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Agency and intentionality-dependent experiences of moral emotions

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Abstract

Moral emotions are thought to influence moral behaviour by providing a driving force to do good and to avoid doing bad. In this study we examined moral emotions; specifically, guilt, shame, annoyance and feeling “bad” from two different perspectives in a moral scenario; the agent and the victim whilst manipulating the intentionality of the harm; intentional and unintentional. Two hundred participants completed a moral emotions task, which utilised cartoons to depict everyday moral scenarios. As expected, we found that self-blaming emotions such as shame and guilt were much more frequent when taking on the perspective of the agent whilst annoyance was more frequent from the victim perspective. Feeling bad, however, was not agency-specific. Notably, when the harm was intentional, we observed significantly greater shame ratings from the perspective of the agent compared to when the harm was unintentional. In addition, we also found clear gender differences and further observed correlations between moral emotions and personality variables such as psychoticism and neuroticism.

1 Introduction

2 We regularly face scenarios in which judgements have to be made as to whether an action is right
3 or wrong, ranging from extremes such as criminal acts, to more trivial questions of telling a
4 “white lie”. In addition to reasoning in moral judgements, it is recognised that emotionally driven
5 aspects of the judgement procedure are critically important. For instance, offensive but harmless
6 actions, such as washing the bathroom with the national flag or eating a dead family pet provokes
7 strong moral condemnation, but individuals are unable to justify their disapproval beyond stating
8 it as wrong (Haidt et al., 1993). These moral emotions are thought to influence the link between
9 moral standards and moral behaviour (Tangney et al., 2011) and provide a driving force to do
10 good and to avoid doing bad (Kroll and Egan, 2004).

11
12 It has been suggested that some moral dilemmas elicit emotional responses more than others, and
13 that this affects moral judgments (Greene et al., 2001). There is also evidence showing that
14 changing the emotional state of individuals influences their moral judgements. For example,
15 participants who watched a happy movie in comparison to a neutral movie were more likely to
16 choose the morally ‘appropriate’ choice in a moral dilemma by sacrificing an individual for the
17 greater good (Valdesolo and DeSteno, 2006), whereas in a separate study eliciting anger led
18 participants to condemn justice violations more harshly (Horberg et al., 2011). The notion that
19 emotions influence moral judgements is also consistent with the results of neuroimaging studies,
20 which have shown activation of brain regions typically associated with emotion when
21 participants are faced with moral dilemmas (Greene et al., 2001), everyday moral transgressions
22 (Seara-Cardoso, et al. 2016) or pictures with moral content (Moll et al., 2002). Moral emotional
23 experience has been demonstrated to be relevant to depression with patients showing agency-
24 selective neural changes in moral emotional networks (Green et al. 2012; Zahn et al. 2015).

25

26

1
2 'Moral emotions' refer to emotions that are associated with social interactions. They differ from
3 basic emotions by encompassing the interests of persons other than oneself (Haidt, 2003; Moll et
4 al., 2002). Moral emotions change depending on whether we direct blame towards ourselves (e.g.
5 guilt, shame) or others (e.g. moral anger) (Zahn et al., 2011; Zahn, et al., 2020). Shame and guilt
6 are defined as "self-conscious emotions" but have clear differences (Tangney et al., 2007). Shame
7 is viewed as the more "public" emotion (arising from public exposure and disapproval) leading to
8 a negative evaluation of the self, whereas guilt refers to a more "private" experience associated
9 with internally-generated pangs of conscience leading to the negative evaluation of a specific
10 behaviour (Tangney et al., 2011). By contrast, moral anger is associated with violations of the
11 rights of individuals (Russell and Giner-Sorolla, 2013) and has been previously associated with
12 attributions of intentionality and blame (Alicke, 2000; Tetlock et al., 2007).

13
14 Moral emotions differ depending on a person's perspective of the moral scenario, i.e. agent,
15 victim, observer and whether the act was intentional (Zahn et al., 2012; Buon et al., 2016). For
16 instance, guilt or shame result from negative outcomes attributed to one's self, and moral anger
17 results from negative events attributed to illegitimate acts of others (Lawler and Thye, 1999).
18 Further, intentionality of the harm is an important factor in generating moral emotions. Whilst
19 anger is often experienced with intentional moral scenarios, unintentional harms are believed to
20 elicit compassion (Petersen, 2010).

21
22 Moral emotional experience also differs depending on individual differences such as age, gender
23 and personality. For instance, children and adolescents through to adults have reportedly
24 different experiences of shame and guilt, which have differential consequences on behaviour
25 (Tangney, et al., 2007). Research also suggests that women experience higher self-conscious
26 moral emotions such as guilt and shame compared to men (Else-Quest et al., 2012). In addition,
27 moral emotions are linked with personality with shame and guilt proneness correlate with

1 neuroticism, agreeableness and extraversion (Abe, 2004; Einstein and Lanning, 1998; Harder and
2 Greenwald, 1999). Finally, although the development of moral reasoning is often linked to
3 intelligence, moral emotions do not rely on logic and analytical skills (Malti et al., 2013; Malti and
4 Buchmann, 2010). Nevertheless, the developmental emergence of moral emotions is largely
5 dependent on moral cognitive ability (Dentici and Pagnin, 1992; Malti and Latzko, 2010).

6
7 In the present study we used a novel moral emotions task focusing on two different perspectives
8 in a moral scenario; the agent (i.e. the person who committed the act in the moral scenario) and
9 the victim (the person who experiences the consequences of that act) whilst manipulating the
10 intentionality of the harm caused in the moral scenario; intentional (the agent intended to cause
11 harm) or unintentional (the harm was an accident). The most commonly explored moral
12 emotions are guilt, shame, embarrassment and pride (Tangney and Fischer, 1995), however we
13 chose to focus on the negative “self-conscious emotions”; guilt and shame. Whilst pride is a
14 positive moral emotion, embarrassment although not distinct from shame, is often difficult for
15 people to separate (Crozier, 2014). We also chose to include “annoyance” a negative but not self-
16 conscious non-moral emotion and “feeling bad”, a more general feeling for when people cannot
17 specify a distinct emotion. Our objective was to explore individuals’ feelings of guilt, shame,
18 annoyance and feeling bad when taking on the perspective of each role, and further establish any
19 effects of gender, age or personality traits. We hypothesised that shame and guilt would be
20 greater when taking on the role of the agent compared to the victim and that these moral
21 emotions heightened when the harm was intentional. We further hypothesised a distinction
22 between guilt and shame based on the perspective with agents feeling more guilt and victims
23 feeling more shame.

1 **Materials and Methods**

2 **Participants**

3 We recruited two hundred healthy volunteers (as described previously in Bland et al., 2016¹).
4 Inclusion criteria were as follows: 18-50 years old, no previous or current psychiatric
5 disorders,, no significant head injury, no current use of medication known to affect mood or
6 cognition, no first degree relatives suffering from any psychiatric disorders, smoking less than 5
7 cigarettes per day, drinking less than the UK government guidelines for weekly alcohol intake
8 and fluent in English. The Brief Symptom Inventory (Derogatis and Melisaratos, 1983) and the
9 Mini International Neuropsychiatric Interview (Sheehan et al., 1998) were administered to
10 participants who were excluded if they met the criteria for any psychiatric diagnosis. This study
11 was approved by Research Ethics Committees at the University of Manchester and the
12 University of Cambridge.. Participants were reimbursed for their time and travel expenses.

13
14 Data from 199 participants were analysed due to one participant's data failing to download.
15 Participants' mean age was 26.66 years (SD = 9.81) and a mean Wechsler Test of Adult Reading
16 (WTAR) score of 112.18 (SD = 6.29). The sample consisted of 99 male and 100 female participants,
17 half of whom were educated to degree level.

18 **Experimental procedure**

19 Prior to the visit, participants completed five questionnaires online: Big Five Personality
20 Inventory (John et al., 1991), Eysenck Personality Inventory (EPQ: Eysenck and Eysenck, 1991),
21 the Barratt Impulsivity Scale (BIS-11: Patton et al., 1995), the UPPS-P Impulsive Behaviour Scale
22 (Whiteside and Lynam, 2003) and the trait section of the State-Trait Anxiety Inventory (STAI:
23 Spielberger et al., 1970). On the day participants further completed two current mood state
24 questionnaires: Profile of Mood States (POMS: Shacham, 1983) and the state section of the STAI

¹ The present paper presents reanalysed material distinct from Bland et al (2016)

1 (Spielberger et al., 1970). Wechsler Test of Adult Reading (Wechsler, 2008) was used to
2 estimate participants' IQ. Participants were seated in a in a quiet testing room and completed
3 the task on a touchscreen laptop (Dell XT3) using PsychoPy software (Peirce, 2007). The moral
4 emotions task was administered as part of the EMOTICOM neuropsychological test battery
5 (Bland, et al 2016).

6

7 **Moral Emotions Task**

8 The task uses cartoons to depict 14 everyday moral scenarios which were partially adapted
9 from previous approaches that used text based vignettes to convey the scenarios (Seara-
10 Cardoso et al., 2016). Half of the scenarios depicted intentional harms (e.g. the agent blames the
11 victim for the agent's breakage) and the other half unintentional (e.g. the agent loses the victim's
12 dog). Participants were asked to imagine how they would feel in the situation and rate the
13 following emotions: guilt, shame and annoyance on a 6-point scale ranging from "not at all" to
14 "extremely" and feeling bad on a scale of 6-point scale ranging from "bad" to "good".
15 Participants were shown each scenario twice, once as the *victim* and once as the *agent* of the
16 harm. The task lasted approximately 13 minutes (Figure 1).

17

18

Figure 1: Figure to show the moral emotions task

19 **Analysis**

20 All statistics were computed with SPSS statistical software (IBM, Version 20.0). Post-hoc
21 analyses were performed for significant main effects using Bonferroni correction. Ratings from
22 the moral emotions task were normalised from the 6-point likert scale to values ranging 0-1.
23 Bad ratings were reversed scored. Data were then entered into a 4(moral emotion: guilt vs
24 shame vs annoyance vs bad) x2(agency: victim vs agent) x2(intentionality: intentional vs
25 unintentional) repeated measures General Linear Model (GLM). Gender was entered as a
26 between subjects factor. A violation of the assumption of sphericity was indicated by Mauchly's

1 test [$\chi^2(5) = 43.10$], therefore the Greenhouse–Geisser correction was reported for the repeated
2 measures ANOVA. The assumption of homogeneity of variance for t-tests were assessed using
3 the Levene statistic which showed one significant violation ($p < 0.05$) for agent guilt and was
4 therefore degrees of freedom were adjusted accordingly.

5
6 Two-tailed Pearson's correlations were used to relate performance on the tasks to personality
7 measures in order to assess how ratings are associated with other psychologically relevant
8 characteristics, as well as age, IQ and years in education. The statistical significance of all
9 correlations were corrected for multiple comparisons ($0.05/n$; n = number of task variables)
10 and subsequently significant levels set to $p < 0.003$. Cohen's d effect size was calculated as
11 Cohen's $d = (M_2 - M_1) / SD$ difference. With 199 participants we had 90% power to detect
12 differences between conditions of $d = 0.23$ at $p = 0.05$ (two-tailed). Split-half reliability was
13 computed using the Spearman-Brown formula (Wilson, 2010) after randomly splitting items in
14 each condition into parallel forms. All Split-half reliability coefficients were greater than 80
15 (ranging from 0.82 to 0.90).

16

1 Results

2 There was a significant 2-way agency x emotion interaction [$F(2.31, 454.92) = 104.09, p < 0.001, \eta_p^2 = 0.35$] (Figure 2). Post-hoc analyses revealed significant effects of emotion for both the
 3 victim [$F(1.86, 366.94) = 1920.68, p < 0.001, \eta_p^2 = 0.91$] and agent conditions [$F(1.67, 329.21) =$
 4 $634.90, p < 0.001, \eta_p^2 = 0.76$]. When participants took on the perspective of the victim they felt
 5 significantly more shame compared to guilt [$t(198) = 14.29, p < 0.001, d = 0.10$] and significantly
 6 more annoyance compared to both guilt [$t(198) = 50.00, p < 0.001, d = 3.54$] and shame [$t(198)$
 7 $= 41.14, p < 0.001, d = 2.92$]. However, when the participant took on the perspective of the agent
 8 they felt significantly more guilt compared to shame [$t(198) = 12.39, p < 0.001, d = 0.88$] and
 9 significantly less annoyance compared to both guilt [$t(198) = 28.45, p < 0.001, d = 1.28$] and
 10 shame [$t(198) = 24.08, p < 0.001, d = 1.70$]. Feeling “bad” ratings were not significantly different
 11 from ratings of annoyance when taking on the role of the victim [$p = 0.20$] and not significantly
 12 different from guilt ratings when taking on the role of the agent [$p = 0.41$].

14

15 **Figure 2: Bar chart with standard error bars to show ratings for guilt, shame, annoyance**
 16 **and bad from both the victim and agent perspective**

17

18 Intentionality

19 When considering the role of intentionality there was a significant 3-way interaction of agency x
 20 emotion x intentionality [$F(2.34, 461.16) = 22.0, p < 0.001, \eta_p^2 = 0.10$]. Post-hoc analyses
 21 revealed significant effects of emotion x intentionality for both the victim [$F(2.40, 473.24) =$
 22 $60.91, p < 0.001, \eta_p^2 = 0.24$] and agent [$F(1.89, 372.00) = 52.49, p < 0.001, \eta_p^2 = 0.21$] conditions.
 23 When participants took on the perspective of the victim they showed significantly greater
 24 ratings of moral emotions when the harm was intentional compared to unintentional; guilt
 25 [$t(198) = 3.93, p < 0.001, d = 2.78$], shame [$t(198) = 15.70, p < 0.001, d = 1.11$], annoyance [$t(198)$
 26 $= 6.86, p < 0.001, d = 0.49$], and bad [$t(198) = 9.45, p < 0.001, d = 0.67$]. However, when the

1 participant took on the perspective of the agent there was no significant difference of
 2 intentionality in guilt [$p = 0.39$] or bad ratings [$p = 0.31$], but participants expressed greater
 3 shame [$t(198) = 2.74, p < 0.01, d = 0.19$] and less annoyance [$t(198) = -7.80, p < 0.001, d = 0.55$]
 4 for intentional harms.

5

6 **Figure 3: Bar chart with standard error bars to show ratings for guilt, shame, annoyance**
 7 **and bad separated by intentionality from both the victim and agent perspective**

8

9 **Effects of gender, age, IQ and personality variables**

10 When considering the role of gender there was a significant 4-way gender x agent x
 11 intentionality x emotion interaction [$F(2.34, 461.16) = 5.83, p < 0.001, \eta^2_p = 0.03$]. Post-hoc
 12 analyses revealed a significant gender x emotion x intention interaction when taking on the role
 13 of agent [$F(1.89, 372.00) = 7.76, p < 0.001, \eta^2_p = 0.04$]. Females, when identifying as the agent,
 14 showed significantly greater guilt [$t(174.89) = 4.02, p < 0.001, d = 0.10$] and shame [$t(197) =$
 15 $3.15, p < 0.01, d = 0.12$] regardless of intentionality. When taking on the role of the victim, the
 16 significant gender x emotion x intention interaction did not survive Bonferroni correction for
 17 multiple comparisons [$F(2.40, 473.24) = 3.27, p = 0.04, \eta^2_p = 0.02$] and further post hoc tests
 18 showed that females did not differ from males in guilt [$p = 0.60$], shame [$p = 0.36$], annoyance [p
 19 $= 0.20$] and bad ratings [$p = 0.28$], regardless of intentionality.

20

21 **Figure 4: Bar chart with standard error bars to show ratings for guilt, shame, annoyance**
 22 **and bad separated by gender**

23

24 We also investigated the relationship between moral emotions, age and IQ. We found that older
 25 participants felt more annoyance [$r = 0.23, p < 0.001$], however, we observed no significant
 26 correlations with IQ [all $p > 0.05$].

1

2 We found that EPQ Psychoticism was significantly correlated with ratings of agent guilt [$r = -$
3 $0.34, p < 0.001$], agent shame [$r = -0.37, p < 0.001$] and agent bad [$r = -0.33, p < 0.001$] regardless of
4 intentionality. EPQ-Psychoticism however did not significantly correlate with moral emotions
5 associated with taking the role of the victim [all $p > 0.10$]. We also observed that EPQ-
6 Neuroticism positively correlated with agent shame regardless of intentionality [$r = 0.24,$
7 $p < 0.001$], as did victim annoyance [$r = 0.24, p < 0.001$].

1 Discussion

2 Moral emotions have been shown to depend critically on attributions of causal agency such as
3 understanding who carried out a social action and why they did so (Zahn et al., 2011). Here, we
4 have demonstrated agency and intentionality-dependent experiences of guilt, shame, annoyance
5 and feeling “bad”. We show that when taking on the role of agent, participants feel greater levels
6 of self-blaming emotions, shame and guilt compared to annoyance, whereas when taking on the
7 role of victim, participants feel more annoyance. Moreover, levels of shame are greater than
8 guilt when identifying with the victim whereas participants report greater feelings of guilt
9 compared to shame when identifying with the agent. Our results further show that when
10 participants took on the perspective of the victim they showed significantly greater guilt, shame,
11 annoyance and bad ratings when the harm was intentional. However, when the participant took
12 on the perspective of the agent, ratings showed greater shame and less annoyance but no
13 significant difference of intentionality in guilt or bad ratings.

14

15 Our results are consistent with previous findings that support the idea that different types of
16 moral emotions such as guilt and shame can be distinguished by agency. For instance, when
17 considering their own wrongdoings, people report more guilt than shame which may facilitate
18 reparative actions (Schmader and Lickel, 2006). Guilt is therefore thought to be an adaptive
19 emotion promoting moral and prosocial behaviour (Tangney et al. 1992) and thus preventing
20 people from committing transgressions. However, when individuals consider others’
21 wrongdoings directed at them, they feel more shame than guilt which is thought to provoke a
22 desire to hide or leave, aimed at insulating oneself from negative evaluation (Schmader and
23 Lickel, 2006).

24

25 In the present study we also show the effect of intentionality on moral emotions. It has long
26 been understood that whether an action is performed intentionally or not informs our moral

1 judgment of that action (Young et al., 2006). For example, embarrassing someone intentionally
2 is morally worse than doing so accidentally. Our findings suggest that intentional harm
3 heightens moral emotions from the perspective of the victim. Interestingly, when taking on the
4 role of the agent, intentional harms specifically increase shame but not guilt ratings suggesting
5 that intentionally causing harm to someone increases feelings of a more “public” emotion such
6 as shame, perhaps from potential public exposure and disapproval. By contrast, an
7 unintentional harm does not elicit such shameful feelings.

8
9 There was also a clear effect of gender in the present study. We observed that females had
10 heightened feelings of guilt and shame when taking on the role of the agent. This finding is in
11 line with previous findings suggesting that gender affects the intensity and frequency of moral
12 affective experiences (Lutwak et al., 2001). Females are reportedly more likely to experience
13 guilt and shame while also engaging in more prosocial/reparative behaviours than men (Else-
14 Quest et al. 2012; Lutwak et al., 1998; Lutwak and Ferrari 1996). We found no significant
15 gender effects for annoyance and feeling bad. When taking on the role of victim, however,
16 females showed increased feelings of all four moral emotions suggesting clear gender
17 differences in moral emotions regardless of intentionality. This set of findings may be useful in
18 understanding gender differences in treatment outcomes, particularly in terms of self-blame
19 biases and their suggested link to a vulnerability to depression (Green et al., 2013).

20
21 The findings from this study also show that personality variables such as psychoticism and
22 neuroticism are linked to moral emotions. We observed that agent guilt, shame and feeling bad
23 were negatively correlated with psychoticism, a personality trait typified by aggressiveness,
24 interpersonal hostility and shares a number of core neuropsychological deficits with
25 psychopathy (Corr, 2010). Indeed, people who display psychopathy traits are less likely to feel
26 guilt, shame and remorse for their actions (Seara-Cardoso et al., 2012). These individuals may
27 not lack the ability to compute moral judgments *per se*, but instead fail to generate the negative

1 affective states that usually inhibit harmful actions towards others, such as guilt (Seara-Cardoso
2 et al., 2016). We also observed that ratings of agent shame were significantly correlated with
3 Neuroticism which has long been associated with heightened reactivity to negative emotional
4 stimuli (Costa and McCrae, 1980) and brain areas implicated in neuroticism are those that have
5 been previously associated with moral emotions (Canli et al., 2004).

6

7 Together our findings support the role of emotion in moral scenarios. This role is important in
8 considering emotional impairments commonly found in a range of psychiatric disorders and
9 how they influence the way individuals approach judgements about morality. For instance,
10 individuals with psychopathy have been found to show a lack of remorse and guilt for their
11 wrongdoings, as well as a lack of empathy for the victim (Hare et al., 1991). However, they do
12 not appear to lack an ability to understand that an action is wrong from a societal perspective
13 (Cima et al., 2010). By contrast, individuals with obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD, Rachman
14 1993; Stewart and Shapiro 2011) often experience an exaggerated sense of guilt and
15 responsibility, which can be largely inappropriate in the context, and is positively related to
16 severity of symptoms (Salkovskis et al., 2000). Indeed, “feelings of guilt” is a core symptom of
17 major depression: feelings of worthlessness or excessive or inappropriate guilt nearly every day
18 (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). Further, delusional ideation was found to predict
19 shameful feelings as a result of intentional harms to the victim (Savulich et al., 2018). Therefore
20 affective responses to moral situations are likely to be impaired in a range of psychiatric
21 disorders therefore highlighting the need for future studies in patient groups.

22

23 Whilst the present study provides novel insights into the relationship between moral emotions
24 and personality, there are a number of limitations. First, the task assessed only two moral
25 emotions; guilt and shame and it is unclear how other important moral emotions such as pride
26 or embarrassment would be modulated by agency, intentionality, gender and personality in this
27 task. Second, the data reported is from a cohort with a limited age range and a mean age of only

1 26 years. Finally, static cartoons are only able to depict quite simplistic moral scenarios and
2 therefore are unable to capture the full complexity of moral situations.

3

4 In conclusion, using this novel test of moral emotion, we have demonstrated agency and
5 intentionality-dependent experiences of guilt, shame, annoyance and feeling bad, which are
6 sensitive to both gender and individual differences in personality. These moral emotions are
7 increasingly recognised as powerful determinants of decision-making and by highlighting the
8 differential emotional experiences that help guide social behaviour, we can begin to better
9 understand potential targets for therapeutic interventions.

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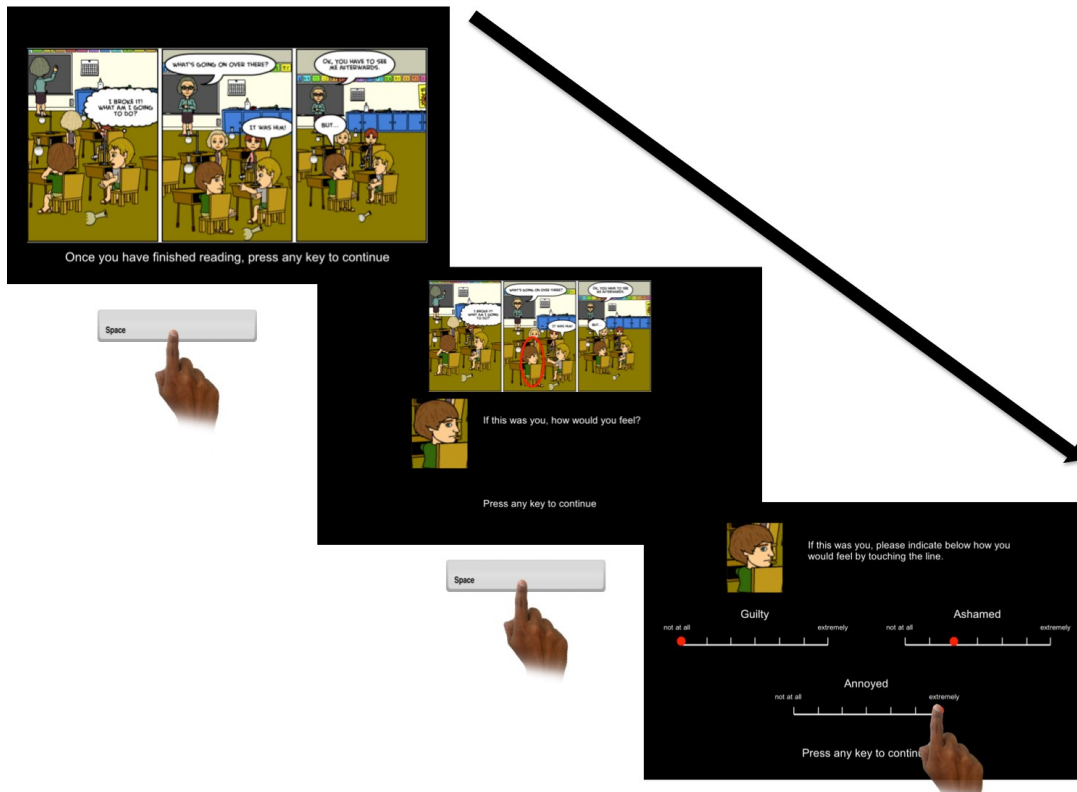


Figure 1: Figure to show the moral emotions task

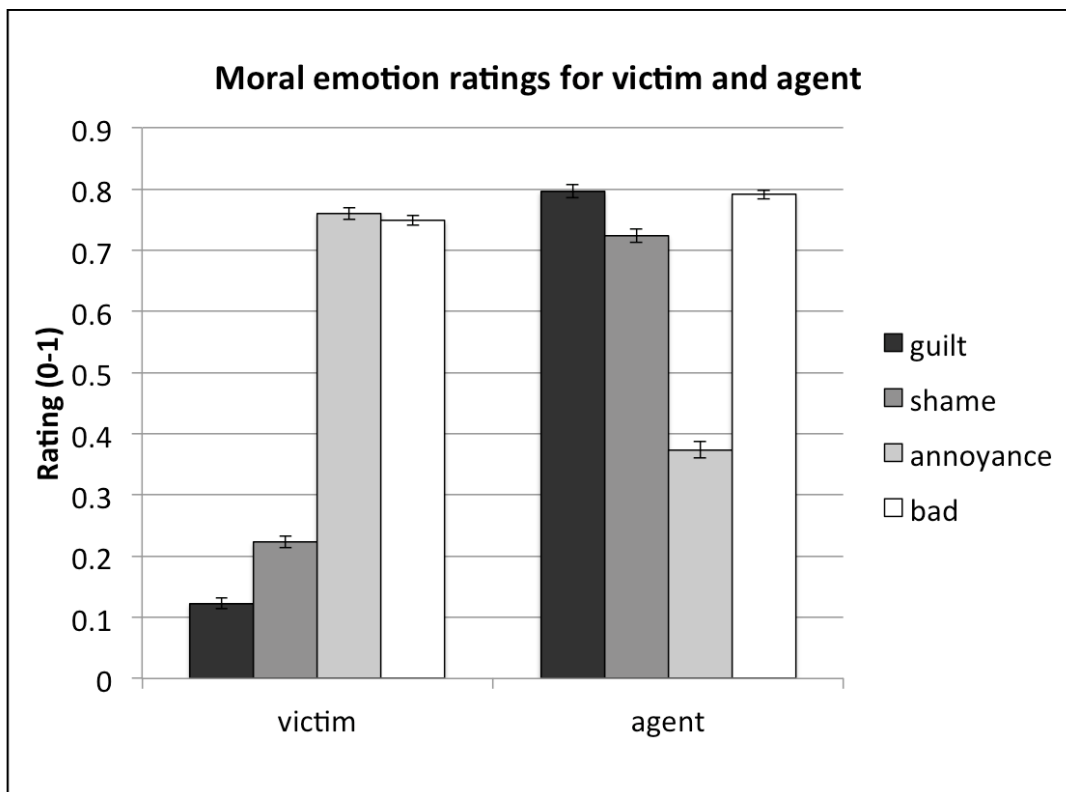


Figure 2: Bar chart with standard error bars to show ratings for guilt, shame, annoyance and bad from both the victim and agent perspective

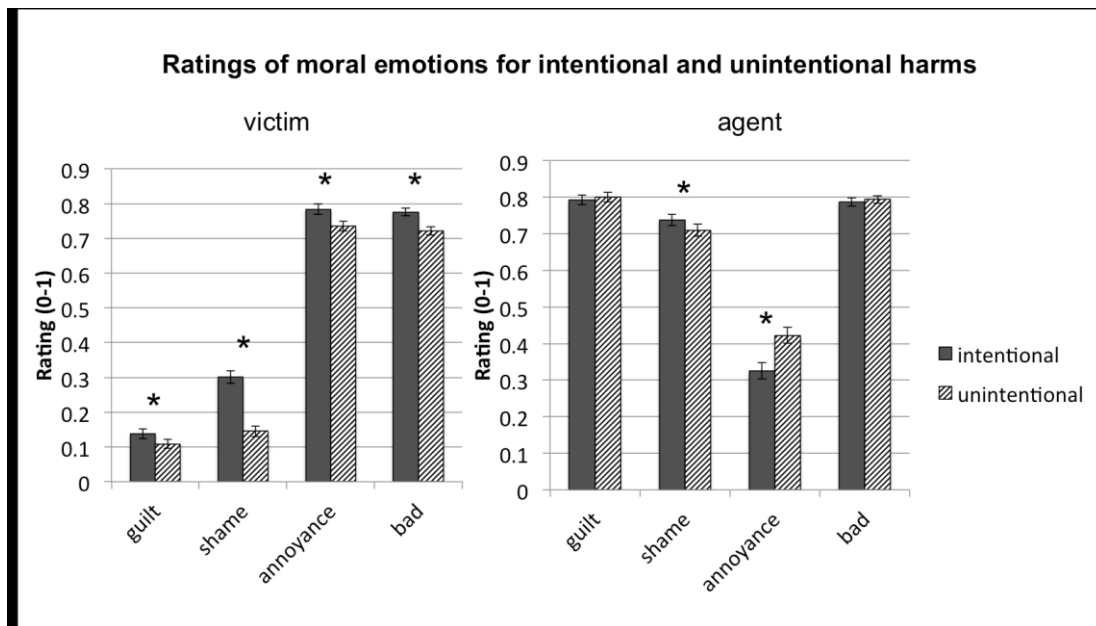


Figure 3: Bar chart with standard error bars to show ratings for guilt, shame, annoyance and bad separated by intentionality from both the victim and agent perspective

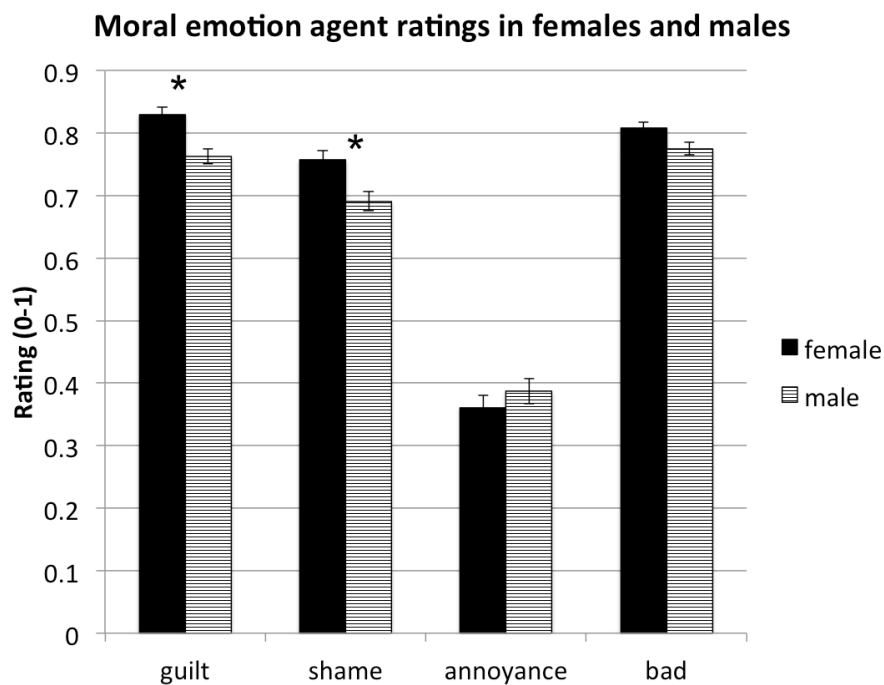


Figure 4: Bar chart with standard error bars to show ratings for guilt, shame, annoyance and bad separated by gender