

Guilt, shame, responsibility?

Reactions to the Shoah and handling of present intergroup relations

Keywords: collective emotions, moral responsibility, intergroup attitudes

1. Introduction

This study analysed the association between the reactions of young Germans to the Shoah and the way they handle present intergroup relations. The remembering of past harm takes an important place in today's societies, but one question remains urgent: Does this remembering lead us to a questioning of our own behaviour in society? While remembering the tragedy caused to the victims of Nazi terror, our societies cultivate more and more resentments to present minorities, like immigrants or Muslims. The aim of this study was to analyse how the way we react to the horror of the past is linked to the way we ourselves behave in today's situations of exclusion.

The interest in collective memory and individual reactions to one's group's actions, like collective emotions, is a recent, but growing sector of research on intergroup relations. These emotions, like guilt or shame, can be experienced by an individual due to his affiliation to a group, especially if his group has acted negatively towards an outgroup, and they are likely to be associated to prosocial behavioural and attitudinal motivations towards the victimized group (Wohl, Branscombe & Klar, 2006). Feeling guilty for the Shoah can thus be associated with the motivation to support reparation politics (e.g. Peetz, Gunn & Wilson, 2010). Concerning group based shame, Allpress, Barlow, Brown and Louis (2010) suggest to distinguish between essence shame and image shame. Essence shame implicates the impression that the harm committed by the group shows a negative essence of the group, leading to the motivation to act prosocially towards the victimized outgroup in order to establish the moral value of the group. Image shame is based on the fear that the group is seen negatively by others, potentially leading to denial and antisocial attitudes towards the victimized outgroup.

The different studies about collective emotions all limit the analysis of their outcomes to one particular intergroup context. The aim of the present study was to go further: What kind of reaction to the Shoah leads an individual to challenge his own way of behaving in present situations of discrimination? Given that the influence of collective emotions is potentially limited to the intergroup context they are based on, like the relation between Germans and Jews, it was interesting to consider the implications of the more general concept of moral responsibility, based on Hannah Arendt's work on humanity (1951, cited by Birmingham, 2006). This responsibility consists in the adoption of moral principles valuable for all human beings, in the sense of vigilance towards present violations of human dignity, based on the awareness of human weakness.

Our hypotheses predicted that collective guilt, essence shame and image shame would be related to the way participants deal with Jews. We expected, firstly, that guilt and essence shame are negative predictors of secondary Antisemitism, whereas image shame is a positive predictor. Secondly, we hypothesized that guilt and essence shame are positively associated with support for reparation politics, whereas image shame is negatively associated with this variable.

Furthermore, we expected that moral responsibility predicts, better than collective emotions, attitudes towards immigrants. More precisely, we suggested that moral responsibility negatively predicts negative attitudes towards immigrants and positively predicts support for measures in favor of immigrants. Given their prosocial potential, collective guilt and essence shame could also be associated to the attitudes towards immigrants. However, we suggested that their influence is indirect and mediated by responsibility.

2. Method

2.1 Participants and procedure

128 pupils from a German high school, between 15 and 20 years old, filled out the questionnaire. The participants first read a short text reminding the historical context of the Shoah and then answered several questions containing the measures of the different variables.

2.2 Measures

The main factors measured were *collective guilt, essence shame, image shame, responsibility, secondary Antisemitism, support for reparation politics in favor of Jews, negative attitudes towards immigrants* and *support for measures in favor of immigrants*.

All items were measured on seven-point Likert scales and inserted into a questionnaire. Most of the items were inspired by existing measures currently employed in social psychological research.

3. Results

Linear regression analyses were used to test the main hypotheses. In accordance with our predictions, a high level of guilt is associated to a low level of secondary Anti-Semitism, whereas a high level of image shame is associated to a high level of Anti-Semitism. Essence shame does not predict this factor. Moreover, in accordance with our hypothesis, guilt and essence shame predict support for reparation policies. Image shame is not significantly associated to this factor.

Furthermore, responsibility is a negative predictor of negative attitudes towards immigrants and a positive predictor of support for measures in favour of immigrants, as predicted by our theoretical considerations. Interestingly, guilt also predicts negative attitudes towards immigrants and support for measures in their favour, but its effect is mediated by responsibility, whereas essence shame is a direct predictor.

4. Discussion

Our findings demonstrate that collective guilt experienced by young Germans concerning the Shoah is negatively associated to secondary Anti-Semitism, i.e. the experience of guilt promotes a positive view of Jews and an admission of their suffering and claims. The results also confirmed the model suggested by Allpress et al. (2010) that distinguishes between essence shame and image shame. In accordance with our predictions, image shame is positively associated to secondary Anti-Semitism, whereas essence shame predicts the support for reparation policies. The positive association between guilt and support for reparation policies has also been proved by our results.

Moreover, this study focused on the association between the reaction to the Shoah and the attitudes towards the present minority of immigrants. The findings show that moral responsibility based on the Shoah is associated to a low level of negative attitudes towards immigrants and a high level of support for measures in favour of them. The results also demonstrate that collective emotions linked to the Shoah can be associated to prosocial attitudes towards immigrants. Nevertheless, considering the potential implications of the results on social reality, we suggest that an imposition of guilt or shame can imply the risk of defensive reactions in spite of their potential prosocial effects. Thus, we suggest the importance of the consideration of shared moral responsibility that implies a critical integration of the past while enabling the individual to act in the name of a common vigilance regarding to human dignity.

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