

Women and Guilt: Implications for Conflict

Beckie Peyton

University of Massachusetts, Boston
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Faculty Advisor: Susan Opotow, Ph.D.

Outside Evaluator: Linda Hartling, Ph.D.

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ABSTRACT

This project explores women's personal experiences with guilt through interviews and self-reporting questionnaires. Five women were asked to define guilt, describe its presence in their lives, and how they cope with and resolve it. The Guilt Inventory and the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict MODE Instrument were also administered. Women described guilt that is caused by their sense of omnipotent responsibility for others' needs, and most often in close relationships. Notably, these descriptive experiences are often contradictory to how each woman defines guilt. While guilt is defined as a bad feeling brought on by perceived unfulfilled obligations to others, participants also feel a tremendous sense of guilt when they commit no wrong. I conclude that women practice a moral self-exclusion, defining themselves in terms of their commitments to others, and dismissing their own voices and needs to avoid feeling guilty. Guilt is not socially adaptive, but leads women to feel weak and flawed to the detriment of social relationships. Proneness to guilt suggests women are disadvantaged in conflict when uncomfortable with asserting their rights and needs. Guilt, as experienced, is highly individualized, but indicative of the dangerous consequence of gender socialization of women and girls to nurture and care for others.

He saw that women, the tenderest and most fragile of all God's creatures, were the oftenest superior to sorrow, adversity, and distress; and he saw that it was because they bore, in their own hearts, an inexhaustible well-spring of affection and devotion.
Charles Dickens, *The Pickwick Papers*

PART I. INTRODUCTION AND THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

This research project draws on the literatures of conflict theory, feminist theory, and psychology to address the relationship of gender and guilt to conflict. How do women define guilt in their lives? What is its origin and significance? Is guilt self-imposed or socially imposed—in other words, is it internal or external, or both? Does it go away, and how so? How does guilt relate to conflict in women's lives: are guilt and conflict present at the same time? Does one precede or follow the other? Learning the answers to these questions could have significant impact on directions of future research in these areas. More importantly, by gaining in-depth knowledge of how women experience guilt in their lives, we will be better able to understand our own motivations. It is my hope that by talking about this often difficult and painful emotion, women can become more aware of themselves as individuals as well as members of the group, *woman*. Only when women gain self-consciousness can they understand and effectively react to the world.

At the outset, I would like to point out that what I am really studying is not “guilt” but rather “guilty feelings.” Webster's Dictionary (1969) defines guilt as the fact of having committed a breach of conduct especially violating law and involving a penalty. Were I interested in guilt, I probably would have done my research with prisoners. By interviewing people who have confessed to a crime, I would be assured that my research was on guilt—the *fact* of having committed a transgression, regardless of whether or not one *feels* guilty. A guilty feeling, conversely, is the *feeling* of having committed a transgression, regardless of whether or not the transgression was, in *fact*, committed. I am interested in addressing guilt as I suspected

most women experience it, which is the feeling of guilt more than the fact of being guilty. I knew I was on the right track as I began interviewing. In a discussion of guilt experienced by people who commit crimes, the following exchange occurred:

Madeline:¹ Well, my guess is that if you interview a few more women, they're not gonna be talking to you about the kind of guilt you're supposed to feel like if you shoplift. That's not what's sort of emotionally poignant for women about guilt.

BP: So what are they going to be talking about?

Madeline: It's a different kind of guilt.

BP: Well, is it like a, you didn't do anything wrong, but you're still, you still feel guilty?

Madeline: Right! Right!

While the terms “guilt” and “feeling guilty” are used interchangeably in this paper, they are meant to refer to the presence of guilt feelings, not necessarily to factual immoral conduct. This paper will address guilt as a gendered emotion, and conflict as a gendered construct, and link these data to possible ramifications for women.

GUILT AND GUILTY FEELINGS

The fields of psychology, sociology, anthropology, and others have devoted much attention to this complex moral emotion, and have offered much richer definitions, as well as theories as to its antecedents, significance, and consequences. *Guilt* can be defined as a negative affective state induced by the feeling of having wronged another, or violating a moral standard (see Kugler & Jones, 1992; Tangney & Dearing, 2002). It is a second-order emotion—one that is socially constructed and acquired (Hegtvedt & Killian, 1999).

The nature of guilt

Traditionally, guilt was viewed as an “unfortunate side effect” and a “crippling emotion [used] to hobble impulses” (Greenwald & Harder, 1998, p. 228). These early conceptions of

¹ Pseudonym.

guilt focused on the psychological symptoms associated with it, and carried assumptions of guilt as pathological and self-focused.

Perhaps because of its socially constructed origin, some recent scholarship has shifted focus to the remedial and positive interpersonal functions of guilt. The crux of this scholarship is an assertion that guilt, while negative, is beneficial and evolutionary: it helps us maintain relationships, offer apologies, and tend to others' pain to right our wrongs (Keltner & Harker, 1998). The nature of guilt suggests that it serves to bond people through caring behavior (Baumeister, Stillwell, & Heatherton, 1994). Guilt motivates people to accept responsibility and may inhibit anger and hostility. People who are feeling guilty are encouraged through these feelings to behave in a caring, socially responsible way. Guilt is a moral emotion and represents powerful internal sanctions against socially and morally unacceptable behavior. It presses toward confession, reparation, and apology (Tangney & Dearing, 2002). Proneness to guilt has also been associated with empathic responsiveness and perspective-taking (Abell & Gecas, 1997).

However, many others question whether guilt is truly the positive phenomenon described above. A great deal of empirical research associates guilt with psychological problems and pathology (Berg, 1986; Harder, 1995; Kugler & Jones, 1992; O'Connor, Berry, & Weiss, 1999). Kugler and Jones (1992) suggest that more attention should be focused on the extent that guilt is derived from actual moral transgressions versus neuroticism. Certainly, when we feel guilty we feel bad, which suggests that guilt must have maladaptive aspects that could lie in its origins, manifestation, or resolution. Focus groups on women and conflict conducted by Gina Perri Cannady and Susan Opatow (see Cannady, 2002) clearly indicated the presence of a crippling, paralyzing, self-defeating guilt which can render us powerless. This is the guilt to be explored in

this research, to gain a greater understanding of where it comes from, where in our lives it exists and why, and what we do with it. Implicit support for this hypothesis can be found when we examine guilt through the lens of gender.

A note on shame

While this paper researches the contingencies of guilt for the women studied, it is appropriate to point out a significant debate in the field as to the different nature of shame versus guilt. Defined as “a painful emotion caused by the consciousness of guilt, shortcoming, or impropriety (Webster’s, 1969),” shame has often been examined in research alongside guilt. While both guilt and shame are self-evaluative and interpersonal, some researchers assert that shame is a “more destructive” emotion because it condemns the “entire self” (Gilbert, Fiske, & Lindzey, 1998, p. 710). Tangney and Dearing (1992) argues that guilt condemns only a specific act, and is therefore more manageable and less socially disruptive.

I have trouble with the conclusions stated above for several reasons. Firstly, many of the differences found in empirical research on proneness to guilt or shame may be explained by differences in the constructs employed to measure guilt, as well as differences among the instruments used (O’Connor et al., 1999). Kugler and Jones (1992) suggest that a theoretical distinction between guilt and shame is problematic because psychometric measurements have proved inadequate to distinguish them. I also question how one self- or socially-destructive emotion can be “worse” than the other. Perhaps most importantly, an emotion which is “less socially disruptive” (Gilbert et al., 1998, p. 710) may be more difficult when experienced by members of a low power group precisely *because* it does not disrupt the status quo.

GUILT AND GENDER

To understand how guilt can be a much more salient construct for women than for men, a thorough examination of gender differences in psychological function is necessary. Numerous studies have highlighted the importance of understanding these differences across multiple disciplines. A growing body of literature (Gilligan, 1982; Tangney & Dearing, 2002; Zahn-Waxler, Cole, & Barrett, 1991) has suggested links between the feminine gender role and guilt, and this association may be especially salient in women with children (Efthim, Kenny, & Mahalik, 2001). Research on guilt in children by Williams and Bybee (1994) found it statistically significant that among 5th, 8th, and 11th graders, more female than male students reported experiencing guilt over norm violations relating to compassion and trust. After conducting numerous studies totaling over 3,000 participants, Tangney and Dearing (2002, p.154) conclude: “the consistency of the results is striking. Whether we considered elementary school-age children, lower middle-class adolescents, college students, parent and grandparents of fifth-grade students, or adult travelers passing through an airport,” female participants consistently reported greater guilt than males. Women experience stress and guilt when they fail to live up to socially accepted standards, when they fail to develop trusting relationships, when they are required to be assertive, and when they perceive themselves deficient in nurturing others (Efthim, et al., 2001). Because of these gender differences so often found in empirical research, it is legitimate to view guilt through the lens of gender. Much of what we have learned and observed about what it means to be “female” offers strong suggestions as to why these differences exist.

Gender socialization in childhood and beyond

Gender is socially constructed in boys and girls, first through social learning, and then internalized and actively maintained by even young children who exhibit stereotypically appropriate behavior (Unger & Crawford, 1996; Bem, 1987). The process of gender socialization begins at birth: a recent study of birth congratulations cards found that cards for girls—indeed, there were no gender neutral cards at all—were more likely to contain messages of sweetness and sharing (Unger & Crawford, 1996). Also from the first moments in the delivery room, mothers and fathers, often unwittingly, begin to attribute attractiveness, gentleness, or nurturance to their daughters, while sons are largely characterized by potential physical ability or athletic skill. Research indicates that parents are more likely to talk to daughters as young as three about emotions, especially negative ones, than they are with sons (Fivush & Kuebli, 1992). Perhaps as a result, preschoolers are more likely to think girls are “sadder” than boys, and that mothers do not get angry as much as fathers do (Fabes & Eisenberg, 1993). Numerous studies (see Unger & Crawford, 1996) have shown that adults believe girls are needier than boys—both men and women respond more quickly to a baby girl crying, girls are held more often as toddlers (after they have learned to walk), and are helped more quickly and more often than boys. This differential treatment produces a pattern of emotional sensitivity, nurturance, and helplessness in girls. Nancy Chodorow (1978) notes that children develop an authentic self only with a sense that their feelings and needs have not been projected onto them, and that they have not been inhibited by overanticipation of their needs. Essentially, girls are encouraged to form their own belief that they are needy and helpless, allowing the cycle to repeat itself. Mary Pipher (1994) describes how girls, in early adolescence, “are expected to sacrifice the parts of themselves that our culture considers masculine on the altar of social acceptability . .

. The rules remain the same: be attractive, be a lady, be unselfish and of service, make relationships work and be competent without complaint. This is when girls learn to be nice rather than honest (p. 39).” Perhaps the most notable aspect of this entire gender socialization process is that it occurs often with a lack of awareness on the part of both adults and children.²

Boys and girls are born into a world in which they are instructed as to what clothing is appropriate for their sex, which toys they should want to play with, which personality attributes (e.g., nurturing or competing) they should display, and who they should play with and what types of games. As a result of the constant push to meet socially appropriate standards of femaleness, girls learn to define themselves as empathic and relational—connected to the world, with a strong capacity to experience the needs and feelings of others as their own—in a way that boys do not (Chodorow, 1978; Hartsock, 1983). Expectations do not change when girls grow up. Women are also expected to engage in positive social behavior; being compassionate, sympathetic, sensitive, and understanding (Tschanz, Morf, & Turner, 1998). Many women report feeling discomfort in situations which demand assertive behavior (Efthim, et al., 2001). Women are encouraged to develop characteristics such as submissiveness, passivity, docility, dependency, lack of initiative, and the inability to act, to decide, and to think (Miller, 1976). Also important qualities in children, they indicate a woman who is “well-adjusted.” In fact, it may be impossible to be both adult and female: healthy women are described as passive, dependent, and illogical, while healthy adults and healthy men are described as active, independent, and logical. In a classic study, one could not score both as a healthy woman and a healthy adult (Broverman, Broverman, Clarkson, Rosencrantz, & Vogel, 1970).

² It is important to note that many of the seemingly surprising behaviors mentioned here have been observed by parents who hold stereotypical beliefs *and just as often* by those who do not (see Fagot, 1978).

Because women are considered “natural” caretakers, they have come to believe that they should want to respond to others at all times and in all ways (Miller, 1976). Research on role conflict by Linda Napholz (2000) confirms that women can often feel an overwhelming sense of responsibility for everything. One participant in Napholz’ study stated, “I think women feel obligated to save everything, to fix everything. And they feel guilty when they can’t do multiple roles (p. 259).” Another believed that women are “so busy taking care of everybody else’s business and they’re forgetting their own business and peace of mind (p. 259).” These sentiments reflect how women come to internalize a lifetime of learning a specific set of behaviors and characteristics “good girls” and “proper women” should have. In women’s minds, they are transformed into something that is innate or biologically predetermined.

Women’s morality

Much of the guilt women experience in their lives may be in large part attributed to how they define morality. In her provocative study on women and abortion, Carol Gilligan (1982) gives us tremendous insight into how women view morality. According to Gilligan, women define morality as a wish not to hurt others. She names this center of woman’s moral concern the *ethic of responsibility*, a morality which anchors the self in a “world of relationships” where judgments are made based on empathy and compassion. When women are asked to describe themselves, they do so in terms of their relationships, e.g., “I am a wife, a mother of three children.” As gender role socialization and women’s lived experience come together, “concern with individual survival comes to be branded as ‘selfish’ and to be counterposed to the ‘responsibility’ of a life lived in relationships. And in turn, responsibility becomes, in its conventional interpretation, confused with a responsiveness to others that impedes a recognition of self (Miller, 1976, p. 127).”

Gendered expectations and guilt

Women's gendered role can result in guilt feelings in two important ways: the nature of what it means to be female, as well as what happens when women violate accepted norms. The first concerns the nature of what is feminine—to nurture and take care of others. It seems that anyone whose job it is to take care of everyone will surely feel that she has not done that job successfully when she sees pain in the world every day. This plays out in the jobs women have: wives take care of their husbands, mothers take care of their children, teachers take care of their students, secretaries take care of their bosses, nurses take care of their patients. Women also care for elderly parents, friends, neighbors, co-workers, etc. When women take on non-traditional roles they still do not escape: women who run for political office often do so on a mother or widow platform, usually with aims to “clean up” politics, improve education, healthcare, or housing, end war, or do anything else that will make the world a better place. This suggests that women develop a sense of *omnipotent responsibility* to a degree where fulfilling our role becomes impossible. It is not omnipotence in a sense of being very powerful, but rather that everything is their responsibility to care for. When women fail at this, they feel guilty.

It is important to note that caring about others and the capacity for empathy are important and vital skills for any member of society, male or female. As suggested above, *everyone* can feel guilty when they hurt others or commit immoral acts. It is not my goal here to suggest that women or men try to stop themselves from this goodness. The danger for women lies in the development of hyper-sensitivity to others' needs along with a neglect of the self. Women's role seems so other-focused they can feel guilty when they do things for themselves. By attending to their own needs, women are necessarily devoting less time or effort to the needs of others, and therefore perceive that they are failing at their job. Because caring turns into part of who women

are, they then are also failing at being themselves. As subordinates, woman's role of facilitating the growth of others at the expense of herself (as well as her resulting "failure" to do so) has been established for her by the dominant group. It is important to note the distinction between acceptable female roles and behaviors versus the roles and behaviors a group may define *for itself* from a position of social power or political access. This will be discussed more later.

Violating gender roles

As suggested above, non-conformity to gender roles fosters guilt development in women because natural tendencies to feel anger or self-righteousness, especially in a conflict situation, are juxtaposed with self- and social-sanction. When women act on these tendencies, feelings of guilt arise because they are doing something "wrong."

Social sanction. In research examining gender differences in narcissism, Tschanz, et al. (1998) conclude that feelings of entitlement and interpersonal exploitiveness in the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI, Raskin & Hall, 1979) are less integral for the construct of narcissism among women than among men. They hypothesize that the reason for this difference is because exhibiting exploitive tendencies and open displays of feelings of entitlement violate the feminine gender role and would likely elicit negative social sanctions. People react positively to behaviors that are congruent with gendered expectations, and negatively to those which are not (Kolb, 1994). A girl who prefers trucks and mud to dolls and ruffles may become an object of ridicule by her peers as well as her parents. As adults, competitive women are labeled "bitches" or suspected of actually being men.

Self sanction. Abell & Gecas (1997) believe that guilt is a feeling people experience based on the attitudes and responses they get from others—when we perceive that they are unhappy with our behavior, we feel guilty. Behaving in accordance with social values and

norms is a central criterion of individual self-worth, and guilt is a mechanism that serves to help people conform to social and moral norms of behavior (Abell & Gecas, 1997; Efthim, et al., 2001). But gender roles are also maintained by a much more disturbing phenomenon—women themselves. Women often experience negative psychological effects of violating gender roles through self-devaluation, *regardless of social disapproval*. Even when they are not blamed by anyone else, women feel guilty when they perceive themselves to be selfish or to have caused suffering to another. When we violate socially acceptable behavior, we feel bad about ourselves.

GENDER AND POWER

Power, defined generally as the ability to bring about desired outcomes (Coleman, 2000), is a construct highly relevant to discussions of gender and guilt. Women are often considered a low-power group because they can lack important resources such as financial independence, education, and career opportunities, to name a few. While all of these inequities undoubtedly continue to exist for women, and are by no means unimportant, I would like to focus on power as those without power often understand it—influence that is used to *empower* others (see Kolb, 1994). By doing this, I am not trying to belittle the importance of the power of wealth or opportunity, but rather to legitimate the way women view themselves in the world. By supporting the idea that women need to get out in the world and “act like men” wielding power, I delegitimize women’s strengths. Women are good at empathy and human understanding, and have no need to feel inferior because we do not have the competitive attributes that men consider strengths (for a discussion, see Miller, 1976).

The problem with recognizing and embracing women’s strengths as a source of power lies in the fact that our difference from men has come to signify our inferiority to them. Just as caring, docility, and vulnerability are adjectives that are also used to describe children, they have

also been used to argue that women are less fully developed than men. Because of their position of power, men are allowed to claim their different self as the “better” one (Chodorow, 1978).

French and Raven (1959) identified six types of power used to influence others: *coercive*, the use of negative incentives such as threats; *reward* or *exchange*, the use of positive incentives such as gains in wealth; *ecological*, the use of environmental modification such as erecting a fence; *legitimate* or *normative*, the use of social norms to make the other accept your position; *referent*, the use of identification with the other to alter their attitudes or values; and *expert*, the use of perceived superior knowledge or skill. Considering all of them, men have greater power than women, and therefore, greater ability to exert social influence (Carli, 1999). Carli’s (1999) research concludes that the power of men comes in many forms, the strongest of which are expert and legitimate. Women, in contrast, possess only referent power. This kind of power is relational, and possessed by people or groups who are liked or considered socially attractive. Carli’s findings support the fact that these differences are reflected in social influence—women have greater difficulty using competence and authority to influence others, and indeed, they turn to referent power as their most oft-used method of social influence.

These findings present quite a dilemma for women trying to exert influence: to be persuasive, they must appear modest to avoid the risk of rejection. However, their modesty also makes them appear incompetent, and thus causes them to lose legitimacy. Indeed, people with little legitimate power are not expected by others to be assertive, as this would be viewed as an illegitimate attempt to gain status at the expense of others (Carli, 1999). If it is true that to reduce resistance, women should employ influence strategies such as a lack of self-interest, one might naturally wonder how can they possibly succeed in representing themselves? It would be interesting to observe the process and outcome of an exchange in which the man’s position is

perceived as knowledgeable and legitimate, and the woman is left with only the “power” to agree!

Rationalizing and denial

In the study of concepts such as guilt, which are concerned with morality and wrongdoing, rationalizing and denial play an important role. In their analysis of environmental conflict, Opatow and Weiss (2000, p. 479) define *denial* as “a form of selective inattention toward threat-provoking aspects of a situation to protect a person from anxiety, guilt, or other ego threats.” Denial is a mechanism people use to cope with conflicts and painful situations—by deceiving themselves, they are at least temporarily spared harm, embarrassment or blame. Similar to denial, *rationalizing* is the act of providing plausible but untrue reasons for conduct (Webster’s Dictionary, 1969). Often unconscious, when we rationalize we recognize what we do, but fail or do not want to see the true reasons for it. In a sense, we are either knowingly or unknowingly committing an attributional error against ourselves.

Rationalizing and denial can be employed to maintain power or control (for an example, see Opatow & Weiss, 2000). In this paper, I am more concerned with how those without power can also use these mechanisms to explain or excuse their low power status. When members of low power groups rationalize or deny their subordinate status, their power is diminished further. The self-punishing nature of guilt and the relational nature of women’s position combine to create an atmosphere in which women as nurturers of others can act to perpetuate their own denial.

Denial of entitlement. *Entitlement* is “a set of attitudes about what a person feels he or she has a right to, and what he or she can expect from others and as a member of a social group (Steil, McGann, & Kahn, 2001, p. 404).” Entitlement is closely associated with socially

constructed perceptions of who one is rather than what one has done. Differences in feelings of entitlement come from differences in social group status and responsibilities associated with different social roles.

We have already seen how women are socialized to put others first and value connections above achievement (see Chodorow, 1978; Miller, 1976), and this may result in their lower sense of entitlement compared to men. This was exemplified in a pay allocation study (Hegtvedt & Killian, 1999), in which women were consistently more satisfied not only with less money than men, but also with a smaller percentage of the whole than men. In other words, they described the process and outcome as fair even when the money was not equally distributed (they received less than 50%). The same results were not produced with men.

The lack of a sense of entitlement can be traced back to the gender role women have internalized. Sandra Lipsitz Bem (1993) calls this phenomenon *gender polarization*. Male norms become the mechanism for organizing social life, and women's different "scripts" are assumed to be naturally occurring. Therefore, any deviation from these accepted scripts is unacceptable as biologically and scientifically wrong. Internalized social norms provide references as to what women can expect and feel entitled to: "women's work" is less valued, and therefore women expect to be paid less than men.

Denial of personal disadvantage. When members of low power groups do not feel entitled to the things they do not have, it can lead to a *denial of personal disadvantage*, that is, they deny their own victimization (Crosby, 1984). In her research on working women, Faye Crosby discovered that women readily accepted that, as a group, women are discriminated against in the workplace. However, they simultaneously denied their own disadvantaged position. Because the women in the study *were* discriminated against in compensation and

promotion, Crosby concludes (1984, p. 374): “women appear to experience virtually no sense of grievance or injustice about their own condition.” She offers several possible explanations: that people must believe they live in a just world where we are rewarded and punished based on what we deserve (see Lerner, 1980); that one consequence of oppression is that minority members tend to accommodate majority opinions and internalize a negative image of themselves; and that cognitive biases will not allow us to infer personal discrimination because it will require blaming a specific person.

Intersectionality. In a discussion of gender and power, it is important to note that women are often “doubly” disadvantaged, that is, they are often at the “intersection” of two or more low power groups (ethnicity, class, age, etc). These low power identities are cumulative, they are more than just the sum of their parts (Grillo, 1991; Minow, 1997), and can include not only the above, but also lack of resources, information, or alternatives. Opatow & Khaminwa (2000) also point out that power even “influences the kinds of issues that emerge as legitimate in conflict and the process deemed appropriate to deal with them (p. 4).”

Essentialism. This paper is not meant to essentialize women into guilt-ridden pushovers. Martha Minow (1997) recognizes the danger for women in accepting the lines of oppression that “fuel their dependence on their own victim status as a source of meaning . . . [and] reenact subordination along the same lines as historical subjugation (p. 54).” Simple social categorization can serve to delegitimize and dismiss an individual merely for being a member of that category (see Cook-Huffman, 2000), and that is not my goal here. At the same time, it is just as irresponsible to point to a few circumstances in which women seem to enjoy parity and forsake the reality of their low-power status as a group. Denying a reality because it is painful will, ultimately, not serve the interests of any low-power group or individual.

WOMEN AND CONFLICT

Opotow & Khaminwa (2000) argue that conflict is a gendered construct. Because of their unique life experiences, women adopt different ideas about “what conflict is, what conflict means, what kinds of conflicts are important . . . and how conflicts should be managed (p. 1).” The role of woman has been socially constructed to be that of caregiver, wife, and mother. But many women have also created a public identity for themselves. Because they operate in both public and private spheres, women experience a wide range of conflicts, including both personal and professional. These conflicts can be justice based, power based, or resource based. Women experience conflict within themselves, with other women, with children, and with men. Because of their disadvantaged status, women are also prone to conflict with social and cultural institutions.

Ground-breaking research on women and conflict conducted by Gina Perri Cannady (2002) offers rich insight into how women view and react to conflict in their lives. Themes of self-criticism and guilt were found across interviews, and none of the women studied was confident that her feelings were viewed by others as “legitimate.” Cannady notes that women exhibited a disproportionately large sense of responsibility for their conflicts, which was manifested by an internal voice telling them they did something wrong. She concludes that, in a conflict, “guilt is a defining factor (p. 53).” I believe that this feeling of guilt can be traced to the socially-imposed feminine ideal of selflessness.

Implicit conflict

Conflicts are *implicit* when they are hidden, covert, or unexpressed. In contrast to conflict processes which are visible and can be scrutinized and negotiated, implicit conflicts are difficult to see, name, or examine. To properly address and resolve implicit conflicts, it is

necessary to uncover and address both their interpersonal manifestations as well as the structural contexts in which they occur. This can be quite difficult because of their covert nature.

Internal conflicts. One reason that conflict may remain hidden is when it is internal, a struggle between two conflicting behavioral tendencies in one person. To alleviate pain and futility, we may try to deceive ourselves and deny a behavior which violates social norms. Because we can reduce self-conflict by labeling our behavior positively, we try to act consistently with our beliefs but we also find ourselves believing that the way we act is correct (Deutsch, 1973).

Powerlessness. Implicit conflicts are often experienced by low power persons who are denied the right to openly engage in conflict and challenge norms (Miller, 1976). Morton Deutsch (1973) notes that internal conflicts are likely a reflection of a larger social problem and therefore may reflect an individual's place in social structures. Clearly, those who have the means and the permission to openly advocate for themselves without fear of self- or social-sanction will not be left to rationalize their behavior and attitudes, nor to cope with unresolved conflict.

Rights

When they do not perceive injustices, women are unable to reach the "claiming" stage, or the assertion of their rights (Grillo, 1991). Rights are inherent, deserved, ethical, appropriate, just, and veritable. The idea of rights legitimizes self-interest (Grillo, 1991), and therefore a predilection to feeling guilty denies rights assertion and renders self-interest illegitimate. Women are then doubly disadvantaged in conflict because needing to assert their rights reinforces the gendered notion that they should feel guilty for thinking about themselves.

Justice

Justice is closely linked with feelings of guilt. A sense of justice can be drawn from decisions that we make ourselves: because we did it, it must be fair (see Deutsch, 1975). However, gender differences found in recent research call into question the idea that we are all inherently able to be fair to ourselves. Returning to the pay allocation study, Hegtvedt & Killian (1999) addressed how perceptions of procedural and distributive justice affect emotional responses, including guilt, to bargaining outcomes. They found that subjects who thought they were fair to themselves in the bargaining process were more likely to feel guilty over pay allocation. Significant gender differences were found in that female participants were more likely to express satisfaction with their own pay level (i.e., women were more often satisfied with less pay), and therefore, experienced more guilt than males. The more fair both the process and outcome were perceived, the more guilt these women experienced! This supports Faye Crosby's (1984) assertion that disadvantaged persons cannot act as their own advocates.

Many theories of how we seek and obtain justice in conflict situations rest on one assumption—that we first perceive an injustice. To experience *relative deprivation*, an individual must realize she has gotten less than she expected based on her contribution (see Crosby, 1984; Deutsch, 1985). In order to have a grievance about her own lack of an outcome, a person must want the outcome, feel entitled to it, and believe that it has been denied by someone other than herself. (Crosby & Gonzalez-Intal, 1984). To claim an assertion of rights, one must first recognize a *perceived injurious experience* (see Felstiner, Abel, & Sarat, 1980-81). What is critical here is that the situation of injustice is perceived. Without this perception, conflict will remain latent. If women do strive to live up to the ideal of selfless caretaker, will their guilt at

being “selfish” enough to speak with their own voice prevent them from claiming rights in conflict?

This research project is an attempt to address this and other questions by exploring women’s personal experiences with guilt through interviews and self-reporting questionnaires. The data collected from participants will be analyzed along several dimensions to gain a better understanding of the origins and significance of guilt, as well as its impact on their lives. Implications for women in conflict will also be discussed.

I may be strong-minded, but no one can say I'm out of my sphere now, for woman's special mission is supposed to be drying tears and bearing burdens.
 Louisa May Alcott, *Little Women*

PART II: METHOD

To develop a more thorough understanding of guilt than that based on my review of literature and my own experience, I decided to talk to other women about theirs. The data used in this project was collected through semi-structured interviews as well as two survey instruments, the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument (1974) and the Guilt Inventory (Kugler & Jones, 1992).

Research done by, for, and about women often involves new kinds of information, new ways of thinking, and a new importance placed on women’s unique life experience, and therefore necessitates new research methodologies. Ideas and guidelines from feminist research methods have, in many ways, informed the design of this project.

Participants

The five women who participated in this study ranged in age from 25-50, and all describe themselves as Caucasian. Interviews were conducted by telephone with women living throughout the United States. Education levels ranged from some college to a completed

Table 1. Participant Demographics

Participant (Pseudonyms)	Age Range	Education Level
Brooke	41-45	Some College
Emma	25-30	Graduate Degree
Zoe	31-35	Graduate Degree
Madeline	46-50	Undergraduate Degree
Shelby	25-30	Some College

graduate degree, and all work outside the home for money. All of the women are either married or living with a partner. Two of them have children. Participant demographic information is summarized in Table 1.

All participants in this study were recruited through personal connections with the researcher, and they include fellow students and friends who expressed interest in the project in informal discussions. Sharing the project description with other women both in the Dispute Resolution Program and in related fields resulted in many “volunteers” wanting to participate.

While it was encouraging and beneficial to have several acquaintances offer to participate, this methodological decision was not made out of convenience. The nature of this project begs for and seems to necessitate a personal approach to data collection. While existing methodology literature does not offer numerous examples of researchers “interviewing acquaintances and friends,” it does offer strong support for the methodological appropriateness of this approach for feminist topics. In a widely-referenced study on mothering, sociologist Ann Oakley (1981) established and maintained friendships with one third of the participants. She believed the highly personal nature of the subject matter naturally produced this result. Banning relationships from research for and by women negates the importance of the relational way we live our lives and experience guilt (see Gilligan, 1982). We cannot conclude that women are relational and then not allow research about women to focus on and be situated within close relationships.

Traditional research methods strictly forbid any prior relationship between researcher and subject ostensibly so that the data collected is not somehow biased. Perhaps it is also to ensure participants are not coerced out of a sense of obligation to participate. As long as participants are offered the same safeguards as strangers, these problems can be avoided.

Benefits of prior relationships. It is my contention that empathy and connectivity are just as valid ways of knowing as distance and objectivity (Reinharz, 1992), and perhaps even more so. Many sociologists have long-advocated an epistemology which includes living among native cultures in an attempt to learn as much as possible about them. Sociologist Hortense Powdermaker (1966; in Reinharz, 1992) found that fostering relationships had many positive results: it helped her establish credibility with those who may have been reluctant to participate; it increased participants' comfort level because they were talking to someone they knew; it enhanced the data because the researcher was more knowledgeable about the community; and it resulted in shorter, more focused interviews.

I decided to talk to women I know because I also believe it can produce richer data. Writing about women interviewing women about aspects of their experience as women, Marjorie DeVault (2002) stresses the importance of constructing a sharedness, or finding similar categorical memberships in creating a more meaningful conversation. If both parties are already familiar with each other through a previous relationship, this important step is already established and allows the conversation to quickly move into a mutual exploration and construction of deeper meanings of the topics at hand. In my study, we were able to bypass the developmental process of creating a relationship.

Finally, I would have felt illogical and unjustified in claiming to do research for women if I had told potential participants who had expressed an interest that they did not meet the qualifications (unless they were male). Women are experts on their own behavior and feelings, and it would have done these five women a disservice to decide their experiences were not valid merely because I know them.

An argument against bias. The scientific validity of this project will not be jeopardized by relationships between researcher and participant. With a sample size of five women, regardless of who they are, this study may not be able to offer findings that can be replicated to a much larger population (e.g., in different cultures, over time, all women in the U.S.). However, the depth of information about this small group of people can in many ways be meaningful. Perhaps it could be used to inform the design of a survey to assess guilt. I believe the experiences of each and every woman are important. Research on women is highly contextual, perhaps because they have such developed “private” lives. While socially relevant and complete, it may not necessarily be replicable (Reinharz, 1992), but it is nonetheless important.

Protection against coercion. Including participants with an existing relationship with the researcher does not jeopardize the voluntary nature of this study. They did not feel pressured to participate in exchange for course credit or for a monetary reward, as is often the case with widely-accepted, supposedly non-coercive psychological research. This project, its theoretical background, method, consent paperwork, questions, and surveys were approved by the Institutional Review Board of The University of Massachusetts, Boston, just as it would have been required if subjects were strangers. Participants were provided with both verbal and written instructions that participation was voluntary and that they could change their mind at any time. They were also instructed that they could opt-out of any questions they did not wish to answer, and that their identity would remain confidential. Finally, because I already had a respectful relationship with all of these women, there was even more of an assurance that their safety and comfort would remain of utmost concern.

Multiple methodology

Within the feminist research tradition, there is debate about the usefulness of quantitative data. Some argue that because it is widely accepted as scientifically valid, quantitative data can be used to legitimize the findings of qualitative research (Jayarantne, 1983). Others are more skeptical. Maria Mies (1983) charges that traditional research methods are scientifically irrelevant and elitist. Once quantitative instruments have been shown to be reliable in large populations, it may mean they are outdated and contain underlying sexist biases (Cook & Fonow, 1990). Shula Reinharz (1992) notes that quantitative data can be questioned as valid. In 1985, eighty three percent of reviewed social psychological studies were conducted with undergraduate students, although the findings were then called “human” behavior.

I decided to use both qualitative and quantitative methods, which I hope will yield data that is individualized and contextual, but also that can be viewed through a wider lens. To complement the interviews, I also administered two surveys to participants. When a single method seems inadequate, using multiple research methods can increase the likelihood of correctly interpreting results, and connect individual behavior and thoughts to a larger social framework while maintaining respect for individual differences (Cook & Fonow, 1990; Reinharz, 1992). Cognizant of the arguments above, I carefully chose measurements which have conceptualized both guilt and conflict in a way that allows participants to accurately express themselves.

Interviews

The interviews I conducted are characterized by two things: they are semi-structured, and employ a conversational format. I did intend to learn about specific aspects of guilt: how women define it and how they experience it (e.g., what instigates guilt). This required a list of

questions which I needed to make sure were addressed in each interview (see Appendix). However, I did not use a rigid structure, because I wanted to allow space for different kinds of experiences. Women's lives are highly complex (see Cannady, 2002), and relegating their experience to a short list of easily quantifiable questions has a great potential to distort reality. Traditional views postulate that if participants stray from the expected subjects of the interview, their scientific claims of validity must be questioned (Oakley, 1981). In this case, the interviewer is left with the difficult choice of data from structurally different interviews, or data which may not accurately reflect what really matters to women. I chose to focus on ensuring my data accurately reflects what is important, and semi-structured interviews offered the opportunities I needed for clarification and discussion in a more free interaction. They allowed me to obtain the answers I was seeking, but at the same time to maintain the focus on the participants by adding relevant questions as the interviews progressed, whenever unanticipated patterns or partial thoughts emerged.

These interviews were more like conversational exchanges than researcher asking only predetermined questions, recording answers, and responding in robotic fashion whenever the participants wanted to know about the project, about the question, or about what I thought. As a female, I was not only a researcher but also a relevant participant and potential beneficiary. I was unable to not have opinions and experiences as a woman who has felt guilty, and I found it deceitful and subversive to keep participants "blind" to the purposes of my research and my thoughts on what I was learning. Again, in her research on expectant mothers, Ann Oakley (1981) decided that woman to woman research is most successful when researchers invest their own personal identities into the relationship, especially when the subject matter is highly personal. Oakley argues that we cannot expect women to give us their time and discuss personal

experiences if we are not willing to invest the same. For her, personal involvement does not translate to dangerous bias but rather “it is the condition under which people come to know each other and to admit others into their lives (p. 58).”

Active participation and self-disclosure transforms interviews into real conversations and ensures participants will not be used as research objects (Acker, Barry, & Esseveld, 1991; Reinharz, 1992). Holstein & Grubium (2002) encourage researchers to engage in *creative interviewing*—a process in which the interviewer gets to know more deeply the experience of participants. This is achieved when the interviewer “establish[es] a climate for mutual disclosure. The interview should be an occasion that displays the interviewer’s willingness to share his or her own feelings and deepest thoughts. This is done to assure respondents that they can, in turn, share their own thoughts and feelings (p. 117).” My interviews were conducted as interactional exchanges, in which both researcher and participant were able to be personalized and humanized to the other.

Surveys

Participants completed both the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Management Mode Instrument (TK scale) (Thomas & Kilmann, 1974), and the Guilt Inventory (GI) (Kugler & Jones, 1992). Both measurements have been shown to have a high level of reliability (Jones & Schratte, 2000; Kilmann & Thomas, 1977; Kugler & Jones, 1992; Thomas & Kilmann, 1974). Both survey instruments can be used to place participants on statistically reliable scales of guilt and conflict style.

The Guilt Inventory. The Guilt Inventory is a 45-item self-report questionnaire which includes three subscales designed to measure the most common conceptualizations of guilt: trait guilt, state guilt, and moral standards. Answers are given using a 5-point Likert scale ranging

from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Higher numbers reflect greater guilt or moral standards (some items are reversed in scoring). Kugler & Jones (1992) define *guilt* as “the dysphoric feeling associated with the recognition that one has violated a personally relevant moral or social standard (p. 318).” *Trait guilt* is defined as a continuing sense of guilt beyond immediate circumstances. *State guilt* is defined as present guilty feelings based on current or recent transgressions. *Moral standards* is defined as subscription to a code of moral principles without reference either to specific behaviors or overly specific beliefs. The authors note that their data shows little support for distinguishing guilt and shame, although their trait guilt subscale may be closely related to how others conceive shame.

The Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument. The TK scale (1974) consists of 30 pairs of statements describing different behavioral responses to conflict, which is designed to classify a person’s behavior in conflict situations. Respondents are asked to choose which of the two behaviors in each pair they would be more likely to use. Using scales of assertiveness and cooperativeness, the TK measurement categorizes conflict handling behavior into five different styles: *Competing*, in which one uses whatever power seems appropriate to win one’s position; *Collaborating*, which involves an attempt to work with the other person to find some solution which fully satisfies the concerns of both persons; *Compromising*, in which a person tries to find a mutually acceptable solution that satisfies both parties; *Avoiding*, in which an individual does not immediately pursue her own concerns or those of the other person; and *Accommodating*, in which an individual neglects her own concerns to satisfy the concerns of the other person. The authors assert that there is no universal “correct” conflict style, as all five are useful in some situations, and one person may employ all the styles at different times depending on their personal predilection as well as the particular conflict situation.

Procedure

Initial contact with potential participants was made either by email or face to face. They received a written description of the project if they expressed an interest in being interviewed and were asked to contact me if they were still interested. After this confirmation, participants were given written consent forms for both participation, taping and transcribing their interview data, and using the information for this paper. Names of participants have been changed to protect confidentiality.

After the consent forms were signed I addressed any questions or comments participants had on any aspect of the study. No one was left “blind to the manipulation.” Interviews were conducted on the telephone. All interviews were audio-tape recorded and transcribed, then analyzed across five variables: (1) how participants define guilt, (2) the reasons and circumstances in which they experience guilt, (3) whether guilt is something that can “go away,” (4) how guilt changes or remains constant over time, and (5) whether the guilt these women experience is adaptive or maladaptive. To ensure that the conversations I had with participants were framed by their understanding and experience with guilt, rather than a conventional understanding, I administered the surveys last. After the interviews and surveys were completed, participants again were given an opportunity for further comment or questions on any aspect of the study. Finally, all participants were debriefed with a written description of their individual survey results as well as general findings and conclusions of the project.

*I have made myself personally responsible for the fate of every
human being who has come my way.*
Anais Nin

PART III: RESULTS

SURVEY MEASUREMENTS

Thomas-Kilmann Conflict MODE Instrument

Results of the TK scale can be found in Table 2, with the predominant style used by each woman indicated in boldface. The possible scores for each style range from 0 (for very low use) to 12 (for very high use).

Table 2. Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Management Style³

	Brooke	Emma	Zoe	Madeline	Shelby
Competing	2	3	5	5	1
Collaborating	9	6	4	6	6
Compromising	4	10	9	5	7
Avoiding	7	4	2	7	6
Accommodating	8	7	10	7	10

As expected, none of the participants used just one style. Three women scored highest in *accommodating*, the most of any style. One of these, Madeline, was tied with *avoiding*. For all the women, *accommodating* was either the first or second most prevalent style. None of the women scored highest in *competing*; it was also the least likely style used by four of the five

³ While a comparison of mean scores ($n=339$) is indicated by Thomas & Kilmann (1974), I have not included them as a comparison in this paper. The T-K tests were administered in the early 1970s to middle and upper level managers in business and government organizations. I make two assumptions: that this sample was largely composed of men, and that they were considering their answers with regard to situations arising in a business setting. As none of my participants was male, and none focused on guilt or conflict in a work setting, I cannot with any credibility compare my data with this.

women. The point variation between first and second style choice was three or less for all women.

While this sample size is not large enough to draw relevant conclusions for women as a group, it does clearly illustrate that these women employ multiple conflict management styles. Although there is no clearly dominant style for any of them, there is a predilection for accommodating and against competing. This does seem to support research on appropriate gendered behavior for women, and is significant. The competing style is both assertive and uncooperative, while the accommodating style is the opposite—unassertive and cooperative. According to Thomas & Kilmann (1974, p. 10), accommodating “might take the form of selfless generosity or charity, obeying another person’s order when one would prefer not to, or yielding to another’s point of view.” The authors suggest those who score high can be depriving themselves of influence, respect, and recognition. Competing, on the other hand, “is a power-oriented mode, in which one uses whatever power seems appropriate to win one’s own position—one’s ability to argue, one’s rank, economic sanctions” (p. 10). Those who score low in this category may have trouble taking a firm stand out of concern for other’s feelings, or if they feel powerless.

The Guilt Inventory

The results of the GI are listed in Table 3. Scores more than one standard deviation from the sample mean are bolded. In the trait guilt category, two women scored more than one standard deviation from the sample mean: Brooke, who scored higher, and Emma, who scored lower. All the women scored within one standard deviation of the sample in the state guilt category. One woman, Zoe, scored more than one standard deviation less than the sample mean in the moral standards category. None of the women were significantly divergent from the

sample mean in more than one of the three categories. No scores for any of the women in any category was two or more standard deviations from the sample mean, or outside the range of the sample scores.

Table 3. The Guilt Inventory

	Brooke	Emma	Zoe	Madeline	Shelby	Sample of Women⁴
Trait Guilt	<u>76</u>	<u>35</u>	74	61	58	M=54.58 SD=12.40
State Guilt	26	19	26	26	27	M=26.05 SD=7.17
Moral Standards	53	53	<u>39</u>	51	40	M=47.22 SD=7.40

INTERVIEWS

Interview data was analyzed along the five dimensions discussed earlier: how women define guilt, what are the reasons they feel guilty or do not feel guilty, how they cope with or resolve guilt, how guilt changes or remains the same over the life cycle, and whether they see guilt as adaptive or maladaptive. The interviews revealed many expected results based on my preliminary research, but they also revealed some themes that were completely unexpected.

Definitions

I began each interview by asking participants to define guilt in their own words. Some noted this was a difficult question. Here are the definitions each woman offered:

Zoe: Guilt. Um, that would mean to me that you are, you feel or there is something that makes you think that you have done something that you shouldn't have or have something that you shouldn't have. And it's, guilt is the feeling that's associated with those situations.

⁴ These are results of Jones, Schratter, & Kugler (2000) testing the validity and reliability of the Guilt Inventory. These tests were administered to 1,688 college students, with samples ranging from 117 to 304. The mean age was 19.1 years, 92.4% were Euro-American, and over 94% were unmarried. While the test was given to both men and women, the value of *n* for women only was not indicated. The mean (M) and standard deviation (SD) values indicated are for female participants only.

Brooke: I think that guilt is a sense of having disappointed other people, and being a bad person because of that.

Madeline: Guilt, to me, is something that you, you feel bad about because you feel like you have a responsibility toward it, and you haven't done anything about it. I mean it's a, you feel bad because you've either done something or not done something that you feel responsible for.

Shelby: My definition of guilt. Um, I guess it would be if you did something and then you felt a sort of negative reaction about how you felt about it. Like, uh, I don't know if I can use the word 'guilty' but I felt that I should have done something more or I should've given a different answer or, I feel bad about something.

Emma: Um, feeling bad about something and also that it is somehow your responsibility. (pause) I guess actually I wanna add to the definition that it's in a negative way. I'm responsible for something but not feel guilt, like, not in a negative way.

Though they expressed it in different words, all the women's definitions contained a notion of feeling bad, and that the feeling was connected with not fulfilling a personal responsibility. All the definitions are similar to the conceptualizations offered by psychologists. Brooke's definition may be more related to trait guilt, while the others seem closer to state guilt.

Reasons women feel guilty

The women in this study offered a variety of circumstances and explanations about where and why they experience guilt. Some gave a list of several situations, while others focused on one particular area of their lives that made them feel guilty. Two of the women, Shelby and Madeline, described a major cause of guilt in their lives concerned their siblings:

Shelby: [Speaking about her sister at a time she ended a long-term relationship] I guess I can say that I feel really guilty about sometimes the way I treated her when, like, during her relationship with [her boyfriend] . . . I was very mean to her. Instead of talking to her about it, I just, you know, got mad at her and let her think that she was a bad person and I felt really guilty about that.

Shelby went on to talk about other guilt feelings with her sister, including feeling guilty that she has moved away from home while her sister has stayed to care for their parents. When I thought she meant that she felt guilty for leaving her parents, she did not. Rather, she seemed to feel guilty that her sister feels too guilty to move on with her life. It was as if Shelby feels guilty about not feeling guilty!

Madeline also expressed tremendous guilt about her siblings:

Madeline: I would say that I have guilt around people that I really care about that I tried to protect but I couldn't because it wasn't really my job, so, I mean I have a *lot* of guilt around my brothers and sisters, and my grandpa. . . I suppose the most poignant, or painful for me is my [siblings]. Where I really didn't think that they were getting cared for very well, and I wanted them to get better care. . . . That they had, you know, a bad situation and I couldn't intervene, or didn't intervene.

Two other women, Brooke and Emma, expressed guilt about parents.

Brooke: Definitely the most guilt that I felt in my life is about my mother and my father. . . . my mother, the guilt is about not being able to save her in different versions throughout my life, and, or it being not safe to engage with her at different times and feeling guilty that I can't just do it at a level that'll keep her feeling okay. And, ah, with [my father], um, you know, I think I am, I mean, I guess the good news is that mostly what I feel like with him is just sad. But over a lot of years I felt like 'what is wrong with me?' I really felt bad that somehow I just wasn't able to be, you know, the kind of person or whatever that he'd want to have any engagement with at all, and that something must be pretty horribly wrong with me. . . . I always had a big sense of feeling responsible as a kid for what was going on in the family, and feeling really guilty when it wasn't okay, which was about all the time. (laughs) Um, and just a big feeling of responsibility for everybody in the family, I guess.

Emma: I mean, I suppose, well maybe in terms of my family, that I don't get to see my family often enough [because they live so far away]. . . . I think up until [I got married] she [my mother] always had this thought of 'maybe she'll come home' and now it's pretty obvious that I'm not and I have no plans to come home. So I've made my life here. So that part of it is that's my decision and I suppose that's the way the guilt would come in. . . . So I do feel bad that she's lonely and all that, and my role in it is the fact that I chose to leave and live in another country.

Finally, Zoe talked about having a lot of guilt feelings toward friends she perceived do not have all the things that she has:

Zoe: Of my close friends . . . I'm the only one right now who's married. And there's some times that I feel guilty for that, not because I'm married but because I seem to have something that other people want. And it, it will make me feel guilty that I can't give them what they want. But that's, you know, not something I can do. So there's guilt in terms of relationships with your friends, and sometimes you know, with your spouse, if you don't think you can—if he's home working and you're off doing something else, you can feel guilty there, too.

For all these women, guilt seems highly focused on close personal relationships. While a theme of caring runs through all the narratives, guilt is not always caused by letting down those we care about. For example, Madeline described feelings of guilt about not taking care of her brothers and sisters, both when she lived with them and after she moved out and started a family of her own. I asked Madeline if she had ever gotten any indication from her siblings that she should feel guilty because she wasn't there or didn't act. Her response was, "Never. Never."

Again, in my interview with Shelby, she described feeling guilty that her grandmother had sent her money while she was training to be a hair stylist. She talked about how every time she would see her grandmother, she would feel guilty for not doing her hair since her grandmother had helped her out so much while in school. I asked Shelby if her grandmother had ever given her any indication that she felt it was "owed" back to her in exchange for the money, and she said no. Shelby concluded that "it was definitely a feeling I brought on myself," and could not remember any time when her grandmother said or did anything indicating she should feel this obligation. These experiences seem to support the idea that guilt is also self-imposed, and we can feel it when no one else seems to think we have committed a social or moral transgression.

Conversely, some of the women talked about being “guilt tripped” by relatives or friends but that it did not always work to make them feel guilty. Shelby noted that when her mother tries to make her feel guilty for leaving home, she does not succeed, but that her sister does. Emma also mentioned how her mother tries to make her feel guilty for moving away—it seemed to work sometimes and not others.

Another widely covered theme in these interviews was the notion of omnipotent responsibility. Emma, who showed the least trait and state guilt on the GI, nevertheless seemed to have guilt issues around an overwhelming sense of responsibility. Here she talks about her mother:

Emma: Obviously I’m not, I know she, I’m not responsible for her feeling lonely because she is divorced and, you know, has lost her parents. But I guess where, maybe where my guilt comes in is in knowing that I’m adding to that. That she doesn’t, that she’s not able to kind of alleviate her own feelings of lonesomeness and sadness by having my company.

Interestingly, Emma recognizes there are other factors that are making her mother sad and lonely, but at the same time, she still seems to believe that if she were living at home, the other problems would go away. In this and many other exchanges, it was clear that these women feel a constant and huge burden to take care of many people, often at their own expense.

Feeling guilt-free

While all of the women found it easy to come up with situations which make them feel guilty, they also all mentioned situations or relationships in which they rarely experience guilt. Some of these were in close relationships, particularly with their spouse or partner. Both of the women with children did not discuss any feelings of guilt related to them. Zoe briefly mentioned feeling guilt at work, but only if she forgot something on her part of a group project. Other than

this brief exchange, none of the women I spoke with mentioned feeling guilty in any way related to work.

These findings are significant. Guilt around marriage, children, and work roles was what I thought would be the focus of every interview I conducted. Much of the research that has been conducted on women and guilt suggests that these roles are most salient. This is perhaps even more interesting when we consider some of the jobs these women have: one works with high-risk youth, one is a political activist who works with women's groups, one works in customer service, and another is a consultant who assists judges with criminal sentencing recommendations. These are very distinct situations that all seem highly likely to induce guilt. But for these women, their experiences with work actually seem to offer mechanisms for *resolving* guilt and conflict!

In the interviews, the women shared their work experiences with me. Emma heads off guilt at work by not allowing herself to feel that way. She acknowledges that “there’s only so much I can do as an individual. . . . I can’t be everywhere . . . I can’t change society, I can’t change the government . . . So, I can’t feel guilty. If I allowed myself to feel guilty at all about maybe not having done enough, then that’s when I have to get out of the whole field.” Zoe, who admits she works in a male-dominated field, said she only rarely experiences guilt at work. She believes that “working with men, I’ve think we’ve had to learn to be that way because if you’re not [able to say no to co-workers] you’ll get walked on. And nobody has time to get pushed around.” She talks about how she feels comfortable saying no to requests at work because she can offer “proof” that she is already too busy with other assignments. This was the same woman who talked about how she often attends multiple social functions in the same day so that none of her friends or family feel slighted by her absence. These examples show how a different set of

rules seems to apply for these women in their personal and professional relationships and experiences.

Coping with and resolving guilt

Another important aspect of my interviews were the women's discussions of how they handle guilt. I wanted to know if guilt is resolvable—or are some kinds of guilt and not others? They spoke of how guilt makes them feel and act, how they try to avoid it, cope with it, and try to resolve it. Some expressed a belief that “hard” guilt does not go away, whereas the “easy” guilt can be addressed more easily through apology, returning a phone call, sending a birthday card, etc. Most of each interview focused on a kind of guilt that was much harder to dismiss.

Coping. When I asked what they did when they felt guilty, four of the five women expressed largely negative responses:

Shelby: I, I think about it constantly. And sometimes I write the person out a letter even though I probably won't send it, but I usually feel better when I write a letter and then read it. Sometimes I talk to the person and sometimes I don't. But then it depends on what it was that I did, and whether it's fixable or not. There are some times when I don't do it. And I just, kind of, I'm too embarrassed to talk to them. And just feel so guilty about something that I can't, I'd be, like, more embarrassed to talk to them.

Madeline: I feel bad about it. And then I avoid it. You know, which is sort of what I was trying to say, I sort of disengaged. But then you beat yourself up about it all the time and you feel perpetually, forever bad about it.

Zoe: Um, let's see, when I feel guilty I cry. Sometimes. I also tend to overanalyze the situation, like, I will keep talking about it and talking about it and talking about it. Sometimes this works.

Brooke: I get paralyzed. I certainly can also experience when I feel guilty also being really angry and resentful, right, at whatever caused my guilt. Then I spazz out. Blow up. Act like a big martyr.

Rationalizing around guilt was another recurring theme across interviews. The women offered numerous reasons for feeling like they need to be the ultimate caretaker: that it was a

personal trait, because they were the oldest child, because they moved out of their parents' house first, and because "the people who should have been responsible were not" and therefore it was their *job* to step in. When Madeline explained that she "disengaged" from her guilt but still felt bad, I asked her if she then continues to disengage. She replied that she does, "until I see those people again and then I feel bad. I mean it's actually more complicated than that. I mean, I think that, with those situations, I've come to terms with the fact that there was nothing I could have done." All of the incidents in which these women brought the guilt feelings on themselves (see above) are further examples of how they say their guilt is because they have let someone down, but realistically have no reason to believe that this is so. Only one woman, Emma, said that she really does not get a paralyzing feeling with guilt that she can't seem to resolve.

Resolving. Despite these challenges, women do find ways to resolve guilt. When I asked who they turn to when they feel guilty, all of them first mentioned their spouse or partner. Interestingly, they do this for different reasons. Shelby talks to her partner because "she is for the truth and getting it out in the open." Emma, who felt guilty about moving so far from her mother, turns to her husband because he is in a similar situation and "understands." Madeline turns most often to her husband, but she says "just to sort of process it a little bit, to just share something, for one thing. I don't expect him to fix it." Zoe offers some insight into resolving self-imposed guilt by bringing her feelings out in the open: she describes feeling guilty that her husband might be disappointed that she hasn't gone to graduate school. She admits that she feels like she's disappointing him when he asks about it and gets "overly sensitive." When she tells him how she feels, "he looks at me and goes 'Where the hell'd you come up with that?!? I never said that!' And I'm going, 'Yeah, hon, you're right. You never said that.' . . . and that's a bit of reassurance to me, going okay, I just twisted that around." She is relieved of her guilt when she

realizes, essentially, she brought it on herself and her husband admits he never disappointed the way she thought. This tactic of airing feelings does help Zoe rid herself of guilt, but it does not seem to make her notice or change her *pattern* of behavior of imposing guilt on herself.

While these women do turn to others when they feel guilty, it does not alleviate the guilt for all of them. Madeline notes that she involves her husband “more to share it, not resolve it. I mean, it doesn’t go away.” Zoe talks about how her husband always wants to “fix” her problem when she feels guilty. For him, it is just a matter of fact that she “cares too much about what other people think” and that the simple solution lies in just not doing that anymore and putting her own needs first sometimes. She describes how she went alone to a friend’s party because, unlike her husband, she could not just tell her friend “I don’t care, I’m tired” without feeling guilty.

Most of the women also described how they turn to friends or sisters when they feel guilty. They pointed out how they have different needs met by different people. Both Shelby, Madeline, and Zoe note how friends (presumably female) and sisters just understand and empathize with an “I’m sorry” or a “kind ear.” They do not describe, like they did with husbands, that other women perceive the problem as easily resolved. When they seek out other women, it seems like they are looking for rationalization—someone to tell them “I know how you feel. I feel the same way.” As the interviewer and as a participant when participants asked me questions about myself, these sentiments were expressed over and over. There seems to be a universal “understanding” among women about how guilt makes us feel and act.

Guilt and development

In these conversations, I sought to learn the ways in which guilt has changed or not changed throughout these women’s lives. As children, in some ways guilt was still there but

simpler. Emma said she no longer feels guilt about things like “breaking a vase and trying to get away with it.” Shelby talked about how, in Catholic school, she would have to “make up” feeling guilt about not eating her vegetables or lying to her parents. Zoe experienced guilt as a child when she brought home bad grades.

Nonetheless, while the guilt-inducing events may have been rather unsophisticated, the feeling of experiencing guilt was just as bad. Zoe discovered that:

As I get older, I’m having an easier time deciding what matters to me and what doesn’t. . . . I had to come to terms with it: can’t please everybody, can’t do everything, so I have to pick what means the most. . . . That was a hard realization for me ‘cause I like to try to do everything. I always have. . . . Right now I’ve made a conscious effort to that, my top priority, you know, my husband, my career . . . that’s my focus. So if I have to put my husband first instead of my friends or myself, (laughs) then that gives us a whole new focus!

Shelby, who sometimes had to make up things she felt guilty about for confession, still notes how guilt “was something I was always thinking about.” For Brooke, having trouble separating guilt from other feelings like depression was a challenge throughout her life. She describes over time how she has learned to manage guilt by discovering the sources. She mentions how as a child she had a sense of everything being about her, and now has learned that it’s not about her, it’s “about all those other crazy people.” She can remember “feeling as responsible for my behavior when I was an 8-year-old girl as I’m responsible for my behavior right now.”

The Good and the Bad of Feeling Guilty

When women feel guilty enough to take care of everyone around them, it can be seen as socially positive. By acting on their guilt and constantly taking on responsibility for all that is not well, women do quite a lot to preserve the status quo. However, this seems to give no validation to how this feeling of responsibility can damage the psyche of women. Is it only mitigating social conflict we should be concerned with? What does feeling guilty do for women?

It seems that everyone agrees guilt is a negative feeling (i.e., you feel bad), including those who claim it is a positive, reparative, and socially responsible phenomenon. But by stressing guilt's positive attributes, are they are denying the pain of those who suffer through it? And how does the private pain of those experiencing guilt affect social processes? Because available research on guilt is divided as to whether it is a positive or negative social force, I searched for answers from these women. They did not seem to have anything good to say about guilt, nor did I hear any stories about how it helped them be better people in society. Women are relational, and they define guilt in a relational way, but guilt did not seem to help any of their relationships. Because guilt was most often discussed in strained relationships or difficult periods, it hardly seems socially adaptive.

Some women did mention how guilt can push you to right your wrongs, often early in the interviews. Emma, who experienced the least guilt and scored lowest on the Guilt Inventory, said that feeling guilty “would make me right my wrongs.” She did, however, suggest she would accomplish this by trying to “appease other people, but I try to make the situation not be like, one fraught with conflict.” She may resolve the conflict within herself, manifested by guilt, by attending to the needs of the other person. Other women who began to speak of adaptive guilt quickly shifted their focus to its negative implications:

Madeline: Twinges of guilt make you, you know, when it's something that you have control over, when you feel guilty, the guilt propels you to make it right. Or to atone, or to make amends, or to apologize. But what, what I struggle with is that guilt that, I can't do that. I mean I can't apologize, it wasn't my fault.

Brooke also mentioned what she called “easy” guilt:

Brooke: You know, the easy guilt is just, eh, I didn't send a thank you note, right? Or I didn't return a phone call or something like that. That's just pretty much like 'just take care of it' guilt. . . . I think in some ways there's a very positive side of women, um, you know, the sense of empathy and responsibility for other people's emotional and physical well-being. There's some really good things

about that, but, um, there's such a strong...I think that what we don't experience or aren't taught that there are boundaries on that, that you know, each person is their own individual person, and, ah, you can't always fix everything.

Despite the occasional nod to the positive aspects of guilt, the interviews most of the time gravitated to the negative. Women described guilt as paralyzing, difficult, incapacitating, isolating, sad, and depressing; "it's a feeling of helplessness," it "makes you feel bad, you know, so it lowers your self-esteem and makes you feel like a shitty person," and, "it just leaves me with this, you know, pretty core feeling of 'there must be something wrong with me'." Often, rather than feeling empowered to make amends, guilt made these women feel weak and flawed. Weighing their experiences of the remedial functions of guilt against the detrimental ones, these women mostly decided that guilt is not the evolutionary and beneficial emotion many experts believe it is.

Caring was a *constant* topic in these interviews, and really at the core of how women experience guilt. Caring seems to be the definitive factor for guilt in women's lives. It was overwhelmingly a sense of lack of care that induced guilty feelings in all the women I spoke with. Said Madeline: "I should have been there taking care of him [my brother], or I could have been there taking care of him. I felt like I should have been there taking care of him." In almost all the statements included in this paper, we see evidence of the importance of care in women's construction and experience of guilt.

Guilt as experienced vs. guilt as defined

As the interviews progressed, I noticed that some of the women would refer back to their original definition to add, explain, or change something they had said at the outset. Expanding on their definitions throughout the interviews, most of the women divided guilt into two categories, "easy" guilt and "hard" guilt. Only Emma stated that she did not experience the latter.

The explanations and changing definitions seemed like a way the women were rationalizing their behavior so that it was gender appropriate. For me, this phenomenon was one of the most striking aspects of the interviews.

As the interviews progressed, when describing situations, relationships, or times when they felt a high degree of guilt, I realized that what the women were describing as guilt did not match their antecedent definition. They were talking about situations in which they had done no wrong—having to turn down social invitations or requests for help because they were too busy; mothering younger siblings possibly at the expense of their own children; feeling guilty about moving away from home; not being able to “take care” of parents, both as children and as adults; not being able to give friends everything they have, etc.

Sometimes, they noticed the dissonance between their definitions and their experiences, and interrupted themselves when they realized it was happening. Four of the five women explicitly backtracked to add to or change their original definition after they began speaking about their lives. After Shelby told how she still felt guilty for spilling a snack at a sporting event as a child, she could not explain why when I asked her. She then paused, and asked me, “Well, what’s the difference between guilt, and, like, thinking you should have said something and then not saying something? Is that guilt, or is that just not saying something?” All of a sudden, she felt she had gone off topic and asked me “did I even answer the question?” When she talked about moving away from home, Shelby felt guilty that her sister was left to take care of their parents. As I was trying to differentiate her feelings about her parents and her sister, she stopped herself: “uh, I don’t know that I even feel guilty about it because it’s, because guilt is like, feeling guilty about it would mean that there’s some sort of wrongdoing but I don’t feel like

I did anything wrong by leaving.” In both of these exchanges, she seems to experience a sudden confusion when her guilt experience was not guilt at all in the way she originally defined it.

Even Emma, the one woman who did not feel paralyzed about guilt, stopped herself when she noticed her inconsistencies:

Emma: And, you know, I don't think, I suppose that when I said that guilt is about being responsible and when I think about the feelings of guilt that I have about not being there for my Mom, I suppose in a sense they don't really match up.

BP: Well, that's okay.

Emma: Yeah, but it's an interesting point, because it doesn't mean that I don't feel guilty that, or that the feelings I feel I don't call them guilt. Um, [because it's not] something I can do much about.

At first, I began to think that they were right—they were just confusing feelings of guilt with sadness or anger or some other negative emotion. Certainly, if they have already defined guilt as a consequence of wrongdoing, they didn't really feel guilty about a situation in which they committed no transgression. I think they felt the same way, and that's why they hesitated or tried to go back and change their definition to match their experience. But in the end, I think it was guilt they felt, not just those other emotions. Guilt, compared with related emotions, came up many times:

BP: And do you still feel guilty, or do you feel something else—

Madeline: No, I think I still feel guilty. And I feel guilty because I disengaged. I mean I would have rather figured it out a long time ago that there was nothing I could do about it and not disengaged.

BP: I actually feel the same way about stuff, like I feel guilty on one hand, but—

Madeline: It wasn't my job, it wasn't my fault . . . And I think it probably has to do with, um, you know, maybe some self aggrandizement, where you're, you think that you're more powerful than you were or something. . . . But maybe guilt has something to do with powerlessness in a way. Because every situation, or everything that I feel guilt about was something that I didn't have enough power over. Does that make any sense?

When Brooke described how she felt the same responsibility for her behavior as a young girl that she feels as an adult, I agreed with the feeling, but Brooke responded, “[it’s] completely ridiculous! It’s ludicrous! *But, it feels true. It’s emotionally true.*”

Those who do not complain are never pitied.
Jane Austen

PART IV. DISCUSSION

When I decided to study women and guilt, I was confident I had chosen a topic on which women could speak at length, whatever it was they had to say. My preliminary meta-analysis of existing scholarship on women and guilt informed me that guilt surfaces for women because of working and motherhood, caring for elderly parents and spouses, depression, marriage, socioeconomic status, being a student, abortion, illness and HIV, rape, war, feminism, physical abuse, sexuality and sex, divorce, racism, prison, religion, violence, self-mutilation, and even witchcraft.⁵ Clearly, women feel guilty about a lot of things.

Overwhelmingly, the largest body of literature focuses on guilt arising from role conflict, particularly concerning roles as wife/mother and worker. When I began talking to women, I thought that they would lament that even though they enjoyed working outside the home and being successful in their careers, that they still felt guilty about time that was not spent with children, spouses, friends, elderly parents, preparing healthy meals, and all the other things women are “supposed” to do. But the women I spoke to did not mention this kind of guilt. Two of the five women have children, and all live with a partner, but in the many situations they described in their lives, guilt about working outside the home was not among them. I wonder if this might have been different if I had talked to more women with children, especially with younger children. I also wondered if this was indicative of a cultural shift—that this is perhaps another way guilt can change over time for individuals. Women in large numbers have been working outside the home for almost four decades. All of the women I interviewed came of age

⁵ I searched several academic databases (Academic Search Premier, Expanded Academic, Psychlit, catalog of the Boston Public Library) using terms such as “women”, “guilt”, “conflict”, “emotion”, “gender”, “role”. These searches resulted in hundreds of articles and books which I was able to categorize into the topical areas mentioned.

during the modern women's movement or after it: perhaps they have internalized a new gender role in which, as long as you still take care of everything at home, it is not forbidden to also work as a wage earner. Perhaps now, in addition to nurturing those at home, women are expected to also have a paying job and handle both responsibilities with ease.

This research does not address these important topics, but it does illustrate how the *antecedents* of guilt have remained unchanged. While these women did not feel guilty about working, they still have guilt about other things in their lives, all of which, like the guilt experienced by women working outside the home, have roots in women's sense of caring and obligation to others. So while the particular situation that invokes guilt may change, the underlying cause remains the same. When we think about these underlying causes, rather than situational specifics, these findings may be salient for a large number of women.

The findings of this research highlight a series of inconsistencies about how women view themselves and others. The way these women described guilt in their lives indicates that it does originate out of a sense of obligation women have to nurture and care for others. Particularly, when those they are close to are hurting or in need, women feel obligated to help. Not offering help and not resolving the problem can result in guilty feelings. Strikingly, these feelings seem to exist often in situations where these women were not responsible for committing a transgression, and even when they were powerless to help. Experienced guilt, in these circumstances, does not support accepted definitions of when people feel guilty. They do offer support for the idea that women feel a sense of omnipotent responsibility for the care of others. All the participants in this study discussed situations which made them feel guilty, but at the same time acknowledged that they did not feel they had committed any wrongdoing. The women felt guilty when *others* did not fulfill their obligations to people they care about, even

when they recognized it was not their fault. This inconsistency between experienced and defined guilt must be further studied.

DENIAL OF SELF

Women have been shown to define morality in terms of relationships (Gilligan, 1982). They derive moral “goodness” from acting out of care and concern and a desire not to harm others. However, this ethic of responsibility is often juxtaposed with a marked tendency to exclude themselves from those deserving care. Carol Gilligan (1982) noted how one woman in her abortion study contradicted her own definition of morality when “obligation and sacrifice override the ideal of equality, setting up a basic contradiction in her thought (p. 64).” I, too, interviewed women who described personal experiences which contradicted their own definitions of what determines guilt. While women seem hyper-sensitive to caring for others, there is an inconsistency to their ethic of care when it comes to themselves. According to Gilligan (1982), women unknowingly dissociate from themselves, dismissing their own voice as selfish. Women have adopted and internalized the idea that self-interest is not allowed (Miller, 1976), and that acting out of self-interest is in inherent conflict with their definition of morality. Women are prone to guilt feelings when they deem their own behavior as anything but selfless, concluding it must be selfish.

In this study, women described how guilty they felt about *others'* unfulfilled obligations. Emma noted how she felt guilty that her absence made her mother unable to overcome sadness from the death of her parents and her divorce. Madeline talked about how guilty she felt that she did not “mother” her brothers and sisters because she was either a child herself or taking care of her own family. Zoe described feeling guilty for being married while many of her female friends remained single. Brooke described feeling guilty to this day that her behavior as an eight year

old was not good enough to prevent crises in her family. Even years later, these women still feel guilty that they did not do what they themselves have determined was not possible to care for others' needs.

When women believe they should sacrifice themselves for the needs of others, it suggests they have internalized the role of selfless caregiver. These findings suggest that women are actually perceiving *themselves* as outside the scope of justice. Considerations of fairness to the other parties are important, but considerations of fairness to self induce feelings of guilt. Using criteria for moral exclusion laid out by Susan Opatow (1990; 1999), these women judge themselves as expendable or undeserving, and it appears acceptable, appropriate, and just for them to harm themselves. They deny their own autonomy, rights, and entitlements for the sake of allocating resources to others who are, presumably, within the scope of justice. While it is often argued that women are seen this way by men, what is truly frightening is when women begin to view *themselves* as people who fall outside the moral community.

CONFLICT AND GUILT

When women consider themselves as undeserving and feel guilty for having needs that may conflict with others' needs, it can pose considerable risk in conflict situations. When gender roles are internalized, women correlate a positive sense of self with being forgiving, caring, and concerned with others' needs. One can only imagine how detrimental this would be in a conflict situation which requires being able to state and defend your needs and goals. The presence of conflict may make it even more difficult for women to view themselves as legitimate, visible people entitled to dignity and justice. As legal theorist David Luban (1989) suggests, if a particular gender did not equate with a particular level and type of power or with particular emotions, it would not even be a consideration. If guilt feelings naturally arise out of the

perception of what it means to be a good woman, perhaps women will readily make concessions which they view as just and fair (see Hegtvedt & Killian, 1999).

The guilt feelings in these women offer explanations as to why women's conflicts may be dismissed as unimportant, or why they may not even be brought into the open at all. A conflict exists only when we perceive an injustice against us, or have conflicting goals with ourselves or another person (Deutsch, 1973; Felstiner, Abel, & Sarat, 1980-1). If women deny their own voice and needs, they will never reach this stage of consciousness about conflict, never mind having the tools to resolve it. The privatization of women's guilt and intrapsychic conflict experiences further undermines a chance for resolution. Individuating and highly compartmentalized experiences are less visible, and allow women to continue to deny their subordinate position as they further distance themselves from their social group. Conflict remains latent and, therefore, unresolved.

Many conflict theorists have offered methodologies for constructive conflict resolution. Deutsch (1992) notes that empathy for the other party is an essential element. Empathy for the other party suggests that conflict will be resolved with consideration of their needs and goals. However, empathy for others combined with a sense of relational awareness will lead to a more constructive conflict process. Current conflict literature never begins on the premise that one of the actors (or one intrapsychic voice) will not be concerned with her own well-being. The idea of viewing the self as undeserving of fairness must be explored further.

POWER

Guilt, as experienced by the women in this study, comes from powerlessness to meet the needs of others, as well as powerlessness to validate the needs of the self. As Madeline, a participant in my research described, "everything that I feel guilt about was something that I

didn't have enough power over." This was a theme that ran across interviews, although not all the women were able to recognize and name it. When women are unable to offer help or protection to others, they feel guilty. Paradoxically, this feeling of omnipotent responsibility has been associated with narcissism and a feeling of being all powerful (see O'Connor, et al., 1999). But for these women it perpetuated their powerlessness. They felt an obligation to be responsive to and responsible for everyone's needs, but by doing this only set themselves up for inevitable failure when they could not meet their own moral standard. Eventually, they do hear their own voice and can only feel guilty if they listen to it as their own needs become, amazingly, inconsistent with their sense of self.

Powerlessness is maintained when the guilt these women feel renders them unable to move on. When women feel guilty for *others'* bad deeds, no apology or amends they offer will fix the situation or "right" the wrong. Many times in these interviews, the women acknowledged their helplessness while at the same time continuing to experience guilt. I believe this powerlessness also comes from women's subordinate position in society. Men are socialized to develop a sense of self as an individual in a way that women are not. They are able to say "this is what I need right now" and not feel guilty for acting on it. This became clear in my interviews with women when they talked at length about how their husbands react to their guilt. Husbands seem to adopt a position where, once they have determined they did no wrong, they then should not and cannot feel guilty. These women described how they would share guilt with their husbands, who would just conclude that they care too much about what other people think, or they need to simply think about their own needs (being tired, hungry, etc.). While all four married women mentioned turning to their husbands when they feel guilty, none said it resolved their guilt. It seemed that they could recognize the value in the way men viewed the situations,

but did not have the tools themselves to do the same. These women do not have the power to be selfish or angry the same way their husbands do. The women's stories about their husbands also supported my early hypothesis that talking to men about guilt would yield very different discussions. Possible gender differences in guilt and guilt resolution should be explored further with research on both women and men.

SO . . . IS GUILT ADAPTIVE?

It is interesting that much of the recent literature on guilt stresses only the benefits of its interpersonal nature. Indeed, terms such as empathy, caring, and morality all have strong positive connotations. My findings challenge these conclusions. Women who suffer with guilt feel weak and flawed rather than empowered to right their wrongs. They correlate their guilt feelings with hopelessness, powerlessness, and a sense of personal "badness" that can inhibit their ability to function and lead to negative outcomes both for themselves and for those around them. As a socially constructed emotion, guilt is considered interpersonally adaptive by many (see Tangney & Dearing, 1992). But I have found that the premise of these conclusions, the antecedents of guilt, seem flawed. For me, this positive view of guilt means that women are to be lauded for merely "adapting" themselves to the role laid out for them in society, and as feelings of guilt arise, they continue to subjugate their needs to the needs of others.

THE INTERSECTION OF INDIVIDUAL AND SOCIAL PROCESSES: IMPLICATIONS FOR SOLUTIONS AND CHANGE

Guilt, as experienced by women, is highly individualized, but I believe it is systemic and indicative of a larger social problem. Women seem to have incredible ability to rationalize the guilt they experience as something that they brought on themselves, and that they are experiencing alone. The responsibility of caring for others that women place on themselves

seems universal from my research. For the most part, these women were able to rationalize their guilt as resulting from personal failures, justifying and maintaining the role which seems natural to them.

Occasionally, the women in these interviews did exhibit a consciousness of gender roles. Brooke talked about how she feels that women are socialized to be selfless and therefore feel guilty when they have needs that are not permissible. Madeline speculated that “women probably have more guilt because they’re, as a group, more caretaking.” At the end of the interview, Zoe echoed the others:

I think a lot of women seem to go through these things and I, like I said, I don’t know if it goes back to feeling that we, we feel that we have to please everybody. You know, we’re not as comfortable saying no, like, we feel bad if we say no. . . . And I don’t know why that is that we feel bad if we say no. . . . See, I immediately will put myself out. [My husband] will put somebody else out.

Many scholars (Crosby, 1984; Hartsock, 1983; Miller, 1976) argue that the first step in overcoming the feeling of omnipotent responsibility and the guilt that goes with it is when women realize their situation. While some of the women I interviewed recognized their guilt might be a problem affecting many women, it still did not alleviate these feelings or cause them to stop blaming themselves. Existing literature does not seem to offer an explanation for this incongruence.

While I disagree with those who view guilt as adaptive, I can also recognize why a debate exists. Empathy, nurturing, and caring (the antecedents of guilt for women) *are* good qualities. As individuals, most of us aspire to possess these traits ourselves, and we seek them in other people. We can see in many ways, such as in charity and relief work, how these values are highly esteemed across many cultures and religions, and over time. It is certainly not my contention that women should stop caring about other people. At the same time, I am struck by

how the personality traits that make women good—empathy and caring—can make them feel so bad.

Women's feelings of omnipotent responsibility and guilt will not disappear through some change within individuals—it is a social problem and therefore only a group effort will resolve it (see Lewin, 1948). Jean Baker Miller (1976) advocates a return from isolation, in which women, indeed, everyone, can build growth-fostering relationships characterized by mutual empathy, mutual empowerment, zest, authenticity, clarity, a sense of worth, and a desire for more connection (see Miller & Stiver, 1997). Unfortunately, women face a double-bind when attempting this change: they cannot assume more powerful and authentic roles because they are not allowed to, and they will not survive in an androcentric world by adopting traditionally female roles of being cheerful and yielding (Sullivan & Turner, 1996). Additionally, Faye Crosby (1984) notes that we cannot rely on disadvantaged groups to rectify their own subordinate position. This presents a dilemma for women in achieving changes in thinking and self-perception.

The conversations in this project are not meant to offer conclusions but rather a starting point to understanding the women's experience of guilt and conflict. The literature on women and conflict must be expanded to address the tensions in women's guilt experiences as well as how to transform women's moral community to include themselves. Women, who are so good at speaking for others, must find a way to also speak for themselves. Somewhere between selflessness and selfishness, women and men must learn how to live centered on mutually beneficial relationships that can include serving others without being subservient. It seems that the only solution is for women to learn how to take care of themselves, not just others, and to develop a sense of self for which their own voice is both valuable and necessary.

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APPENDIX: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What is your understanding of guilt? (A definition.)
2. Where or when is guilt in your life?
3. Where in your life is guilt not present, or rarely present?
4. What do you do when you feel guilty?
5. Who do you turn to when you feel guilty, and why?
6. How has guilt changed in your life over the years (or remained the same)?