



Reparation or reactance? The influence of guilt on reaction to persuasive communication☆



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Guilt can promote pro-environmental persuasive communication.
- Reparatory behaviors require the presence of reparation suggestions in message.
- Link is fragile and can be reversed when reparatory means are blatantly offered.
- Our results provide interesting insights for persuasive messages using guilt.

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ABSTRACT

Guilt is generally assumed to motivate a desire to repair and to promote prosocial behavior. However, recent research suggests that this link is not automatic and that guilt may sometimes lead to negative social outcomes. Four experiments tested the causal influence of incidental guilt on pro-environmental attitude and behavior considered as a specific category of general prosocial behavior. Results indicate that guilt may indeed promote general prosocial (pro-environmental) behavior, but that it requires the presence of reparation suggestions in order to trigger prosocial behavior. Moreover, this link is fragile and can be reversed when reparatory means are blatantly offered by the guilt inducer. Results are discussed in terms of their implications for research on guilt and for the role of guilt in persuasive communication.

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1. Introduction

The role of emotions in persuasion has been largely explored during the last decades (Baron, Inman, Kao, & Logan, 1992; Bodenhausen, Sheppard, & Kramer, 1994; Moons & Mackie, 2007; Schwarz, Bless, & Bohner, 1991; Tiedens & Linton, 2001), improving our understanding of persuasion processes. It may however be noted that this research has mainly focused on the impact of 'basic' emotions (e.g., happiness, sadness, anger and fear), with relatively few studies addressing the impact of self-conscious emotions (Nabi, 2002). This may appear somewhat surprising, as self-conscious emotions, such as guilt, are very commonly experienced emotions in everyday life. Moreover, among these emotions, guilt possesses a special status as it is commonly used

as a means to make people comply with external demand, for instance in advertising (e.g., Hibbert, Smith, Davies, & Ireland, 2007; Stanton & Guion, 2013). However, up to now, a careful inspection of the literature suggests that little is known about the way guilt influences persuasion: Studies exploring this issue have provided contradictory results and few of them have explored the processes underlying these effects. Thus, the general aim of our research was to explore more thoroughly the influence of guilt on compliance to persuasive communication.

2. Guilt should promote compliance to persuasive message

Tangney and Dearing (2002) proposed that guilt arises from a personal transgression. For guilt to be induced, the personal transgression must have breached one's personal moral standards and have hurt another person (Ortony, Clore, & Collins, 1988). Then, guilt is typically thought to encourage reparative actions (Tangney, Miller, Flicker, & Barlow, 1996; Zeelenberg & Breugelmans, 2008), apologies (Lindsay-Hartz, 1984), or any other attempt to reduce the harm done (Tangney et al., 1996). Consistent with this view, guilt has been found to increase compliance to a victim (or a witness) of one's own transgression

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(Carlsmith & Gross, 1969), to an external charity demand (Darlington & Macker, 1966), and more generally, to favor engagement in reparatory prosocial behavior (Cryder, Springer, & Morewedge, 2012; De Hooge, Zeelenberg, & Breugelmans, 2007; Ketelaar & Au, 2003; Nelissen, Dijk, & deVries, 2007). Based on these findings, one could thus hypothesize that guilt would promote compliance to an external demand, at least when this demand originates from the victim of the transgression (Cryder et al., 2012; De Hooge, Nelissen, Breugelmans, & Zeelenberg, 2011).

3. Guilt as a motivation process to repair

However, guilt is not expected to invariably lead to compliance. According to recent theorizations, emotions can be conceptualized as motivational processes that serve the attainment of a current goal (DeSteno, Petty, Rucker, Wegener, & Braverman, 2004; Zeelenberg, Nelissen, Breugelmans, & Pieters, 2008). Thus, in order to have an impact, a persuasive message should also provide a means to reach the goal activated by the induced emotion. Consistent with this reasoning, DeSteno and colleagues (2004) observed that participants induced to feel sadness were more favorable toward a tax when this tax was presented as solving potentially saddening problems, but not when it was presented as potentially solving angering problems. The reverse was true for participants induced to feel angry. Related findings have been observed in research on attitude ambivalence. For instance, Clark, Wegener, and Fabrigar (2008) have demonstrated that discomfort produced by attitudinal ambivalence can sometimes motivate people to process a persuasive message, as long as this message is perceived as helping them to reduce attitudinal ambivalence. Therefore, if guilt is conceived as a motivational state directed to reparation, the message should include a way to repair in order to produce compliance among guilty people. Although theoretically appealing, this hypothesis is not supported by the research on 'guilt appeals' from which most of the relevant research exploring the impact of guilt on persuasion comes from.

4. The paradoxical case of guilt and emotional appeals

In guilt appeal studies, participants are typically induced to feel guilty by being exposed to a message that also provides means to reduce guilt feelings. For instance, an ad for dental floss for children (i.e., a means to reduce guilt associated with children dental problems) can be accompanied by a message suggesting that this is the responsibility of the parents to make children keep their teeth clean (see, Coulter & Pinto, 1995). Whereas guilt appeals may be sometimes effective in increasing the effectiveness of a persuasive message (but see Noel, 1973), it frequently results in counterproductive, reactance-like, effects (e.g., Coulter & Pinto, 1995; Darlington & Macker, 1966). The results of a meta-analysis conducted by O'Keefe (2000) even suggest that the more guilt is induced by the message, the weaker the influence is.

These findings echo "backlash" effects that have been reported in the field of fear appeals. However, in fear appeal research, reactance-like effects are typically observed when the scared people think that the recommended responses to cope with their fear is inefficient or that they are personally unable to perform this response (e.g., Witte, 1992). Therefore, extending this theoretical position to guilt appeals would not help explain why an increase in guilt intensity, keeping the means constant, would reverse the effects of guilt on persuasion.

Nevertheless, in line with this view, we consider that reliance on integral guilt (i.e., guilt is induced by the very same stimulus for which a response is asked; e.g., Basil, Ridgway, & Basil, 2006, 2008; Hibbert et al., 2007) could be at least partially responsible of these results. With such a procedure, the induction of guilt and the content of the message are closely intertwined and interpreted as a whole. As a result, individuals can think that guilt has been induced on purpose, with a manipulative intent that they will attempt to counteract. This may explain why high integral guilt induction could lead to reactance-like effect (see

O'Keefe, 2000). For instance, Coulter and Pinto (1995) hypothesized and found that moderate levels of (integral) guilt increased compliance whereas higher levels were accompanied by anger that in turn led to reactance effects (see also, Coulter, Cotte, & Moore, 1997; Rubin & Shaffer, 1987). However, in this specific example, it is unclear whether the effect is due to the level of guilt per se or to the fact that, as the level of guilt induced by the message increases, the perceived manipulative intent of the requester appears more blatant (e.g., Cotte, Coulter, & Moore, 2005).

In sum, it seems plausible that some effects observed in the area of guilt appeal may be constrained by the fact that guilt was induced integrally, which could also have led to misspecifications of the processes underlying the effects of guilt (O'Keefe, 2003). Therefore, it appeared necessary to manipulate guilt and the content of the message independently. In these conditions, guilt should induce a motivation to comply with the requester as long as the manipulative intent is not blatant. When the manipulative intent is made salient, the effects of guilt should reverse and lead to reactance.

5. The influence of guilt in pro-environmental communication

In this research, we chose to measure compliance in the domain of pro-environmental behavior. A first reason was that this behavior constitutes a domain of great societal importance that has guided many studies during the last two decades (Kollmuss & Agyeman, 2002; Steg & Vlek, 2009). Moreover, it is generally believed that moral emotions such as guilt play a central role in encouraging pro-environmental behaviors (Bamberg & Möser, 2007; Steg & Vlek, 2009). For instance, positive correlations have been observed between anticipated guilt and pro-environmental behaviors, like recycling patterns (Elgaied, 2012). Other studies found that eco-guilt (i.e., guilt arising when people are asked to remind about environmentally harmful behaviors) could motivate intention to behave pro-environmentally (Mallett, 2012; see also Ferguson & Branscombe, 2010). Yet, these studies were either correlational or relied on integral guilt. Therefore, as recently highlighted in a meta-analysis on pro-environmental behaviors experiments (see Osbaldiston & Schott, 2012), evidence for a direct causal link between incidental guilt and pro-environmental behavior remains scarce.

More important, this domain presents several specific features that could be of great interest at the theoretical level. First, consequences of pro-environmental behaviors are not directed toward someone in particular (as it is often the case in guilt research). Secondly, they are expected to have implications in the far future with no immediate direct consequences (Behrend, Baker, & Thompson, 2009). Thus, pro-environmental behavior can be considered as a behavior that is expected to benefit the whole society and not a specific individual (Gifford et al., 2009). As a result, showing that guilt could favor investment in such behaviors could be of great interest for a better understanding of the effects of guilt as it can be seen whether it can motivate behavior of an individual even when there is no direct benefit for him or herself, or for any specific individual.

6. Experiment 1

The first experiment examined the impact of guilt on the compliance with pro-environmental persuasive message. We exposed guilt (vs. control) participants to a message presenting the negative consequences of unmanaged waste before asking them to report their attitude toward sorting waste. Moreover, we manipulated the text so that sorting waste appeared either as a reparatory means or not. If guilt directly motivates compliance to persuasive communication, making participants guilty should lead them to adopt a more positive attitude toward sorting waste, whatever the way sorting waste will be presented. However, if guilt indirectly leads people to reparation by making them receptive to reparatory possibilities, they should adopt such an

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