

RUNNING HEAD: GUILT PRONENESS

Guilt Proneness and Moral Character

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Abstract

Guilt proneness is a personality trait indicative of a predisposition to experience negative feelings about personal wrongdoing, even when the wrongdoing is private. It is characterized by the anticipation of feeling bad about committing transgressions rather than by guilty feelings in a particular moment or generalized guilty feelings that occur without an eliciting event. Our research has revealed that guilt proneness is an important character trait because knowing a person's level of guilt proneness helps us to predict the likelihood that they will behave unethically. For example, online studies of adults across the U.S. have shown that people who score high in guilt proneness (compared to low scorers) make fewer unethical business decisions, commit fewer delinquent behaviors, and behave more honestly when they make economic decisions. In the workplace, guilt-prone employees are less likely to engage in counterproductive behaviors that harm their organization.

Keywords: guilt; personality; unethical behavior; counterproductive work behavior; character; morality;

Guilt Proneness & Moral Character

The majority of research on morality and ethics has focused on people's judgments and reasoning in difficult hypothetical dilemmas (see Haidt & Kesebir, 2010 for a review). This research has revealed important insights into how people make attributions of right and wrong and the basis for their decisions in situations in which various moral considerations are at play (e.g., considerations about harm, fairness, loyalty, authority, and purity). These studies help us understand decision making in situations in which it is hard to decide what course of action is the most ethical, but cannot fully address what prevents people from engaging in unethical behavior in their daily lives.

Rather than investigate moral judgments or people's ability to reason about difficult choices, our research instead focuses on identifying predictors of unethical and counterproductive behaviors in situations in which one must choose between moral and selfish actions. Guiding our research is a central question about moral character: Are certain individuals predisposed to act more unethically than others? If so, which individual differences—or, “character traits”—predict such behavior? Although there are a number of traits that predict one's moral behavior (e.g., honesty-humility, Ashton & Lee, 2008; empathy, Batson, 1998; future self-continuity, Hershfield, Cohen, & Thompson, 2012), one trait that is particularly important for understanding moral character is guilt proneness.

What is Guilt Proneness?

Guilt proneness is a personality trait indicative of a predisposition to experience negative feelings about personal wrongdoing, even when the wrongdoing is private. It is characterized by anticipating a bad feeling about committing transgressions rather than by guilty feelings in a particular moment or generalized guilty feelings that occur without an eliciting event. Our research program reveals that guilt proneness predisposes people to think, feel, and act ethically

(see also the research program of June Tangney and colleagues; e.g., Tangney & Dearing, 2002; Tangney, Stuewig, & Mashek, 2007; Tangney, Stuewig, Mashek, & Hastings, 2011; Tangney, Youman, & Stuewig, 2009). Knowing a person's level of guilt proneness helps us predict the likelihood that they will behave unethically. Why should guilt proneness decrease unethical behavior? The anticipation of guilty feelings about private misdeeds indicates that one has internalized moral values. Thus, for guilt-prone individuals, public surveillance is not required to prevent moral transgressions; instead, their conscience guides them.

Measuring Guilt Proneness

Guilt proneness can be measured with the Guilt and Shame Proneness scale, or GASP for short (Cohen, Wolf, Panter, & Insko, 2011). The GASP contains four items that measure guilt proneness (it also contains 12 other items that measure related constructs, including shame proneness). Participants imagine themselves in situations in which they have committed a transgression and indicate the likelihood that they would react in the way described, from (1) *very unlikely* to (7) *very likely*, with a score of 4 indicating *about 50% likely*. Here is a sample guilt proneness item: "After realizing you have received too much change at a store, you decide to keep it because the salesclerk doesn't notice. What is the likelihood that you would feel uncomfortable about keeping the money?"

This scale is scored by adding up (or averaging) the four guilt proneness items. Although guilt proneness is a continuum, and we treat it as a continuous measure in our statistical analyses, we consider people with scores of 20 points or below to be low in guilt proneness, those with scores of 21 points to 24 points to be medium in guilt proneness, and those with scores of 25 points to 28 points to be high in guilt proneness. Sample populations vary, but with these cutoffs,

roughly 30%-40% of adults whom we survey are considered low in guilt proneness and 30%-40% are considered high in guilt proneness.

The GASP scale was modeled after the Test of Self Conscious Affect (TOSCA) – a precursor to the GASP developed by Tangney and colleagues (see Tangney & Dearing, 2002 for a description of the TOSCA and a review of key findings). Although there are some conceptual differences between the TOSCA and the GASP (Cohen et al., 2011), the two scales tend to yield similar guilt proneness findings and are highly correlated (e.g., $r = .66$ in Schaumberg & Flynn, 2012). In addition to measuring guilt proneness, both the GASP and the TOSCA measure shame proneness. The primary difference between guilt proneness and shame proneness is whether the person makes a negative evaluation of a specific bad behavior (guilt proneness) or a negative evaluation of his or her entire self (shame proneness). When studying moral character, we focus on guilt proneness rather than shame proneness because guilt is a more moral emotion than shame in that it is associated more strongly with ethical behavior (see Tangney et al., 2007, 2009 for reviews).

Guilt Proneness and Personality

We have administered the GASP, along with other personality scales, to thousands of people across the United States (Cohen et al., 2011; Cohen, Panter, & Turan, 2012a; Cohen, Panter, Turan, & Morse, 2012b). In our research, we typically ask adults to answer questions about their personality and behavior in confidential web-based questionnaires. What have we found?

First, guilt proneness is positively correlated with Honesty-Humility—one of the six major dimensions of personality. Honesty-Humility—or “the H-Factor”—is a broad disposition comprised of the more narrow traits of sincerity, fairness, greed-avoidance, and modesty (Ashton

& Lee, 2007, 2008, 2009). People who are low in Honesty-Humility are more likely than those who are high to behave unethically, for example by committing delinquent and criminal behaviors, such as theft and vandalism. Correlations between guilt proneness and the H-factor are typically around .50, indicating that people who are low in guilt proneness are generally dishonest and arrogant as well.

Guilt proneness also correlates with Conscientiousness and Agreeableness, albeit to a lesser degree. Conscientiousness is a broad disposition comprised of organization, diligence, perfectionism, and prudence; Agreeableness is a broad disposition comprised of forgiveness, gentleness, flexibility, and patience (Ashton & Lee, 2007, 2009). Correlations between guilt proneness and these personality dimensions tend to be between .30 and .40, indicating that people who are low in guilt proneness tend to be more unreliable and intolerant than those who are high in guilt proneness. Integrity test scores have consistently been found to correlate with Honesty-Humility, Conscientiousness, and Agreeableness (e.g., Marcus, Lee, & Ashton, 2007), so the fact that these three personality dimensions show moderate correlations with guilt proneness lends credence to the assertion that guilt proneness is a character trait. The relationships between guilt proneness and the remaining three major personality dimensions (i.e., Emotionality, Extraversion, Openness to Experience) are weaker, with correlations typically below .20.

Honesty-Humility, Conscientiousness, and Agreeableness are all broad personality dimensions. What about more specific aspects of people's personalities? Guilt proneness has moderately strong relationships with empathy, perspective taking, consideration of future consequences, and moral identity, with correlations generally between .30 and .40 (e.g., Cohen et al., 2011, 2012b; Tangney & Dearing, 2002; Tangney et al., 2011). Compared to individuals with

low guilt-proneness scores, those with high scores are more likely to be sympathetic, take the perspective of others, consider the future consequences of their behavior, and value having moral traits

It is also informative to consider personality traits that are uncorrelated with guilt proneness, in order to establish discriminant validity. Self-esteem, neuroticism, and rumination are all unrelated to guilt proneness (Cohen et al., 2011; Tangney & Dearing, 2002). People with low self-esteem are no more likely to be guilt prone than those with high self-esteem, and the same for neuroticism and rumination. We have found a small negative relationship between guilt proneness and depression ($r = -.17$ in Cohen et al., 2011, Study 2), with people high in guilt proneness slightly less likely to report depressive symptoms than those low in guilt proneness (see also Tangney et al., 2011).

What about demographic characteristics? Women are more guilt prone than men, and older adults are more guilt prone than younger adults (Cohen et al., 2011; Tangney et al., 2009). How large are these differences? In a sample of over three thousand American adults ($N = 3,644$) who have completed the GASP in various studies we have run (e.g., Cohen et al., 2011, 2012a, 2012b) we have found that women's guilt proneness scores are approximately one standard deviation higher than men's scores ($d = .94$), and the correlation between guilt proneness and age is moderate ($r = .28$).

Although we have not found reliable differences in guilt proneness levels across members of different religious groups, our results show that guilt-prone people tend to be somewhat higher in intrinsic religiosity, but not extrinsic religiosity (Cohen et al., 2011). In other words, people whose religious beliefs shape their approach to life tend to feel guilty for wrongdoing.

Overall, these findings suggest that guilt proneness is key aspect of moral disposition. It has moderately strong relationships with a variety of individual differences that have been linked to ethical behavior. Moreover, it is uncorrelated, or negatively correlated, with indicators of poor mental health, like rumination and depression.

Guilt Proneness and Unethical Choices

Unethical Business Decisions

One way we have investigated the relationship between guilt proneness and unethical choices is by looking at people's willingness to engage in unethical business practices, such as corporate crime (cf. Ashton & Lee, 2008). We asked 153 adults about their willingness make unscrupulous business decisions in hypothetical situations in which they could benefit themselves and their company by engaging in business practices that harm society and/or the environment (Cohen et al., 2011, Study 2). For example, one dilemma asked respondents whether they would advise their company to exploit a legal loophole that would allow their company to drill for oil and gas in a country in which it is illegal to do so because of human rights violations committed by that country's government. Exploiting the loophole would result in a large promotion and raise, as well as large profits for the company. In this dilemma, 41% of participants low in guilt proneness said they would probably or definitely exploit the loophole, whereas only 25% of those high in guilt proneness said they would probably or definitely exploit the loophole. When we averaged people's responses across all six dilemmas, we found that the correlation between guilt proneness and the willingness to make unethical business decisions was $-.44$. This value is similar in magnitude to the relationship between unethical business decisions and the H-Factor of personality (Ashton & Lee, 2008).

One reason why the unethical business decisions scale is informative for the study of unethical choices is because one's decisions are private and confidential, so there is no conformity pressure or risk of punishment. However, a limitation of this method is that the dilemmas are hypothetical and describe rare events. To provide converging evidence of the relationship between guilt proneness and unethical choices, we examined people's actual behavior in a situation in which they could lie for monetary gain.

Lying for Monetary Gain

To investigate lying, we adapted a paradigm from behavioral economics (cf. Gneezy, 2005). In this study, 72 adults completed a decision-making task presented on the Internet in which they could lie to potentially earn \$50 rather than \$25 (Cohen et al., 2011, Study 2). Participants were led to believe that they were interacting with another participant. They were informed that they had been randomly assigned to the role of a "message sender" and their counterpart had been assigned to the role of a "message receiver." The senders were shown a payment table and asked to send a message to a receiver whose payment table was blank. The senders had to choose between two messages: One message was an honest statement about the values in the payment table; the other message was a lie. Senders learned that the receivers would choose a payment allocation based on the message that they sent. Participants who sent the honest message would earn \$25 if they won the raffle (and their counterpart would earn \$50); but participants who sent the deceptive message would earn \$50 if they won the raffle (and their counterpart would earn \$25).

Guilt proneness predicted the frequency with which people lied. Whereas 45% of the participants with low guilt proneness scores lied, 36% of those with medium guilt proneness scores lied, and 20% of participants with high guilt proneness scores lied.

Dishonesty in Negotiation

We examined whether negotiators low in guilt proneness were more unethical than negotiators high in guilt proneness in a study with 56 MBA students (Cohen et al., 2011, Study 3). Participants were randomly assigned to the role of either a buyer's agent or seller's agent in a role-playing exercise about a real estate negotiation. The two parties had incompatible interests and there was strong pressure on participants in the buyer's role to lie. Following the negotiation, sellers reported whether the buyers engaged in dubious negotiation practices (e.g., misrepresentation). Guilt proneness was assessed one to four weeks prior to the exercise.

Buyers who were high in guilt proneness were judged by sellers to have committed fewer unethical negotiation behaviors ($r = -.53$) and to have been more honest ($r = .43$) than negotiators low in guilt proneness. Specifically, 75% of negotiators with low guilt proneness scores were suspected of unethical behavior, whereas 55% of those with medium guilt proneness scores, and 46% of those with high guilt proneness scores were suspected of unethical behavior.

Counterproductive Work Behaviors

In the workplace, guilt-prone employees enact less counterproductive work behavior ($r = -.33$ in Cohen et al., 2012a). Counterproductive work behavior (CWB) refers to volitional behavior that harms or intends to harm organizations or people in organizations, such as showing up at work late without permission, stealing office supplies, and being rude to clients (Spector et al., 2006). Very few employees who are high in guilt proneness commit CWB, but many employees who are low guilt proneness commit CWB. And, of the employees who commit at least some counterproductive acts at work, those who are high in guilt proneness commit fewer of these acts compared to those who are low in guilt proneness. Moreover, guilt proneness significantly predicts CWB even after statistically controlling for other variables known to

predict these behaviors, including gender, age, intention to leave one's job, interpersonal conflict at work, and negative affect at work (Cohen et al., 2012a). To illustrate the relationship between guilt proneness and CWB, Figure 1 displays the frequency of counterproductive acts (standardized factor scores) committed over the course of seven days by a large and diverse sample of employed adults across the United States (Cohen et al., 2012a).

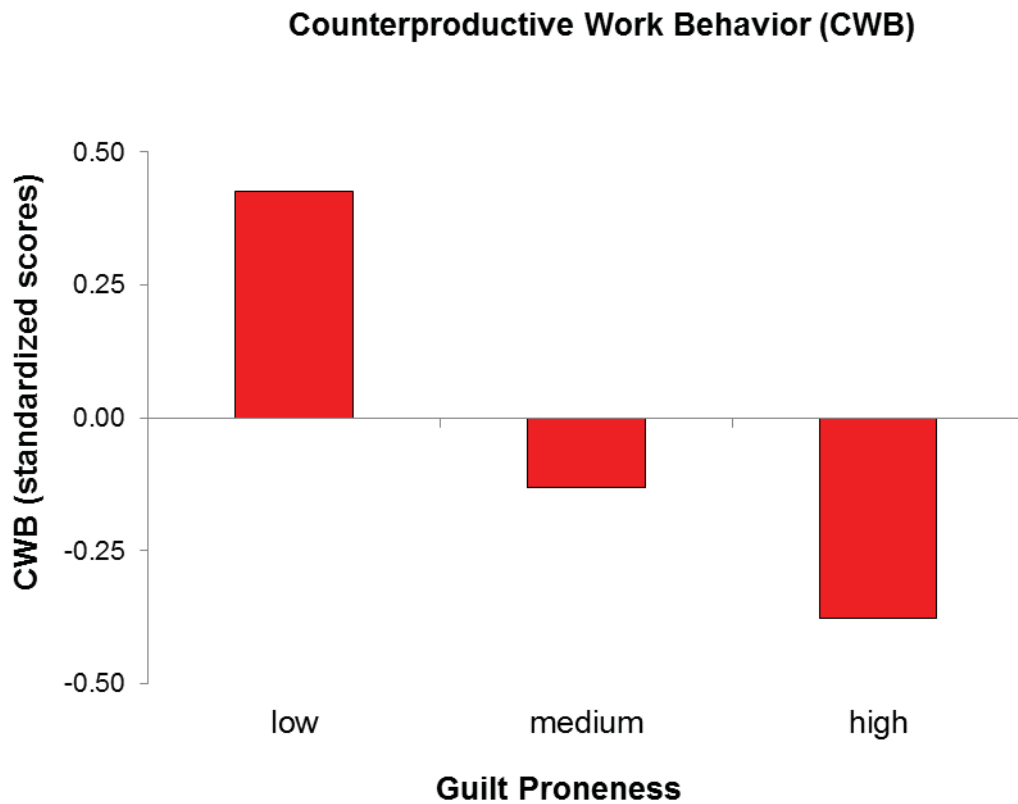


Figure 1. This graph displays the frequency of counterproductive work behavior (CWB) over the course of seven days committed by employees low, medium, and high in guilt proneness. Standardized CWB scores are presented, with 0.00 representing the average level of CWB in the sample, and +/- 0.50 indicating half of a standard deviation above/below the sample mean. In this sample of 416 American adults, 39% of the respondents were low in guilt proneness (scores below 21 points), 27% were medium (scores of 21 to 24 points), and 34% were high in guilt proneness (scores above 24 points).

Delinquency

We found similar evidence in a survey (Cohen et al., 2011, Study 2) that asked both about general delinquency and workplace delinquency (cf. Ashton & Lee, 2008). The general delinquency scale, for example, included an item that asked participants to report the number of times they entered a theatre, concert, park, sports facility, etc., without paying the entrance fee and without being authorized to do so. The workplace delinquency scale, for example, included an item that asked participants to indicate the percentage of work shifts they called in sick when not actually sick. Adults with higher guilt proneness scores reported significantly less delinquency than those with low scores, both at work ($r = -.24$) and in general ($r = -.28$). Figure 2 depicts this relationship for individuals low, medium, and high in guilt proneness.

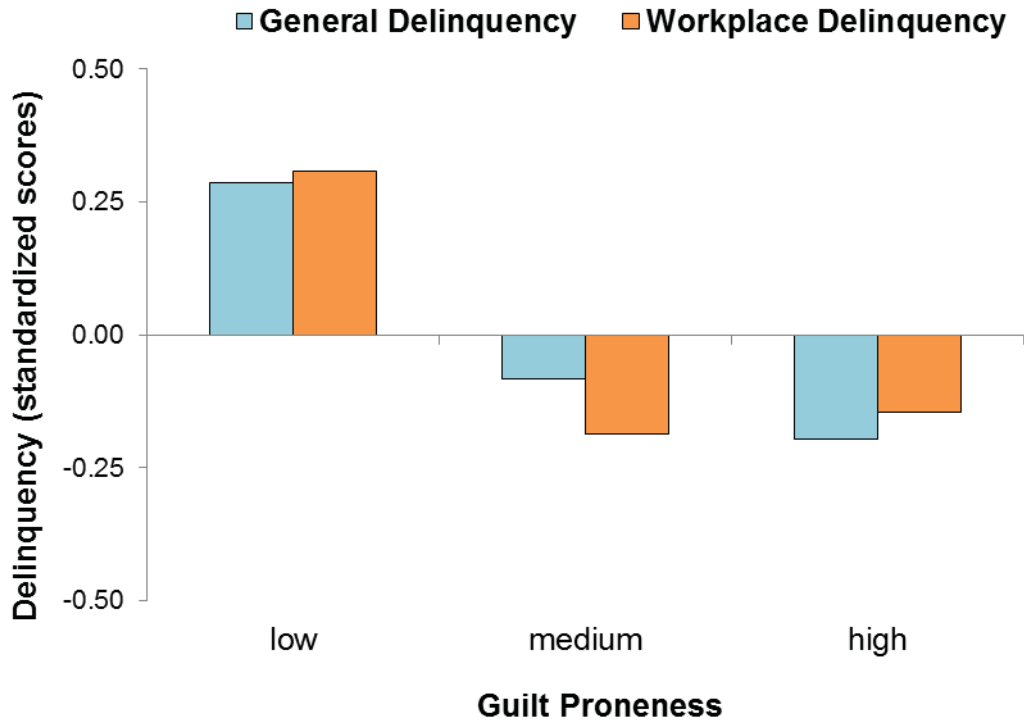


Figure 2. This graph displays the frequency of delinquent behaviors inside and outside the workplace committed by adults low, medium, and high in guilt proneness. Standardized delinquency scores are presented, with 0.00 representing the average level of delinquency in the sample, and +/- 0.50 indicating half of a standard deviation above/below the sample mean. In this sample of 148 American adults, 34% of the respondents were low in guilt proneness (scores below 21 points), 26% were medium (scores of 21 to 24 points), and 39% were high in guilt proneness (scores above 24 points).

Criminal Behaviors

An exciting development in the guilt proneness literature is the study of this personality trait among jail inmates. Tangney and colleagues (2011) have measured guilt proneness, using an adaptation of the TOSCA, among hundreds of inmates in a suburban Washington, D.C. jail. They have found considerable individual variation in guilt proneness among inmates, and this variation is associated with risk factors for criminal recidivism. For example, inmates high (versus low) in guilt proneness report lower levels of antisocial personality and are rated lower in psychopathy by trained clinicians using the Hare Psychopathy Checklist. Moreover, guilt proneness is negatively correlated with prior felony convictions and jail experience, as well as severity of criminal charges.

Using the GASP to Assess Moral Character

We believe the guilt proneness scale of the GASP has the potential to be an important measurement tool for predicting which individuals are likely to behave unethically in their social interactions inside and outside the workplace. Given the relatively high frequency with which people low in guilt proneness lie and commit counterproductive acts, it may be wise for seekers of ethical friends and lovers to be mindful of guilt proneness when selecting new companions. In the workplace, it may be wise for employers to consider guilt proneness when making hiring decisions. Because the scale is short (only 4 items), it may be able to be employed by human resource professionals to help prescreen applicants and to assist with targeted interviewing. However, as the GASP has yet to be used in high-stakes settings such as personnel selection, we recommend that future research first examine the necessary predictive validity data in contexts where respondents might be motivated to lie or engage in impression management.

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End Note

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Recommended Readings

Ashton, M. C., & Lee, K. (2008). The HEXACO model of personality structure and the importance of the H Factor. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, 2, 1952-1962.

doi: 10.1111/j.1751-9004.2008.00134.x

This review article provides a brief description of the HEXACO model of personality, with a focus on the Honesty-Humility dimension.

Cohen, T. R., Wolf, S. T., Panter, A. T., & Insko, C. A. (2011). Introducing the GASP scale: A new measure of guilt and shame proneness. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 100, 947-966. doi: 10.1037/a0022641

doi: 10.1037/a0022641

This empirical article describes the development of the GASP scale and documents key findings between guilt proneness and unethical behavior.

Tangney, J. P., & Dearing, R. L. (2002). *Shame and guilt*. New York: Guilford Press.

This book discusses the similarities and differences between guilt and shame, and the relationships these emotions have with other psychological variables.

Tangney, J. P., Stuewig, J., & Mashek, D. J. (2007). Moral emotions and moral behavior. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 58, 345-372.

This review article discusses how guilt, shame, and embarrassment relate to moral behavior.

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