



Guilty feelings and the guilt trip: Emotions and motivation in migration and transnational caregiving



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ABSTRACT

This paper explores experience of 'guilt' as a motivating emotion in the migrant process. Data are drawn from two major research projects with a focus on Italian transnational families comprising adult migrant children living in Australia and their ageing parents in Italy. Findings confirm Baumeister et al.'s (1994) three broad functions of guilt as relationship-enhancing; a tool for exerting influence over others; and a mechanism for alleviating inequities in relationships. The analysis extends this social relational understanding of guilt by locating it within the broader context of cultural processes to argue that a moral obligation to return is implicit in the migration process.

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1. Introduction

As a scholar of migration working in the disciplines of anthropology and sociology, the issue of emotions has always been relevant and evident, but has rarely been the focus of my research. This tendency to overlook emotions is common in migration studies generally (Mai and King, 2009: 297), although there is a growing body of research (including this Special Issue) that responds to this gap (e.g. Svasek, 2012). In this paper I draw on two substantial migration research projects, neither of which was designed specifically to analyse emotions, but both of which elicited data that lends itself to an examination of emotions and motivation. The focus of both projects was the ongoing connections between migrants and their homelands and, in particular, the transnational family relationships maintained across time and distance between adult migrant children and their ageing parents in Italy. Findings from both projects indicate that an emotion central to key motivations in the migration process is guilt. In the words of one migrant daughter; "Guilt, guilt, guilt is what all migrants face!"

Despite receiving a certain amount of attention from psychologists, guilt has featured only occasionally in the anthropological and sociological literature on emotions. This said, the emotion or notion of 'shame', which is thought to be closely connected to guilt, has received much attention in the anthropological literature (especially of the Mediterranean), particularly in relation to the cultural construction of honour and morality (Peristiani, 1966;

Herzfeld, 1980; see also; Fassin, 2012). The long-standing anthropological notion that shame is a more public emotion and guilt a more private affair (Benedict, 1946), has been challenged by recent psychological research (Tangney et al., 1996). However, there continues to be general agreement among psychologists that they are distinct emotions (Keltner and Buswell, 1996). Shame is generally thought to be more painful than guilt and to involve a negative assessment of the whole self – *I am bad* [shame], rather than of some specific action, or failure to act – *I have done a bad thing* [guilt] (Lewis, 1971).

Baumeister et al. (1994, 244) point out that when guilt is examined in the psychological literature, it is primarily theorised as largely or entirely linked to private self-consciousness (e.g. Buss, 1980: 159), defined as 'a solitary affair and a product of mainly intrapsychic processes'. The central aim of my paper is to confirm Baumeister et al.'s (1994) critique of this view and to extend their analysis of guilt as 'an intrapsychic phenomenon that originates in interpersonal attachments and social exchange' (p261) through an examination of its role as a motivating emotion in the migration process. This view of guilt reflects the relatively recent shift in social psychology to theorise emotions as relational rather than intrapsychic. For example, the psychologist De Rivera (1984) proposed that all emotional states are based on interpersonal relationships and, indeed, that all emotions are fundamentally concerned with adjusting these relationships (see also Frijda, 1986). I apply an anthropological approach to emotion to examine how emotions

arise out of social and cultural processes (e.g. Harre, 1986; Bendelow and Williams, 1998; Parkinson et al., 2005). I am particularly interested in social science discussions about the relationship between morality and emotions. Some anthropologists, for example Michelle Rosaldo (1984), argue that emotions are moral statements. Similarly, the psychologist Janice Lindsay-Hartz (1984) argues that guilt experiences are characterised by “a violation of the moral order”.

My hypothesis is that the act of migration, by causing physical separation, absence and longing, places the migrant in a difficult moral bind, in particular concerning their obligations to care for ageing parents. The normative expectations of ideal family caregiving, at least in dominant Western configurations, assume kin must be physically present to adequately care for each other (Jamieson, 1998).¹ For example, the major bodies of literature on caring (including feminist, gerontology and nursing) all pose a very narrow definition of care as dependant or ‘hands on’ that, by definition, demands physical co-presence. In addition, research on Italian conceptions of care and wellbeing suggest that the elderly commonly define their health in direct relation to how regularly they see and how close (both emotionally and geographically) they feel they are to their children, particularly daughters, who are expected to provide for all the care needs of their ageing parents and parents-in-law (Zontini, 2007; MacKinnon, 1998; Di Leonardo, 1987; Baldassar, 2011a). The data I report on in this paper suggest that migrants feel guilty because the physical separation and absence imposed by their migration severely restricts their ability to fulfil their caregiving obligations to their elderly parents, which prioritise physical co-presence. These ‘guilty feelings’ motivate them to ‘stay in touch’ as often and as effectively as they can by creating opportunities in which they can exchange virtual (and other forms of) co-presence across distance in an attempt to fulfil their sense of moral obligation. Here the relationship between guilt and obligation requires unpacking and is relevant to all family contexts, whether migration is involved or not.

In focussing on guilt as an interpersonal and social construct, Baumeister et al. (1994) argue that guilt is especially prevalent in certain types of relationships:

“People appear to feel guilty when they hurt, neglect, or disappoint others and when they benefit unfairly vis-à-vis others or at others’ expense. Communal relationships, based on expectations of mutual concern for each other’s welfare, are particularly relevant to causing guilt (p261)”

In anthropological and sociological terms, these ‘communal relationships’ might be more clearly defined as social relationships characterised by shared moral obligations. For example, family caregiving relationships are defined by the ‘norm of generalised reciprocity’ in which people give care without measuring exactly the amount they receive, but with the expectation and obligation that care will be returned to them (Baldassar and Merla, 2014: 7). A pertinent exemplar of this norm in the context of this paper is what family and gerontology studies refer to as the ‘generational contract’, where parents care for their young who in turn care for them when they age (Bengtson and Achenbaum, 1993). In the words of an Italian migrant daughter;

¹ While there is no room for extensive discussion in this paper, there are important examples of cultural traditions that do not equate appropriate caregiving with physical co-presence. For example, Olwig (2014) argues that the migration of women from the lower classes is part of a system of circulation of care that is an integral and accepted aspect of family and kinship in Caribbean societies (see also McKay, 2007).

I would feel guilty ... Because I feel that you know, they have cared for me, and I should care for them, I feel that that’s why they’re – that’s why they lived all their lives for their children. So, holy cow! If we can’t even care for them in the end! I am a bit shocked [by] the Australian system, because as you know, I am married into an Australian family, and [my husband] has a grandmother who needs care and she doesn’t get it.

This said, not all family members give and receive care equally. Women typically shoulder a far greater burden of care and generally give more than they receive, an issue I have discussed extensively elsewhere:

... care and the ability to exchange it can be considered a type of resource or form of social capital ... that is unevenly distributed within families, subject to cultural notions of gender and identity roles relating to rights and obligations to care, which intersect with, and interrelate to, the historical care regimes of the various nation-states and communities in which families reside. (Baldassar and Merla, 2014: 7)

Guilt as a motivating emotion in this context is particularly interesting as it can be conceived as a resource that can be used by the less powerful, often women and the elderly, to elicit caregiving responses from those with more power. The ability to employ guilt in this way, colloquially referred to as the ‘guilt trip’, relies heavily on the norm and culturally defined moral obligations of generalised reciprocity that are constitutive of family (and ‘communal’) relationships. This interpretation confirms and extends Baumeister et al.’s (1994) emphasis on the interpersonal by examining guilt as a set of moral relationships that reproduce gendered cultures of care. What follows is an analysis of the relational and cultural features of guilt in the context of the migration process, including how guilt is expressed in discursive performances across transnational social fields.

1.1. Migration research methods and transnational caregiving data

As noted above, this paper is informed by two substantial migration research projects. The first project, ‘visits home’, involved several years of ethnographic research conducted in the 1990s comprising extensive participant observation with approximately 40 families (including over 80 interviews) exploring the relationships between migrants in Perth, Western Australia and their homeland kin in the Veneto region of north-eastern Italy. Through a detailed analysis of the increasingly regular visits these labour migrants made to their native towns over the course of a century, the visit home is conceptualised as a symbolic act of recompense in response to the culturally defined moral obligation to return to kin and country (Baldassar, 2001, 2011a,b). In this historical and cultural context, feelings of guilt, often combined with a sense of longing in the form of homesickness (expressed by informants using the Italian term ‘nostalgia’) appears to be a central motivation in migrant’s continuing ties to homeland. I return to an analysis of this data later to explore the relational and cultural features of guilt in the migration process in a broader context. First, I examine the role of guilt and motivation in the more micro processes of cultures of care.

The second project, ‘transnational caregiving’, is a collaborative study comprising over 200 ethnographic life-history interviews and participant observation conducted between 2000 and 2004 (Baldassar et al., 2007), with on-going follow up research. Data collection includes a ‘two-ended’ study design involving families living in Perth as well as with their kin living in the countries of

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