 20th century onward), and the context for diminishing attention to guilt seems clear enough (Shields & Koster, 1989). And, as the relevant Google trend line suggests, this is precisely what happened, for several decades – making the later resurgence of guilt even more striking.



Figure 2. Frequency of “guilt” in American English between 1800 and 2008, Google Books Ngram Viewer (the online search engine charts frequencies of words found in Google Books, then plots them on a graph).

None of this would suggest, of course, that guilt would disappear. And, given a broadly accurate acknowledgement of the unusually persistent role of religion in American life, on top of a considerable Puritan heritage, recognition of some ongoing emotional hold would be logical enough (Wong & Tsai, 1995, p. 209). But even with the recognition of a slightly distinctive American context, there was no reason, at midcentury or even a bit beyond, to anticipate a resurgence of guilt in American culture. All the indicators seemed compatible with the trends that had actually emerged in the first half of the century: some persistence of guilt but continued decline overall.

The New Complexity: the Unexpected Surge in Guilt

So what might account for the reversal of trend from around mid-century onward? There are several explanations, beginning on the academic side, but extending into the climate of the United States in the turbulent 1960s and even some wider implications about modernity itself. One cluster of explanations might highlight the relatively positive take on guilt from contemporary American (and other) social psychologists. For the past

several decades a number of experts have urged the positive qualities of guilt, particularly in contrast to shame. The formulation is clear enough: shame is an emotion that calls the whole person into question – you are a cheater, or a criminal, or a fatty – in ways that directly attack self-esteem and make compensation or remediation very difficult. Guilt, on the other hand, centers on a bad action: cheating on an exam, or stealing something, or eating too much. It does not attack the individual beyond the action, and it facilitates both apology and a commitment not to repeat the bad act. It is less likely to isolate the affected individual, or to spiral into psychological depression. Negativity centers on a behavior, not the global self (Gifuni et al., 2016, p.1; Tracy and Robins, 1995, p.5; Lagattuta, 2014, p. 92; Stuewig and Tangney, 1995, p. 373; Goetz and Keltner, 2007, p.154).

Both shame and guilt, of course, are unpleasant, and both challenge the presumed contemporary American preferences for “positive” rather than negative emotions. Both involve some sense of audience, though guilt is commonly more private than shame. Both emotions have to be learned, though in most cultures children pick up the idea of guilt a bit later than shame. But the consequences, and the social and personal uses and impacts, of the two emotions are very different.

As a result, particularly in approaching problems in the criminal justice system or school discipline, a number of psychologists both in North America and Western Europe have been actively urging greater attention to guilt – demonstrating for example that criminals are much less likely to become recidivist if their guilt is emphasized and any wider sense of shame downplayed. There are, to be sure, some complexities in this approach: it is not always clear why some individuals are more guilt prone, some more shame prone, than others, which places some constraints on social systems. But the overall emphasis is clear enough, and certainly contributes to an evaluation of guilt in recent decades. Current estimates of guilt are different from Victorian evaluations, but both see a vital function for guilt in providing constructive guidelines for behavior (Wong and Tsai, 1995; Gifuni et al., 2016; Stuewig and Tangney, 1995).

It is unlikely, however, that the new interest in psychology fully or even primarily accounts for the resurgence of guilt in American society more

generally. Nor, as we will suggest later in the essay, does the fashionable optimism about guilt fully mesh with the sentiments the emotion actually generates among many affected Americans. The evaluation, in other words, deserves serious attention but it does not fully address either the unexpected contemporary trend, or its wider impact.

A second line of explanation moves out in quite a different direction. Noting that guilt is more likely to flourish in an individualistic society like that of the United States, than in more communal settings, several scholars have urged a particular spur to guilt after World War II (possibly in Western cultures more generally, but certainly in the United States). Thus Wilfred McClay, an American intellectual historian, urges that guilt becomes the “inescapable lot” of people technologically advanced society, increasingly aware of global problems and inequities thanks to the expansion of information and aware also of their own special privilege. Building on Freud’s sense that guilt is an essential product of advancing civilization, McClay sees contemporary people increasingly open to guilt as they learn of deep poverty or racial injustice or colonial legacies or war crimes in other parts of the world. Humanitarian organizations play on this sense directly, generating heart-rending pictures of starving children in order to stimulate guilt-based charity. McClay does not directly invoke earlier studies of the role of guilt in modern humanitarian culture, which would only fortify his arguments, but he is surely correct in contending that global opportunities for guilt have expanded in recent decades as injustices are more widely publicized (Haskell, 1985; McClay, 2017).

This general approach has been applied more directly to American guilt, at least by the 1960s. Thus Mike Rowan argues that the United States in the 1960s was experiencing a sense of collective guilt brought on by the social movements and liberal rhetoric of the time, which spoke of the nation as a “sick society”. Evidence of racial injustices and the calamities of the Vietnam War was soon joined by morally-intense condemnations of inequalities based on gender or sexual orientation (Rowan, 2012).

As with the invocation of contemporary psychology, this approach certainly deserves attention. Guilt may have persisted particularly strongly in the United States (despite some signs of diminution) given the nation’s

strong religious orientation and heritage, and then have been newly stimulated by the turmoil of the civil rights movement and the nation's great-power involvement in a number of morally-questionable actions overseas. The approach certainly has the merit of recognizing the need for historical explanation: contemporary guilt trends are partially novel, and cannot simply dismissed as a result of deeper national traditions.

But there are problems with the approach as well. As it has been developed so far, it does not pick up on the earliest signs of advancing guilt, in the mid-century decades; it fits the 1960s far more clearly, when the acceleration of references to the emotion was already well established. More important, it implicitly assumes (and indeed, McClay directly states) that, once launched, this humanitarian guilt would persist unabated. But the tensions of the 1960s were succeeded, in the United States, by the more complacent culture of the Reagan years and then by more recent illiberal and anti-global reactions to terrorism and (with the Donald Trump movement) to immigration and globalization, which have hardly acknowledged any particular national guilt. External evils – communism, terrorism, global forces – not internal flaws explained the nation's problems, and guilt was shunted aside. It seems misleading, with McClay, to place too much emphasis on some transcendent contemporary guilt deriving from the intriguing combination of rising information levels and a sense of responsibility.

The argument might hold, of course, for a portion of the population. Any study of guilt on the national level, in a society as large and diverse as the United States, must of course allow for important differences among subcultures. Earlier work on American guilt, notably by Philip Greven, had already posited regional and religious divisions in guilt proclivities in the 18th century (Greven, 1977). Guilt-ridden evangelical Protestants thus contrasted with genteel Southern planters whose ability to explain away personal misdeeds was remarkably carefree. Comparable divisions surely apply to the past half-century, as the strength of evangelical Protestantism already suggests. Liberal discomfort with racism or global injustice might well both reflect and generate guilt in an important segment of American (and Western) society. The only point is that this is unlikely to be the whole

story. Conservative attacks on liberal sensitivities to racial or gender or global issues hardly reflect a comparable sense of guilt; the currently popular term, “snowflake,” as a means of dismissing undue compassion suggests the important divisions currently in play.

Both the role of contemporary psychological insight and the wider invocation of humanitarian guilt deserve attention, but neither seems fully capable of explaining the contemporary trends. We need the kind of interdisciplinary historical approach that would provide a more comprehensive explanation not for the persistence of contemporary guilt but for its unanticipated resurgence. Along with political sensitivity, factors that might be explored include the behaviors leading up to, and then amplifying, the famous sexual revolution. Premarital sexual activity in the United States began increasing at least as early as the 1950s, and then would lead more clearly to earlier ages of sexual intercourse from the 1960s onward. Adultery, divorce and serial marriage, and for a minority even open marriage became more common and more widely publicized. Quite possibly, the new patterns also provoked new levels of guilt, both on the part of more conservative observers eager to chastise contemporary behaviors, and even on the part of some more hesitant or conflicted participants themselves – despite the expansion of tolerance. Reactions in this area certainly overlap the chronology of increasing guilt references and their persistence over time (D’Emilion and Freedman, 2012).

Religious revivals also deserve attention. The later 20th century saw increased religious observance in many sectors of American society, including the evangelical surge. Correlations are not perfect. References to sin, for example, do not neatly parallel the rise of guilt in the final decades of the century; and while guilt levels remained high after 2000, religious observance began to decline quite notably.

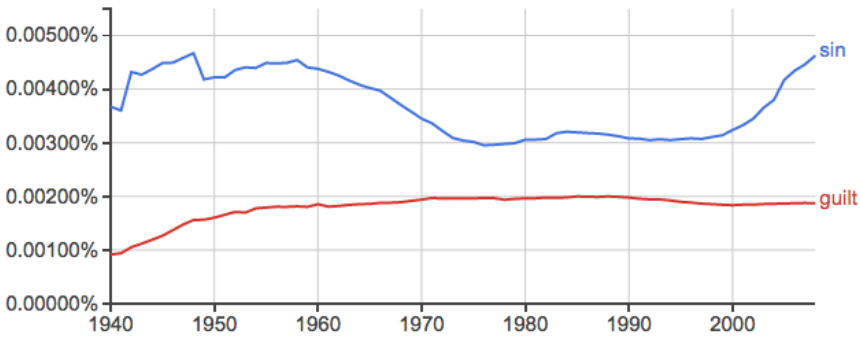


Figure 3. Frequency of “sin” and “guilt” in American English between 1940 and 2008, Google Books Ngram Viewer (the online search engine charts frequencies of words found in Google Books, then plots them on a graph).

Again, the invitation to further research is obvious. Some combination of reactions to new behaviors and religious adjustments constitutes a plausible part of a wider explanation. Implications of the growing acceptance of psychological therapy may also play a role. Many Americans became increasingly open to discussions of uncomfortable emotions like guilt and shame – indeed, they were often urged to express the emotions openly as a means of reducing the pain (Brown, 2013). In what some scholars have called a “therapeutic culture”, the ability to discuss unpleasant guilt feelings undoubtedly gained greater sanction. Absent the ability yet to offer a fully satisfactory explanation, however, we turn to a particular facet of contemporary American guilt to advance a more limited analysis. The more specific focus – on parental guilt and uses of guilt in childrearing -- contributes to assessing the larger trends – for familial guilt constituted no small part of the rising levels of guilt overall; but it also adds an important complexity that is essential in discussing the consequences of the contemporary trends.

The Increase in Parental Guilt

References to parental guilt surged rapidly from 1950 to a high point in the early 1980s, after which it dropped off only to stabilize at levels that remained higher than those of mid-century. The pattern considerably overlaps the more general increase of guilt references already noted, and surely helps explain this in turn. A sense of parental guilt advanced as part of the larger trend, and actually outstripped the trend for a time; its stabilization corresponded to the wider trajectory as well, though the reduction during the 1990s demands attention.

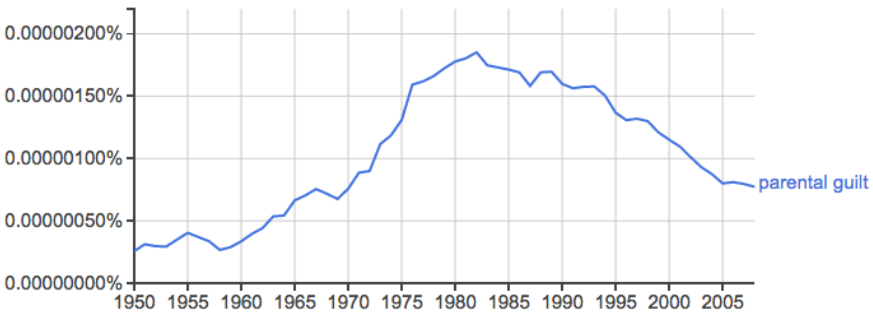


Figure 4. Frequency of “parental guilt” in American English between 1950 and 2008, Google Books Ngram Viewer (the online search engine charts frequencies of words found in Google Books, then plots them on a graph).

Two factors, in turn, primarily explain the striking surge, whatever the conclusions about the causes of guilt more generally. New behaviors made many participants anxious and uncomfortable. At the same time outside commentary measurably increased pressures on parents, who found themselves widely vulnerable. Over time, these two factors were partially addressed – rising guilt levels could generate remediation – though without

soothing the emotion entirely. We explore both components more fully below.

The pattern was complicated, however, by an increasingly pervasive discomfort with familial guilt, which began to take shape earlier in the 20th century but continued even as references to the emotion gained new momentum. It is essential to step back a bit before turning to the newer factors.

For a variety of childrearing experts had explicitly turned against uses of guilt with children, as early as the 1920s. Older Victorian approval of guilt as the basis for shaping moral character fell victim to the new hostility to negative emotions, becoming a common target for experts from that point onward. Guilt, the new expertise insisted, needlessly burdened parents, who had enough to cope with; it could press children as well, who needed to be coaxed and guided by more positive emotions. Imposing guilt on children might set them up for failure, or alternatively produce a dangerously aggressive response. As one popular manual noted, efforts to make a child feel guilty might cause “a harmful effect on his mental health as long as he lives.” A few whole chapters were devoted to attacking guilt, and certainly many sections of the more comprehensive manuals repeated the message, adding specific warnings about toilet training or sexual guidance to the general comments about the dangers of guilt. A new generation of childrearing experts, turning away from their more moralistic predecessors, was bent on purging the family of distracting emotional baggage (Stearns, 1994, pp. 142-145; Renz, 1935, pp. 84-7).

Obviously, this new approach was quite compatible with the declining references to guilt that persisted into midcentury; but it persisted even when the trend line changed, creating an odd atmosphere of discomfort about guilt that – now – was no longer being accommodated by reduced attention.

As a result, even as signs of rising parental guilt became inescapable after midcentury, experts were quick to jump in with an additional set of warnings – with parents, more than children themselves, now the principal target. Thus Hilde Bruch, in a 1952 manual, noted that the “self-criticism and despair” embodied in parental guilt was distressingly widespread. At one point she recounted an interaction with a few mothers who, she claimed,

“asked one guilt-ridden question after another.” Both Bruch and Benjamin Spock not only lamented the unnecessary pain parental guilt might cause, but also its capacity to distort relationships between parent and child. Bruch, in her intriguingly titled *Don’t Be Afraid of Your Child*, worried that guilty parents might inadvertently promote disobedience, as children took advantage of parental weakness; Dr. Spock similarly noted, in his best-seller *Baby and Child Care*, how “feelings of guilt in the parent lead to discipline problems” (Brunch, 1952, p.186; Spock, 1976, p. 366).

Nor, however, according to these new experts, should guilt be imposed on children. Spock, again, warned against developing “a heavy sense of guilt in a young child”, for in his view it could lead to even worse behavior as well as potentially “various distortions of the personality” over the longer haul. Another expert, Penelope Leach, stated outright: “guilt is the most destructive of all emotions”, while the Sears authorial team claimed in 1982 that “the teachings of child psychology and child discipline” urged against guilt: as parents we must “do everything in our power to avoid making a child feel guilty.” Self-esteem, not guilt, should be the child’s lodestar, “the foundation of a child’s well-being and key to success as an adult” (Sears, 1982, p.253; Leach, 1978, p. 401; Hulbert, 2003).

To be sure, particularly after the late-20th-century attacks on undue permissiveness in childrearing (with Dr. Spock as one target), experts were eager to note the importance of providing children with an active sense of morality. Here, guilt might play a constructive role, particularly by the time of later childhood and adolescence. To square the circle, experts who now introduced a slightly more positive role for guilt qualified the emotion with the adjective “healthy.” Guilt itself still risked being negative and undesirable, but a careful dose of “healthy guilt” provided a potential exception. Obviously, by the 1990s, childrearing psychology was also reflecting some influence from the more positive evaluation of guilt in the discipline more generally (Sears & Sears, 1995).

There was no retreat, however, from the concern about the needless pain and distortion of guilt among parents themselves. From Dr. Spock from 1946 onward, to a new generation of experts in the 1990s, professionally-inspired manuals were touted as a means not only of gaining advice about a

host of specific issues but of gaining some relief from a sense that someone parents were responsible for any problems their offspring might encounter. Thus Bruno Bettelheim, in 1987, sought to make parents feel more “secure”, and stop feeling “guilty about not being a good enough parent.” A 1995 manual specifically offered a “peace for parents” section as an antidote to guilt and distress (Bettelheim, 1987; Rosemond, 1995; Sears, 1995, p. 120).

The widespread attacks on guilt, even as the emotion gained ground, were revealingly illustrated by the term “guilt trip”, which emerged for the first time in 1967 (or at least the early 1970s; there is some dictionary dispute). (One early reference came from the *Weathermen*, as reported in a Lima, Ohio, newspaper in 1970 – where a leader berated her colleagues for being motivated by a “white guilt trip.” This suggests some relationship to the idea of rising guilt linked to new civil rights awareness, discussed earlier.) Whatever its initial focus, the term gained currency in the homier context of family and personal life, as a means of objecting to the kinds of manipulation possible as the emotion gained further currency. Guilt trips signaled attempts by others – children or parents might both be culprits – to impose an emotion now regarded as hurtful and often unjustified. The appearance of the term, and its frequent utilization in the family context, neatly captured the tension between an apparently inescapable modern emotion and the equally modern effort to reject its snare (Dalzell, 2009; Lindsey, 1972).

Certainly, as the popularizing experts themselves increasingly recognized, parental guilt was continuing to increase despite their efforts to the contrary and despite the introduction of new deflecting terminology. Again from the 1990s several manuals specifically noted that contemporary parents were “overloaded with guilt” or “today’s all-too-typical parent is frustrated, anxious, and guilt-ridden” (Rosemond, 1995; Sears & Sears, 1995; Stearns, 1994; Wilkinson, 1992).

And here we return to the overall increase of references to parental guilt and their connection to the American guilt problem more generally. The trend of rising guilt was accompanied both by a widespread sense that the emotion was harmful and inappropriate, and by expert efforts to remedy. Indeed, references expanded in part because of the campaign to counter the

emotion. Parents themselves were commonly reporting that guilt was a painful burden, not a useful goad, and experts responded in kind, maintaining on the whole the negative evaluation of the emotion that had emerged after 1920. Here, at least in a family domain, was a distressing conundrum: a new emotional trend was not being adequately controlled by expert alternatives, as it surged forward amid disapproval by almost everyone involved.

The causes of the trend, so pronounced by the 1970s, were again twofold. Most obviously, new levels of parental guilt correlated closely with the famous changes in employment patterns by married women in the United States and elsewhere – only lagging slightly behind. During the 1980s alone, the entry of mothers into the work force expanded by over 12%, while between 1975 and 2000 the percentage of mothers within children under 18 in the workforce rose from 47% to 73%. There was no concealing the guilt that resulted from the clash between old expectations of the maternal role and the new reality of jobs outside the home. Jennifer Palazzo thus noted, in her blog post *Working Mom Guilt*: “I feel guilty. About working. About not working. About no feeling comfortable one way or the other. The working mom guilt? It’s brutal.” Or as a counterpart put the case three decades before: “I always have five million things to do. It’s a guilt trip that I’m not as much of a mother as I could be” (Langway et al., 1980; Marrazzo, 2016; Palazzo, 2017; Ancestry Team, 2014).

Adding to the tension, in the United States, was the notorious absence of adequate, affordable childcare facilities, compared to the situation in most industrial countries – though also considerable parental guilt in the American case about putting children in these facilities even when they were available (Druckerman, 2014). Contributing further was the precipitous rise of single mothers (and some fathers)– again generating a host of commentary at least after 2000, with specific references such as *Single Parent Guilt or Coping with Guilt as a Single Parent* (Wang et al., 2013; Glassmyer, 2015; Livingston, 2013).

New patterns of work and marriage do not, however, provide the sole explanation for the rise of parental guilt, which began in fact before these new behaviors took wide hold. When feminist leaders like Betty Friedan

noted, already in the 1960s, how many mothers were “haunted by guilt”, she was identifying pressures which largely predated widespread employment (which, after all, she was urging as an alternative to housewifery) (Friedan, 2013, p. 251). For the second prompt for rising parental guilt followed from the increasing expectations placed upon parents, and particularly mothers, by the rise of what some have called the “parenting industry” in the United States – the steady increase in the volume and detail of advice about what a good parent must be able to accomplish. Ironically, many of the same experts who clucked about the distress of guilty mothers and fathers were actively contributing to that same distress. And American parents – as observers like David Riesman and Christopher Lasch noted during the transitional decades after 1950 – seemed powerless to resist their blandishments. Certainly there was no question about the steadily mounting volume of advice, even before the advent of the Internet. By 1997 five times as many parenting books were being published as had been the case just 22 years before. And various observers, from Lasch in the 1970s to Pamela Paul more recently, concluded that the main consequence of the literature was to promote guilt and undermine confidence (Lasch, 1979; Paul, 2008; Hulbert, 2003, 362).

For however much they sincerely wanted parents to feel more secure, the experts made it clear that a host of childish problems lay squarely at the parental doorstep. Increasingly rigorous health measures; rising standards of hygiene; appropriate preparation for school success; guidance in emotional development – the list was a long one, and it tended to grow steadily with time. The child who faltered had a parent who was not providing adequate love and encouragement. “Where there is a child with a problem, there is a mother not giving the child enough emotion and praise.” Sometimes the experts might recognize that the conflicting qualities of their advice, as in the comment by Dr. Sears that “parents are ... overloaded with guilt because they may not be doing enough to foster their child’s self-esteem.” Experts, in other words, became adept at generating the parental guilt trip. And while emphases varied, the basic parental responsibility was widely accepted: “I maintain, however, that there are no disobedient children; there are only parents who fail to accept their responsibilities and children who are

scapegoats.” In the end, parental guilt both reflected a sincere belief, by the experts, about the demanding criteria of successful childrearing and an equally powerful, if less acknowledged, recognition that parental guilt was a fundamental source of support for the parenting industry itself (Sears and Sears, 1995, p.97; Rosemond, 1981, p. 27).

The rise of parental guilt hardly explains American guilt trends entirely, though it constitutes a significant component. The causes of the trend are in this case fairly clear-cut, and mutually reinforcing: demanding standards pushed by an accelerating volume of expertise, combined with new behavior patterns that would have been troubling in the best of circumstances but that were exacerbated by the demands of the parenting industry. And all this developed amid widespread disapproval and resentment of the guilt involved – a disapproval ironically shared and promoted by the experts themselves. Simply put, the same literature that imposed growing demands on parents told them that their anxieties were unwarranted – hardly a constructive combination. Here, again, was a key source of the larger dilemma of rising American guilt: a sense that it was unfair and unproductive.

Consequences of the Guilt Trends: some conjectures

A final element deserves attention, in contributing to further inquiry about contemporary American guilt. Beyond obvious pain, and encouragement to sometimes confusing expert advice, what were the results of rising guilt?

Given the lack of substantial attention to this contemporary emotional trend, it is not surprising that assessment of consequences has not drawn extensive comment. Christopher Lasch of course noted, and probably exaggerated, the role of guilt in expanding parental reliance on outside expertise which further reduced their own confidence. Wilfred McClay, writing about guilt more generally, argues that humanitarian guilt has become a serious policy complication in the post-imperialist Western world, reducing the capacity for forceful initiatives. On the other hand, as noted, social psychologists urge that guilt can have constructive effects, though they are focusing on fairly specific and individual issues (Lasch, 1979; McClay, 2017; Murkoff, 2000, p. 21).

Rising levels of parental guilt, amid resentment and anxiety, hardly generated the successful adaptation that the more optimistic interpretations of guilt might suggest. On the other hand, some effective responses did develop, particularly as a second generation of working mothers became more accustomed to their situation. After all, the peak of parental guilt did yield by the 1990s (just as references to guilt in general have stabilized, though slightly later), which in itself suggests some combination of habituation and adjustment. A final set of conjectures seeks to address the predictably mixed results.

On the clearly defensive side: many scholars have wondered why the United States has led the world, in recent decades, in the levels of diagnosis of ADHD in children and in the disproportionate administration of drugs like Ritalin. Obviously an eager medical profession and often impatient teachers play a considerable role in encouraging parents to accept treatment for slightly troublesome offspring. But painful parental guilt is a likely factor as well. Diagnosis of disease, however unfortunate, relieves parental responsibility, while administration of a drug seems to reduce the problem directly. Eagerness to reduce guilt, in other words, might well prompt a measurably distinctive national response around a novel and important issue in contemporary childhood (Singh, 2002; Diller, 1998).

Also on defense, but with some recent moderation: Guilty parents, in a consumer society, respond by giving their children a growing array of gifts. Fathers on business trips, mothers anxious about their time away at work, easily compensate by steadily increasing the level of gifts to children on holidays, at birthdays, and even sometimes simply to ease the process of coming home. Guilt-based gift giving was hardly new at the end of the 20th century, but it did expand. Not surprisingly, eager marketers, aware of rising parental unease, tried to exploit guilt-based giving as well. For their part, omnipresent experts predictably, and uniformly, urged parents not to succumb: children were getting too much stuff, and the guilt was overblown in the first place. Until the 1990s parents largely ignored this advice. There is some evidence, however, that by 2000, encouraged as well by the squeeze on middle-class incomes, parents began to agree that gift giving was running amok. And of course by this point, judging by the Ngrams, the level of guilt

references was beginning to decline as well (Moir, 2017, pp. 257-348; Paul, 2008, pp. 74-76).

The most constructive response to parental guilt, though a rather demanding one, involved the investment of time. Recent studies have persuasively demonstrated that, by the 1990s, many American parents (mothers particularly, but joined by some dutiful fathers), were spending more active time with their children than ever before – even compared to the nostalgic 1950s, when housewifery seemed to reign supreme. Concerned about many factors that might impede their children’s development, including too much television time, parents began to jump in with increasingly elaborate schedules of lessons, family outings, shared leisure. There was some obvious downsides to this development, in limiting children’s autonomy through what became known as “helicopter parenting,” but the trend unquestionably helped to satisfy the parental sense of responsibility. Guilt, here, was doing the job its psychology supporters urged: prompting some real remediation to the behaviors that had helped cause it in the first place. The decline and stabilization of references to parental guilt suggest at least a partially successful result: the surge of the emotion began to abate thanks to a combination of greater experience with the new work patterns and the active efforts at compensation (Craig, 2007; Pew Research Center, 2015).

But there was a final, and arguably less constructive, result as well. Partly through the compensatory efforts, middle-class American families continued to be described as “rushed, tired and stressed” (Miller, 2015). There is every indication that parental satisfaction steadily declined, at least from the 1960s onward, with more and more parents responding to polls by saying that, if they could do things over again, they would prefer to remain childless – or, at the least, invest in only a single child, the “one and done” approach that, along with outright intentional childlessness, was becoming increasingly popular. As a recent study demonstrated, the gap in levels of professed happiness, between childless American couples and those with children, was noticeably greater in the United States than in any other industrial country (Glass et al., 2016, p.2). And while part of the distinction resulted from the notoriously stingier national policies in support of parenting, ongoing guilt

combined with resentment of the emotion played a role as well (Langway et al., 1980; Yates, 2006).

While further analysis remains desirable, the overall point is clear enough. Rising levels of parental guilt had consequences, but these were predictably complicated by the accompanying sense that guilt was harmful and even undeserved. The results might link with a number of new behaviors – from over-medicalization to shifts in the levels of parental attention – but also to a downward reevaluation of the emotional rewards of parenting itself.

Conclusion

At least in contemporary American history, guilt deserves more interdisciplinary attention than it has recently received – including appropriate historical analysis. There is some disconnect between significant psychological studies, touting the utility of guilt in specific settings, and the more complex and broader trends of guilt in important segments of the national culture. A society that is often, and understandably, judged as consumerist and self-indulgent has a more nuanced recent emotional history than might be anticipated. Further efforts to explain the unexpected trends, and to calculate their consequences, are surely warranted. In the family context, we can already gain some sense of guilt's recent trajectory and, particularly, the complex interaction between growing attention and growing discomfort.

For the overall evaluation, at least for parental guilt and perhaps for guilt more generally during the past half-century in the United States, must emphasize the odd tension between rising incidence and active resentment and discomfort. References to guilt increased both because several situations provoked it – from humanitarianism to new parental dilemmas – and because many people sought opportunities to explain how unpleasant and unfair the emotion had become. Cautions about guilt that had accommodated declining attention to the emotion during the early 20th century, now became measurably more ambivalent. Many Americans, at least in specific settings like the family, faced new challenges in dealing with an emotion that they could not ignore but that they sought to contest.

Notes

¹ Something of the same pattern applies to contemporary shame, which poses a similar, and obviously, related conundrum. Disapproval of shame mounted in the United States from the early 19th century onward, and for many decades this helped generate declining rates of reference. Even as considerable disapproval continued and actually intensified, however, in the later 20th century, uses of shame began to expand (and references to increase), for example, in some legal punishments and on social media. Here too, Americans were caught in a trend that generated measurable discomfort. The new sources of shame are, however, more easily identified than is the case with guilt, so the parallels should not be pressed too far (Stearns, 2017).

² The big controversy over original sin crested in the early 19th century, and while an important Evangelical minority kept the faith, most American Protestants began to relax this tradition, effectively abandoning the idea of guilt inherent in the newborn child. (Stearns, 1994; Mintz, 2004).

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