

## Moral Reasoning, Parental Sex Attitudes, and Sex Guilt in Female College Students

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*Forty-eight female college students completed the Mosher Forced-Choice Guilt Inventory, the Rest Defining Issues Test, and the Family Attitude and Communication Scale in order to study the relationship between sex guilt, moral reasoning, and perceived parental sex attitudes. Analysis of variance indicated that Stage 4 moral reasoners had significantly higher sex guilt scores than Stage 5 reasoners. There was also a significant interaction effect between moral reasoning and perceived parental sex attitudes with respect to sex guilt, with Stage 5 reasoners from permissive family backgrounds having very low levels of guilt. The findings suggested that there is an overall negative relationship between sex guilt and moral reasoning, supporting prior studies. However, the relationship between sex guilt and permissive/restrictive family background is more complicated. Paradoxically, more advanced Stage 5 reasoners seemed more influenced by family sexual attitudes than Stage 4 reasoners. The authors offer an explanation for this finding and stress the importance of moral reasoning as a variable in understanding sexual attitudes and behavior.*

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**KEY WORDS:** sex guilt; moral reasoning; family sexual attitudes.

### INTRODUCTION

Mosher (1961) has defined guilt as "a generalized expectancy for self-monitored punishment for violating or anticipating the violation of internalized standards of socially acceptable behavior." Mosher (1961; 1966) has operationalized this definition by developing various forms of self-report in-

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ventories that measure an individual's level of guilt. Within these guilt scales, three areas of guilt have been delineated: sex guilt, hostility guilt, and morality-conscience guilt. Sex guilt, the particular type of guilt of interest in this study, deals with guilt about sexually related thoughts and behaviors and has been correlated with many other sexual influences and behaviors in a person's life.

There have been many studies of the variables associated with sex guilt. For instance, it was found that an individual's sex guilt linearly increased as a function of religious affiliation (Langston, 1973). A study of college students (Mosher and Cross, 1971) found that high sex guilt was associated with less sexual experience, and, in general, less of a tendency to participate in certain sexual acts such as intercourse, cunnilingus, and petting to orgasm. It has also been shown that sex guilt affects the learning of sex-related information (Galbraith and Mosher, 1970; Schwartz, 1973).

One relationship, which has been discussed but rarely studied, is that between sex guilt and an individual's home atmosphere during childhood, especially how open or permissive the parents were about sex. In general, it has been found that parental restrictiveness or permissiveness affects the social and cognitive development of the child (Hetherington and Parke, 1979). It has also been stated (Crooks and Baur, 1980) that people feel guilty about sex because of the attitudes their parents conveyed to them. College students who felt their parents had negative attitudes toward sexuality also had higher sex guilt and expected punishment for engaging in such behavior (Kelley, 1979; 1981).

Mosher's definition of sex guilt is basically a social learning theory restatement of the concepts of personal morality and an individual's reactions to moral transgressions. Gerrard and Gibbons (1981) note that for most people, sexual behavior involves decisions about moral dilemmas, and their choices have moral consequences. These consequences may include guilt, depending partially on moral reasoning. For example, an individual refraining from premarital intercourse because of a fear of being caught and punished by parents would not be expected to experience guilt as defined by Mosher, while an individual refraining due to a belief that premarital intercourse is wrong would be more likely to experience guilt. Thus there should be an association between sex guilt and type of moral reasoning.

Based on Piaget's (1932) outline of a formal logical model of cognitive development, Kohlberg (1963) proposed a corresponding system of development of moral reasoning. It consists of three levels, each containing two stages, which progressively define the basic moral concept to be more integrated, more differentiated, and more universal. Each stage is defined by a different relationship between the child and society's rules and expectations, and employs different sets of logic and values.

The first level Kohlberg (1976) describes is pre-conventional reasoning. In Stage 1, individuals base their moral decisions on the avoidance of punishment and the voice of authority. In Stage 2, moral decisions are determined by what is fair or equal and by following rules when someone's interest may be satisfied immediately. The second level, conventional reasoning, is characterized by moral decisions based on the expectations of others, especially those of authorities. Stage 3 reasoners conform to the stereotypical "good" child and live by such tenets as the Golden Rule. In Stage 4, one conforms to law and order and places importance on meeting obligations and maintaining society's rules. The third level is principled reasoning, where one defines values in terms of self-chosen principles. Stage 5 individuals value rights such as life and liberty and believe in rules for the welfare and protection of all people. In Stage 6, individuals are concerned with the equality of human rights and the respect for people as individuals. According to Rest (1976), about 90% of college students should be at Stage 4 or above. For this reason, the present study concerns itself with only these stages.

There is some prior research on the relationship between sex guilt and level of moral reasoning. D'Augelli and Cross (1975) have shown that sex guilt peaks at Stage 4 and is significantly lower in both Stages 3 and 5. Stage 5 reasoners are presumed to have lower sex guilt than Stage 4 reasoners, because at Stage 5, personal values based on principles of liberty and group welfare determine what is right or wrong; therefore, most Stage 5 reasoners would be more tolerant and less guilty with respect to sexuality. At Stage 4, where one is oriented toward authority and fixed rules, which do not openly condone many sexual acts, a person is likely to feel more guilt. Gerrard and Gibbons (1982) found a significant negative relationship between sex guilt and moral reasoning Stages 1 to 4. In this study, moral reasoning stage was determined by evaluating hypothetical sexual dilemmas rather than the general hypothetical moral dilemmas used by D'Augelli and Cross (1975) and Rest (1979).

In summary, it can be said that sex guilt is an important variable since it is related to many experiences and values of individuals. Although it has been suggested that family environment and level of moral reasoning may be associated with sex guilt, as yet there are no studies that analyze their joint effects.

The purpose of this study was to determine the relationship between sex guilt, level of moral reasoning, and the nature of perceived attitudes and communication about sex within the family of origin. Based on the prior discussion, it was hypothesized that (i) Stage 4 reasoners would have a higher level of sex guilt than Stage 5 reasoners, and (ii) subjects from a more sexually restrictive family would have a higher level of guilt than those from

a more sexually permissive family. In addition, this design allowed for evaluation of the joint effects of the two variables; however it was not clear whether the variables would be interactive or cumulative in their relation to sex guilt.

## METHOD

### Subjects

The subjects were 63 college women from undergraduate psychology courses who volunteered to participate for extra course credit. Subjects ranged in age from 17 to 22 years.

### Procedure

Subjects attended testing sessions in small groups. They were told that the study concerned relationships between sex guilt, family atmosphere, and reasoning about social problems and were asked to complete three inventories to measure these variables. The Mosher Forced-Choice Guilt Inventory (Mosher, 1966), the Defining Issues Test (Rest, 1979), and the Family Attitude and Communication Scale (based on the Parent Evaluation Scales, Cooper, 1966) were administered in random order. Subjects also completed a short questionnaire asking for age, social class, religion, race, and prior sex education courses.

Subjects were eliminated who did not score at Stage 4 or higher in moral reasoning ( $n = 4$ , which confirms the distribution of college students mentioned earlier) or who did not pass the consistency checks ( $n = 5$ ) (Rest, 1979). The remaining 54 subjects were divided into two groups based upon a median split of the family attitude scores (median = 45.5), with high scores indicating relative restrictiveness. Each group was then divided again by their moral reasoning stage scores, yielding four groups. Since the statistical analysis required equal cell frequencies, subjects in each group were eliminated randomly to leave 12 subjects in each of the four groups; 6 subjects were eliminated on this basis.

### Measures

#### *Forced-Choice Guilt Inventory*

This inventory assesses sex guilt, morality-conscience guilt, and hostility guilt. Because only the sex guilt score was necessary for this study, only those

items were administered. Scoring is based on a present-absent system, which correlates over .99 with the original, more complex weighted scoring system (O'Grady & Janda, 1979). This inventory is widely used as a measure of guilt and meets most measurement criteria for psychometric stability (Abramson *et al.*, 1977).

### *Defining Issues Test*

This test is based on Kohlberg's developmental theory and uses his stages to describe an individual's level of moral reasoning. Stage determination is based on the subject's judgment of stage-prototypic statements, which were derived from defined characteristics of each stage. Correlation between this test and Kohlberg's stage assignment is about .70. Test-retest reliability of the Defining Issues Test is in the high .70s, and Cronbach's alpha index of internal consistency is also in the high .70s. This measure has proven to be a useful measure of moral judgment (Rest, 1979).

### *Family Attitude and Communication Scale*

This test, largely devised by the senior author, consists of statements concerning perceived family attitudes and communications about sex. Subjects respond on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. Cronbach's alpha index of internal consistency is .74. This scale was based partially on the Parent Evaluation Scales (Cooper, 1966), which consists of two scales, one for mother evaluation and one for father evaluation. The pertinent items from the original scales were combined into one scale, and more statements to assess family attitudes and communications about sex were added to form the Family Attitude and Communication Scale. The scale included such items as:

When I was growing up, I was prohibited from seeing movies with sexual content.

My parents made reading material dealing with questions children have about sex and other aspects of growing up available to me.

My parents made it clear to me that they believe premarital sex is wrong.

### *Covariate Measures*

Subjects' social class was determined by the Two-Factor Index of Social Position (Hollingshead, 1957). Subjects were also asked about prior sex education courses. If they had had such a course, they were asked to rate the approximate length on a 3-point scale and to rate, on a 5-point scale, the balance

between anatomy/physiology and emotional aspects of sexuality taught in the course. The latter scale went from only anatomy/physiology (1) to emphasis on both anatomy/physiology and emotional aspects of sexuality (5). These two scale scores were multiplied together to yield one score which combined the course length with the breadth of the course content. The resulting scores ranged from 1 to 15, with a 1 representing a very brief course on anatomy/physiology and a 15 representing a long course involving both physical and emotional aspects of sexuality.

## RESULTS

A two-way analysis of covariance with stage of moral reasoning (Stage 4 vs. Stage 5) as one variable, and degree of family sexual permissiveness (high vs. low as determined by median split) as the other variable was used to examine sex guilt across the groups. Because the results revealed that the covariates of age, type and length of sex education courses taken, and social class had no significant relationship with sex guilt scores between the groups, a two-way analysis of variance was performed without the covariates. These results revealed a significant effect of moral reasoning stage as well as a significant Moral Reasoning  $\times$  Perceived Family Attitudes interaction effect on sex guilt (see Table I). The main effect of perceived family sexual attitude was not significant.

As shown in Table II, the mean sex guilt scores for Stage 4 reasoners was 10.87, significantly higher than the Stage 5 reasoners' mean of 5.87,  $F(1, 44) = 11.23$ ,  $p < .005$ . This confirms the first hypothesis. The mean sex guilt score of subjects from a sexually permissive family was 7.21 and from a sexually restrictive family was 9.54. This difference was in the expected direction but was not significant. Thus, the second hypothesis was not confirmed. Since there was a significant interaction effect,  $F(1, 44) = 4.75$ ,  $p < .05$ , the significance of the differences between the individual group means

**Table I.** Analysis of Variance: Sex Guilt  $\times$  Moral Reasoning and Parental Sex Attitudes

| Source of variation   | <i>df</i> | <i>MS</i> | <i>F</i>          |
|-----------------------|-----------|-----------|-------------------|
| Main effects          | 2         | 182.67    | 6.84 <sup>a</sup> |
| Moral reasoning (M)   | 1         | 300.00    | 11.2 <sup>a</sup> |
| Parental attitude (P) | 1         | 65.33     | 2.45              |
| M $\times$ P          | 1         | 126.75    | 4.75 <sup>b</sup> |
| Error                 | 44        | 26.71     |                   |

<sup>a</sup> $p < .005$ .

<sup>b</sup> $p < .05$ .

Table II. Mean Sex Guilt Scores

| Moral reasoning | Parental sex attitudes    |                           |                           |
|-----------------|---------------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------|
|                 | Permissive                | Restrictive               | Total                     |
| Stage 4         | 11.33<br>( <i>n</i> = 12) | 10.42<br>( <i>n</i> = 12) | 10.87<br>( <i>n</i> = 24) |
| Stage 5         | 3.08<br>( <i>n</i> = 12)  | 8.67<br>( <i>n</i> = 12)  | 5.87<br>( <i>n</i> = 24)  |
| Total           | 7.21<br>( <i>n</i> = 24)  | 9.54<br>( <i>n</i> = 24)  | 8.37<br>( <i>n</i> = 48)  |

was evaluated by a Newman-Keuls test. Subjects in the Stage 5 relatively permissive family attitude group had significantly lower sex guilt scores than subjects in all of the other three groups ( $p < .05$  when compared to the other Stage 5 group,  $p < .01$  in the other cases). The differences between the Stage 5 relatively restrictive family attitude group and both Stage 4 groups were in the predicted direction but were not statistically significant.

Pearson product-moment correlation coefficients were calculated between sex guilt and moral reasoning, sex guilt and perceived family sexual attitude, and moral reasoning and perceived family sexual attitude. A significant negative relationship was found between sex guilt and moral reasoning stage,  $r = -.42$ ,  $p < .005$ , and a marginally significant positive relationship was found between sex guilt and restrictive family attitude,  $r = .23$ ,  $p = .056$ . However, when correlation coefficients were calculated between sex guilt and perceived family attitude within moral reasoning stage groups,  $r = .59$ ,  $p = .001$  for Stage 5, and  $r = -.18$ ,  $p > .10$  for Stage 4. Thus the relationship between sex guilt and perceived family sexual attitude was much stronger within Stage 5 than it was overall. No significant relationship was found between moral reasoning stage and perceived family sexual attitude,  $r = -.13$ ,  $p > .10$ .

## DISCUSSION

Hypotheses about relationships between sex guilt, moral reasoning, and perceived family sexual attitudes were partially supported. There was a significant correlation between sex guilt and moral reasoning ( $r = -.42$ ,  $p < .005$ ) and a marginally significant positive relationship between sex guilt and perceived family sexual attitude ( $r = .23$ ,  $p = .056$ ). The analysis of variance also found a significant interaction between stage of moral reasoning and perceived family sexual attitude with respect to sex guilt.

The results concerning the relationship between moral reasoning and sex guilt supported the findings of D'Augelli and Cross (1975) and Gerrard

and Gibbons (1982). Subjects oriented at the law and order stage (Stage 4) were significantly higher in sex guilt than those subjects oriented at the social contract stage (Stage 5). Since, in general, society does not openly approve of the wide variety of sexual activities which in fact occur in a college population, it is not surprising that law and order reasoning is associated with higher sex guilt than reasoning based on interpersonal contracts. Stage 5 reasoners, on the other hand, are not so influenced by society's values and develop their own standards of right and wrong by which to live, thus reducing the effects of external judgments of right or wrong. Therefore, their sex guilt scores are generally significantly lower.

The analysis of variance did not support the second hypothesis, and only a marginally significant positive correlation was found between sex guilt and perceived family sexual attitudes, where a high family attitude score indicates relative restrictiveness. This finding was rather puzzling, since one would expect theoretically that permissiveness/restrictiveness of family background would be related strongly to sex guilt. However, the significant Moral Reasoning  $\times$  Family Background interaction suggests that this relationship may be moderated by the stage of moral reasoning, so that only in Stage 5 reasoners is there a significant relationship between sex guilt and perceived family sexual attitudes. This phenomenon might be explained by the influence of societal values in the different stages. In Stage 4, societal values are extremely influential, to the extent that they diminish parental influence on sexual attitudes. In Stage 5, however, the individuals are not as responsive to general extrafamilial societal values. However, in coming to decisions regarding acceptable and unacceptable sexual behaviors, they may fall back on the moral values and ideals they acquired previously within their families of origin. The paradox suggested by these findings is that the higher the moral reasoning stage in college students, at least for Stage 4 and 5 reasoners, the more their level of guilt is tied to their family attitudes. This finding contradicts the theoretical and commonsensical notion that moral development and decision making move in a linear fashion away from social and parental influence toward independent, rational choice.

Since this study involved three variables and no causal model could be tested, there are alternative explanations of the findings that cannot be ruled out with these data. For example, Gerrard and Gibbons (1982) found sex guilt to be negatively related to sexual moral reasoning and to sexual experience. They suggested that sex guilt may limit sex experience, that limiting sexual experience allows the person to avoid the moral reasoning associated with that experience, and that their avoidance in turn limits moral development on these specific sexual issues. They further suggest that level of moral reasoning may not be consistent from one set of moral dilemmas to another, so that an individual could be a Stage 5 reasoner with respect to cheating



on an exam but a Stage 4 reasoner with respect to sexual dilemmas. Since our study used a general measure of moral reasoning, and since family attitudes could affect children's sexual experience, it is possible that a measure using specific sexual dilemmas and controlling for sexual experience could have produced different results.

In spite of these limitations, the present study supports both D'Augelli and Cross (1975) and Gerrard and Gibbons (1982) in finding a strong relationship between sex guilt and moral reasoning, and it considerably enhances our understanding of that relationship by showing that perceived family sexual attitudes strengthen the degree of association. Also as noted above, moral reasoning and/or family sexual attitudes might be associated even more strongly with sex guilt if sexual moral reasoning were assessed. It is striking that such a robust relationship was found with the general measure of moral reasoning used in this study.

Many people studying sexual attitudes and behavior make the assumption that parental attitudes are an important consideration in the shaping of children's attitudes and values about sexuality, but there has been very little research on the importance of moral reasoning and moral development as possible influences on sexual attitudes and behavior. The present findings and the findings of D'Augelli and Cross (1975) and Gerrard and Gibbons (1982) suggest that there are significant associations among moral reasoning, sex guilt, sexual experience, and decisions about sexual activity. For these reasons, moral reasoning is a variable well worth pursuing in future research concerning sexual attitudes and behavior.

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