

## **Parallel returns: Feelings, temporality and narrative in the experience of guilt**

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### *Abstract:*

This paper tentatively sketches out a model of guilt. It is based on hermeneutic-phenomenological analyses of five men's accounts of feeling guilty and is informed by phenomenological and narrative theory. The model maps how guilt unfolds through time in a looping, iterative manner. Initially, guilt feelings are overwhelming and immediate, such that time seems to collapse. The guilt process then unfolds into two 'parallel returns'; temporal loops wherein an individual first *relives* their guilt feelings (a 'bodily return') and then *re-narrates* the experience (a 'narrative return') in numerous iterations, in an attempt to make sense of what has happened. The final phase maps the resolution: as the narrative becomes more adequate, sense-making becomes easier, and bodily experience is incorporated into over-arching life narratives in a process of synthesis. When this happens, the experience shifts from feeling 'stuck' to progression. Mapping guilt in this way offers insight into the interplay between temporality, feelings and narrative in this particular experience, but may also

provide a framework to consider how it is possible to 'work through' other difficult emotional experiences.

*Keywords:* Guilt, temporality, narrative, embodiment, phenomenology, feelings

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“The reality of a life lived in time is a perpetual weaving of fresh threads which link events and lives – threads that are crossed and rewound, doubled and re-doubled to thicken the web.”

(Lloyd, 1993, p144)

This paper sketches out a model of the interplay between the felt, temporal, and narrative aspects of a guilt experience. The model, in the form of an experiential map, illustrates how guilt unfolds as a looping, iterative process. It was derived from experiential and theoretical material, including hermeneutic-phenomenological analyses of five first-person accounts (Boden, 2013; Boden & Eatough, 2014), and phenomenological and narrative theory. As Lloyd (1993) suggests above, lived experience is the product of weaving together disparate aspects through an iterative process that unfolds in time. The map described in this paper focuses on how the experiential threads of feeling and narrative are interwoven temporally in a unique way that accounts for what it is like to feel guilty. However, we hope mapping this process of shuttling between felt and narrative experience may shed light on how other difficult emotional experiences unfold, are understood, and are ‘worked through’.

### **1. What is guilt? A brief orientation**

There are many types of guilt: legal, technical, ontological, theological (Baumeister, Stillwell & Heatherton, 1994), as well as feelings of guilt, which are the focus of this paper. Guilt is a common phenomenon and generally speaking we know what it is like to feel guilty (Savoie, 1996), yet, empirically guilt is elusive (Baumeister, Stillwell & Heatherton, 1995), and conceptual definitions of guilt remain contentious. Most researchers agree that guilt is a dysphoric feeling (e.g. Harder & Zalma, 1990), which can be chronic and pathological, or mild and transitory (Kubany & Watson, 2003). Guilt is

connected to having done, thought or intended to do something that puts one in the wrong (Baumeister et al., 1994; Kubany & Watson, 2003), and involves violating “a personally relevant moral or social standard” (Kugler & Jones, 1992, p318). Sabini and Silver (2005) argue that the feeling-state of guilt is just what guilty people feel, however, others criticise this, arguing there is no straightforward link between being and feeling guilty (Tangney, Mashek and Stuewig, 2005; Kubany & Watson, 2003; Kugler & Jones, 1992; McGraw, 1987). It is the *perception* of responsibility that is more important than a guilty act (Baumeister et al., 1994).

Guilt is generally not defined as a ‘pure’ emotion, in the way that anger, fear, sadness and joy are (Elison, 2005), although it is often seen as part of the ‘family’ of self-conscious emotions, along with shame, embarrassment and pride (Fischer & Tangney, 1995). Instead, guilt is often defined as a mixture of interrelated affective and cognitive aspects, alongside contextual factors such as relationship to the person harmed, proximity of the event and the irreparability of the harm caused (Elison, 2005; Kubany & Watson, 2003; Lewis, 1993; Roseman, Wiest & Swartz, 1994; Tracy & Robins, 2004; 2006). Most empirical research on guilt in general populations is quantitative and conceptualises it as either prosocial, in that it reinforces interpersonal relationships through prompting reparative acts (e.g. Tangney & Dearing, 2002) or as maladaptive, in that it is intrapsychically damaging and painful (e.g. Harder, 1995).

There has been very little qualitative enquiry into guilt, but those studies that do exist (Brooke, 1985; Karlsson & Sjöberg, 2009; Lindsay-Hartz, 1984; Lindsay-Hartz, de Rivera & Mascolo, 1995) problematise the prosocial/maladaptive dichotomy and illuminate the subtle and complex nature of the lived experience. Together the qualitative literature suggests that far from straightforwardly taking responsibility for their actions, people are often confused about what they have done, why they did it, and what they should do

about it, with reparation sometimes being seen as either impossible, or not the best choice of action. Guilt is painful, and associated with threats to self-identity as people struggle to reconcile their actions with their image of themselves, as well as to relationships, as people may hide aspects of themselves and become secretive. Our qualitative studies sought to explore guilt from an idiographic perspective and in the context of romantic relationships, paying particular attention to the embodied, relational and idiosyncratic ways that guilt may be lived. In this paper, we situate those accounts within phenomenological and narrative theory in an attempt to offer a model that comprehensively describes the guilt experience, as it is lived.

## **2. Mapping the guilt process**

Emotion experiences do not necessarily unfold in a straightforward or rational manner (Goldie, 2003), and guilt seems to be a particularly looping, tentative and jolting experience. We become out of sync with the authentic unfolding of time as guilt ties us to a past that we are unable to influence or alter (Fuchs, 2003). It is our awareness of this fixity and our impotence that feels so distressing, and which reveals guilt as the “real insight into the irreversibility of lived time” (Buber, 1957, p116).

[Figure 1 about here]

In guilt, time is experienced as either retarded, as the focus shifts to the past, to what has been done, and to reliving the difficult feelings of guilt through looping, haunting experiences, or it is accelerated, as the focus shifts to the future and an impatient desire to progress. It is this *asynchronism* (Fuchs, 2001; 2005) that we attempt to sketch out in this experiential map (see Figure 1). The map describes how after the subjectively perceived ‘wrong-doing’ of the guilt event, guilt feelings are initially experienced as an overwhelming immediacy, which seems to exist outside of narrative time, as an

'atemporal' moment. This is quickly followed by two 'parallel returns'; temporal loops where guilt is first re-lived (the 'bodily return') and then re-narrated (the 'narrative return'), until finally, and if possible, synthesis between the felt and narrative loops is reached through a process of trial and error. Once the narrative is able to take account of the bodily feelings, progression is possible as the person makes meaningful sense of their experience by embedding it within the context of their *lifeworld*.

Data from five men's accounts of guilt in the context of romantic relationships was used to develop this map, but in this paper we will primarily draw on one case study – Sam. Data were originally collected through semi-structured interviews that specifically sought to encourage participants to attune to their bodily memories of the events, and to describe these as richly as possible (e.g. metaphorical verbal accounts, abstract drawings). The analytic approach drew on hermeneutic-phenomenological principles, shuttling between empathic and questioning hermeneutic strategies and embodied-reflexive practices. This resulted in idiographic and group-level analyses that were structured thematically and drawn inductively from the data, which included the spoken, drawn, and embodied-reflexive material. The analysis presented in this paper represents an extension to the initial analysis. The aim was to deepen understanding through a rigorous dialogue with the conceptual literature, namely phenomenological and narrative theory. In this way, the final stage of analysis was abductive in that it integrates empirical findings with existing conceptual accounts from within and outside psychology in order to create a novel theory, in this case our tentative 'map'. For fuller details of the methodological approach see Boden & Eatough (2014), and for detailed findings see Boden (2013). Ethical approval was granted, all names used are pseudonyms, and some details have been obscured to protect the participants' identities.

Sam described an experience of guilt relating to ending a relationship with a woman, Gemma, five years prior to our interview. They had lived together for three years. Sam had been trying to “*forge*” a relationship with Gemma at a time when he was also meeting new friends. He felt he had to work hard to establish his relationship with Gemma, yet he easily developed new friendships, and these soon fell into competition. He and Gemma spent more time apart and ultimately decided to end the relationship, with Gemma moving back overseas. As he said goodbye to Gemma at the airport, Sam suddenly felt overcome by a deep guilt. Later, sitting in his empty flat, he realised how little he had put into making the relationship work, and making a home with her. He started to think about all the times he had made her cry, and realised he should have been there for her more often, especially as she had no family in the country. He saw himself as selfish, and described feeling deeply guilty about how he had treated her. Sam’s experience, as an illustration of the experiential map of guilt, is set out below.

### *2.1 Atemporal guilt feelings: Immediacy and ‘nowness’*

The initial experience of guilt is characterised by bodily feelings that are experienced as a) immediate, b) overwhelming, c) dislocating, and then reflectively as d) senseless. Firstly, the guilt experience is described as immediate and engulfing, it “*takes over really, really quickly*” (Edward), being experienced as “*just suddenly [coming] in at once*” (Sam). It seems as though participants experience guilt-feelings as fast and strong, flooding them. Secondly, they feel overwhelmed by these feelings, which are “*intense*” and “*overriding*” (Jamie), so much so that they experience a sort of dissociation, as Luke describes how guilt “*sort of washed over me*”, leaving him “*empty*”. Or they seek ways to numb the feelings by “*getting smashed*” (Sam) or burying their head in the sand (Luke). Thirdly, guilt-feelings involve a sense of dislocation from the world, instability and uncertainty. Edward is “*at a loss*”, Luke felt “*weakened*” and like he was “*sinking*”, Jamie described how “*everything had dropped away*”, and they struggle to know “*where you’re*

*going to go*” (Luke) or *“what quite to do”* (Michael). Fourthly, at the reflective level, this disruption in the participants’ lifeworld, experienced bodily as the sudden and intense felt-states of guilt, is echoed in their attempts to make-sense of the experience. Participants struggle to find logical or rational ways to explain the sudden shift in their embodied-being-in-the-world. They describe the experience as not making “much sense” (Michael), as being “muddied” and “blurred” (Luke), or “uncertain” (Edward), and as feeling “out of control” (Jamie and Michael). It seems that they lack clarity about the events and their corresponding guilt-feelings.

This is illustrated in Sam’s account where these four strands (immediacy, overwhelm, dislocation and senselessness) interweave in his account and are exemplified in the metaphors he uses to describe his experience. Guilt hit Sam suddenly and unexpectedly, flooding him with feelings (‘immediacy’ and ‘overwhelm’). He describes being in *“the foulest mood”*, a pervasive and abhorrent feeling. Sam’s guilt is a potion of different emotional and cognitive experiences all at once: *“honesty, regret, sadness and anxiety, all in portions in the same bottle”*. He describes an altered sense of being-in-the-world (‘dislocation’), going *“into guilt mode”*, where his shoulders drop and roll forward, his chest hollows inwards and he feels tense and *“physical”*. His stomach collapses inside his body as if he is in free-fall, while his throat tightens. Sam identifies these localised internal body-parts because they are lifted into his awareness through his guilt. His stomach, breathing and heart which were once ‘transparent’, are now ‘corporealised’. Fuchs, (2003; 2005) suggests this shift from transparency to corporealisation happens in a number of states (depression, fatigue, shame etc.) and causes the body to become objectified and an obstacle to fluid being-in-the-world. Sam’s body is brought with immediacy into the here-now and his sense of himself is disrupted; he feels choked, he struggles to breathe with the tightness in his chest. His body no longer volunteers access to the world, but is experienced as separate and isolated (Fuchs, 2003).

Guilt has invaded Sam's most vulnerable bodily spaces under his rib-cage, and has secretly eaten away there. He uses two metaphors to capture this diminishment:

*Like if you opened a banana that looks, looks like it was brand new, but it was all black and minging inside, this, it's definitely something that eats away in the centre.*

Whilst on the outside, Sam appears unscathed, inside guilt has made him rotten. This is a feeling-led spontaneous and idiosyncratic variation of a normative metaphor of moral decay. The feelings of badness in his rotten banana embody his self-disgust, capturing the self-condemnation that can be part of guilt (Solomon, 1993). In a second equally powerful image, Sam again contrasts a superficially good self, with the suddenly guilty self:

*If you imagine a 3D cube, a perfect 3D cube made of paper, and then it was sucked in in the middle, an' then it just all crumpled inwards. [...] It was all like 'yep fine' then suddenly something shrinks in, and all no more have you got straight lines and perfect corners, you're just c-, crunched in and not the perfect shape that you were before. It's like the middle gets sucked in.*

Sam initially identifies with the "perfect 3D cube". A cube connotes certain qualities; it is rigid, defensive, impenetrable, inflexible. The absolute symmetry provides an image of Sam as solid, strong, dependable, rational – all traits associated with hegemonic masculinity. Yet, then Sam says it is a paper cube, and suddenly the image shifts revealing his vulnerability. Sam used his hands to demonstrate the cube's imagined surface and sharp straight sides. Then his fingers began to twist and curl slowly as his perfect cube collapsed. The totality of this crumpling is emphasised in his "all no more". In his guilt-mode, he is ruined.

Emotion experience can involve specific, localised bodily feelings (collapsed stomach, tight throat), diffuse whole-body experiences (the foul mood), and more background bodily feelings, such as Sam's sense of crumpled rottenness (Colombetti, 2011) that indicate his relation to the world, as vulnerable, broken. As Sam's body becomes explicit and his feelings overwhelm him, his temporal experience also collapses:

*"it was like just being given a sort of shot of everything you've just - all your guilty memories just suddenly came in at once."*

Guilt seems to attack Sam forcefully, and suffuse him with painful memories, coming into his body "*all at once*", like a "*shot*" – sudden, violent, unexpected – flooding his present.

Time can be seen as the "basic scaffolding" of our lives (O'Brien, 2007, p212). It is not so much a 'thing' as a "dimension of our being", an *unfolding* that giving both meaning and direction to our lives (Merleau-Ponty 2002/1945, p483). In guilt, initial painful feelings are experienced as immediate, permanently present, and 'stuck', with no chance of progression (Wyllie, 2005). Wyllie (2005, p176) suggests that in painful experiences "one suffering moment begins to resemble the next suffering moment", indicating that the unfolding nature of lived time is arrested. This quality of 'nowness' is also seen in phenomenological descriptions of physical pain, which suggest the subject is pulled into the present where the pain exists (Leder, 1990). In this moment, the temporal horizon is experienced as very narrow; the immediacy of the overwhelming feelings is all that there is. Something similar, momentarily, seems to happen in guilt.

If the unity of temporality (past-present-future) is altered, then the coherence and meaningfulness of one's life is also disrupted (Stolorow, 2007) and it can feel as though the world has been 'turned over' (Munro & Belova, 2009). Participants described feeling overwhelmed, being unable to act, and feeling disoriented and confused. Feelings were amorphous. They appeared "*suddenly*" and "*didn't feel anything like it was supposed to*", suggesting the body is "surprised, perhaps, by being caught 'out of line'; by finding itself at odds in a 'world' that had been predicted or anticipated" (Munro & Belova, 2009, p92).

This pattern of overwhelm and confusion echoes that seen in trauma responses, though by drawing this analogy we are mindful of the distinction between traumatic events, such as abuse or accident, and the 'emotional trauma' (Stolorow, 2007) of *some* guilt experiences. However, O'Brien (2007) lists disorientation, confusion, feeling uncertain and losing track of time as typical of traumatic responses, and these were echoed in participants' accounts. In emotional trauma the feeling of stability and predictability in the world is altered, causing being-in-time to be reorganised or disorganised, and the sense of self to be disrupted, and this is reflected in participants' metaphoric descriptions of going to a "*dark place*" (Michael), or feeling like being spun around in a "*whirlpool*" or lost at sea (Jamie). Whereas in a traumatic experience "time comes undone" as the structural and organising principles of time collapse in the face of one's imminent death (O'Brien, 2007, p209), in guilt it is one's moral integrity and a sense of self as familiar and predictable that feels threatened. In both, there appears to be a moment whereby "[e]vents become suspended in time or perhaps more accurately out of time" (O'Brien, 2007, p212). This atemporal moment cannot be adequately narrated; it is a feeling that things "*just went on*" and were "*on-going*" (Edward) without order or structure.

Narratives, the stories we tell about an episode of our life, and our lives as a whole, are particularly sensitive to temporal order (Polkinghorne, 1988). When an experience no longer seems to follow the usual temporal sequence (past-present-future), we struggle to fit it within our pre-existing understandings. Narratives provide anchors that help us keep hold of our shifting world (Munro & Belova, 2009) and in guilt we become unanchored from these familiar narratives. When the prevalent narrative no longer seems to fit, there is a 'narrative gap' - a break or interruption. This gap is registered in the body as the shift from a feeling of being at-home-in-the-world to a feeling of being dislocated and unstable, as was seen in these accounts. With no adequate narrative at hand, events and feelings cannot immediately be integrated in a way that makes sense of what has happened (Polkinghorne, 1988). Participants are caught, momentarily, in an atemporal experience of disruption and confusion, a narrative gap ('senselessness'). In these cases though (unlike some traumatic events) the experience is quickly brought back into temporal order through agentic action. Participants describe a "*clarification moment*" (Luke) that enabled them to find ways to "*put it together rationally*" (Edward). They took particular actions, for example, making a decision to keep a secret, apologising, lying, or confessing, which seemed to allow lived and chronological time to fall back into some semblance of synchronicity.

## *2.2 Parallel Returns: Reliving and re-narrating guilt*

After the initial overwhelming and dislocating atemporal guilt feelings, the guilt experience unfolds into two parallel temporal loops: experiences of *return*. The first is a 'bodily return', a re-living of the bodily guilt feelings over and over again. The second return, which traces a parallel arc, is a 'narrative return', which through reflective narrative accounts attempts to encompass and make sense of the bodily return.

### *2.2.1 Reliving guilt feelings: The bodily return*

Without an adequate narrative to organise temporal structure into past-present-future, the person remains tied to their guilt feelings, and psychologically 'stuck'. Participants described how guilt remained eternally present, *"always in the back of my mind"* (Luke). Guilt is *"always there"* (Jamie), something that is hard to get rid of, something to *"dwell on"* (Alan). As chronological time passes, the feelings fade into the background, only to pop up again unexpectedly whenever they are triggered back into existence, which can be *"every time I see her"* (Luke).

Sam's guilt feelings disappeared into the background to a certain extent, but remained present for about *"three years, constantly"*, suddenly flooding his body again with any trigger. Whenever this happened, Sam felt he has been transported back in time to the moment he first experienced guilt. Receiving an SMS message makes him feel like he is stuck on a perpetual rollercoaster: *"oh, oh dear, here we go again - now I feel bad"*. The reoccurrence of the guilt feelings takes on a certain familiarity, and with every mention of Gemma, Sam's guilt is experienced anew:

*Every time somebody asked how she was, or mentioned, or if she sent me a Christmas card, or if it was her birthday, I, instead of remembering the good things, I just got the guilt, the sinking, the same sinking feeling as I had in the airport, exactly the same. [...] It was like unlocking all this stuff that maybe I didn't want to think about at the time, because I thought I was right to do what I wanted to do. Then each time the guilt turned up, a new memory came with that.*

Sam's experience is enduring, and has a loopy, repetitive nature, as triggers cause him to remember and re-experience his guilt-feelings. His feelings and sensations transport him back in time, and with each wave of guilt-feelings, there is a secondary "unlocking" of memories. Merleau-Ponty (2002/1945) describes remembering as reaching back and

*reopening* time. In guilt though, the past is not opened voluntarily, but experienced as an unwelcome intrusion. Paradoxically, whilst guilt feelings are experienced as eternally present and “*always there*”, they feel unexpected and disconcerting. Feelings that ‘belong’ to the past keep “*cropping up*” anachronistically. Luke describes being “*haunted*” by his feelings; there is an otherworldliness in the way these feelings are revisited upon the body without agency, and they seem not only to belong to another time, but to another person, as the guilt behaviour itself feels alien and strange (Lindsay-Hartz, 1984; Karlsson & Sjöberg, 2009).

Through multiple iterations of this bodily return, guilt is experienced as a permanent presence hovering at the fringes of awareness, ready to flood the body anew at any moment. It feels as if the guilt will “*never go away*” (Luke). Without a narrative to integrate and make sense of the feelings, they are relived over again (O’Brien, 2007). Sam describes this as a feeling of “*here we go again*”, a ‘Proustian rush’ where the past appears to exist in the present (Munro & Belova, 2009), but as an invasion to be ‘braced against’ rather than a nostalgic pleasure:

*That feeling kept cropping up when I was having a beer or something, so as soon as I started to go into relaxing mode, an’ er, perhaps relaxing too much, getting drunk or something, that feeling kept turning up.*

Every time Sam’s guard was down, the guilt feelings returned, intruding into present awareness and demanding engagement. The bodily return is involuntary, uninvited and unpleasant. It amounts to a “past that won’t stay past” (O’Brien, 2007, p211). It is unsurprising that Sam wanted to “*lose those feelings by any means possible*” and describes drinking to “*get rid of all the things [...] in my head*”. He is desperate to accelerate time and ‘move on’.

### 2.2.2 Re-writing guilt: The narrative return

The bodily return is unexpected and painful, yet it is rich with pre-reflective embodied meaning that seeks expression (Lloyd, 1993), so quickly a second loop, the 'narrative return', emerges. This re-writing loop attempts to "tame" the bodily experience (Reavey & Brown, 2006, p190) by forcing it into a narrative shape that permits understanding. Narrative is just one way of languaging experience, but it is particularly pervasive and central in our lives (Polkinghorne, 1988). Narratives help situate our experiences within our collective history (Merleau-Ponty, 2002/1945, p503) and form a bridge between lived and chronological time (Zahavi, 2012). They help us structure and make sense of our experiences, motivations and behaviours, and those of others. Narrative creates a cohesive whole by weaving together separate aspects into a unified meaning (Polkinghorne, 1988), which is temporalised, to say what happened and in what order (O'Brien, 2007). It is this temporal structuring of events, feelings and meanings, that allows us to make sense of emotional experiences.

There is a human need to create narrative, but finding a narrative that 'fits' the lived experience can be difficult. Initially, narrative attempts to impose order are infrequent and lacking (Goldie, 2003), but through a process of what Goldie (2000; 2003) calls *tâtonnement*, through trial and error, there is a tentative 'groping' towards the most adequate narrative form. Narration involves a complex process of moving cautiously within the hermeneutic circle, perhaps starting with some sense of narrative shape, but slowly becoming aware of new saliences that suggest further re-interpretation and reshaping (Goldie, 2003). The *tâtonnement* process is a *feeling for* a narrative that *feels right*: it is an embodied process.

In guilt, this narrative *tâtonnement* is complicated because the feelings, and the morally threatening nature of the circumstances, frequently lead the narrator to 'hide' parts of the experience, even to themselves, through self-deception and justification. Events and feelings are partially revealed and partially concealed with each re-narration, but are also disrupted afresh by the bodily return, which can be triggered unexpectedly. This iterative, interpretative process can be likened to a palimpsest, a parchment where one text has been erased to make way for new text, but through which the old text remains partially visible. With each narrative return, a new layer is added to the palimpsest, adjusted to incorporate the present context and the new perspective on the past. Nelson (2001, p76) describes narrative layers like these as a "tissue of stories", which also seems to capture the fragility of the narration process.

In narrating their guilt experiences, participants frequently shifted between, or layered, different narrative threads in their attempts to find a narrative that adequately fit their bodily experience. Our analysis identified four consistent narratives that emerged through the *tâtonnement* process:

- a) *I acknowledge I did wrong, but I was not myself*: narratives of diminished responsibility that excuse a behaviour
- b) *I acknowledge I did wrong, but the ends justify the means*: narratives that reframe and justify a behaviour
- c) *I acknowledge I did wrong, but I am no longer the same person*: narratives of self-development that distance the individual from a behaviour
- d) *I need external judgement on my behaviour*: narratives that function to elicit judgment from others and position the narrator as impassive

Sam's early attempts at narrating his guilt experience involved solely blaming himself, and this was accompanied by "constant" guilt feelings in the bodily return. Over three years of the *tâtonnement process*, a new narrative emerged, which acknowledged his wrongdoing, but also contextualised his behaviour within the interpersonal situation and emphasised how he has changed as a person. This new narrative suggests he has learnt from his mistakes and has a different, more mature, perspective.

Retrospectively, he distances himself from his early narrative (self-blame) by undermining it as "irrational thinking". His new narrative (shared blame and self-development) is given credibility through evidence that Gemma herself admitted some blame, and is given moral reinforcement through evidence that she is now happy (suggesting 'it's all worked out for the best'):

*"She was like, 'don't be stupid, I'm absolutely loving being over here, studying and, er, I was no angel to live with'."*

By accepting his own portion of blame, his narrative enables him to see himself as someone with integrity ("that's the honesty part of the mixture"), and as someone who is moral, who wants "to be a different person than that". With this he can distance himself from his guilty past, and draw a line between him then, and him now.

*Tâtonnement* usefully demonstrates how Sam tentatively engages with multiple narrative threads until he finds a narrative that 'fits', and can therefore be deemed successful. Goldie (2003) defines a successful person-narrative as having *coherence*, *meaningfulness*, and *emotional import*. A coherent narrative extracts "a configuration from a succession" (Ricoeur, 1990/1983, p66). It helps make sense of the person's actions at the time, allowing the listener (or thinker) "to grasp and make sense of

internal perspectives” (Goldie, 2003, p305). For a narrative to have emotional import, it must reflect the narrator’s new, external perspective upon events, showing their evaluation and emotional response to what happened. A sincere narrative will be infused with this new perspective, which will “shape and colour” it (Goldie, 2003, p306). Sam’s narrative works because it creates a balanced account of the multiple contextual factors, makes sense of his painful feelings, but allows him to maintain a positive sense of himself as mature and reflexive.

A successful narrative need not be perfectly seamless, as long as it manages to integrate any conflict, distance or estrangement that is part of the lived experience (MacKenzie & Poltera, 2010). Various strategies can form part of attempts to tell a successful guilt narrative, including duplicity:

“the possibility raises its head of a narrative that satisfies the narrator, that gives her emotional closure, but that is still deeply self-deceptive [...] We all know only too well of this possibility from our own lives: our own sometimes rather desperate efforts (conscious and unconscious) to put our past actions into an unreasonably favourable perspective” (Goldie, 2003, p314)

The narratives of guilt from these participants were, more often than not, riddled with ambivalence, contradiction, and apparent self-deception. Sam’s narrative was somewhat unusual in that it seemed to be the more successful of the four types identified. Most participants seemed to be stuck at the *tâtonnement* stage of the process, not yet having found a narrative that could completely take account of their felt experience. For example, Edward, whose account centred on his infidelity, claimed to have fully resolved his experience, yet his narrative was full of contradictions and confusions (it lacked coherence), and indicated apparent self-deception and concealment (it lacked a

convincing external perspective) rather than a 'working-through' of what had happened. (see Boden & Eatough, 2014 for a fuller account of Edward's experience). Sam's narrative, in contrast, indicated he had accepted some responsibility *and* described a sense of personal development suggesting a new, external perspective had been found and enabling a sense of progression.

### *2.3 Beyond the parallel returns: Synthesis and progression*

The final phase of the guilt experience involves *synthesis* and *progression*. The felt and narrative returns calibrate dialectically with one another towards synthesis. This forms a feedback effect (Goldie, 2000); the guilt feelings influence the creation of an adequate narrative, and the more adequate the narrative, the less intense or frequent the feelings. As the successful narrative is found, the bodily returns lessen and the painful felt experience juts and flickers less frequently through the narrative re-writes. The synthesis between bodily and narrative experience aids a coherent sense of body-self-world, which is more unified and less disrupted. When synthesis occurs, it is experienced as a temporal *progression*; a shift from feeling 'stuck' in never-ending looping returns, to experiencing something new, an insight in terms of self-understanding.

Through re-narrating his guilt experience into a story of self-development, Sam's guilt feelings eventually stop returning altogether and he experiences feelings of peacefulness:

*I thought here's a Gemma-feeling coming on, right, I'm thinking about Gemma, right brace yourself, this is going to be shit, erm, and it wasn't as bad anymore. Yeah and it just was lessened, and there was more the feeling of happy- happiness isn't the right word, but peacefulness rather than, and less of the stinging guilt, and,*

*a little bit there, but not the sting of it so much. To the point where, I saw her three months ago [...] an' there was none.*

When a narrative 'fits' (even if only loosely), the body that had been prominent and foregrounded, becomes 'transparent' again (Fuchs, 2005). This 'disappearance' happens as the body falls 'in line' with the successful narrative (Munro & Belova, 2009). Sam is able to find what Stolorow (2007, p26) describes as "a relational home" where experiences can be spoken, heard and understood. With this there is an affective experience of relief, calm or peacefulness, just as Sam describes. Successful guilt narratives may overcome dislocation and instability by enabling guilt feelings to make sense to others. However, the sense of dislocation in guilt is also an alienation from oneself; the experience of ambivalence about what has been done, the hesitation in not recognising one's behaviour as one's own, of not feeling familiar to oneself, or of not fully understanding one's own motivations or choices. In successful narratives, like Sam's, where the felt experience is synthesised within a temporally unfolding progressive narrative, there is the possibility to close this gulf. Sam was able ultimately to see guilt as something functional:

*"[guilt] makes you a better person, because you don't want that feeling, so you don't want to do things that will make you feel guilty. [...] the function is, I think, to make you more of the person you aspire to be."*

Through the reorientation provided by his self-development narrative, Sam can view this painful experience as something good, and integrate it into a positive over-arching life narrative. It is an aspirational story, where the protagonist grows into a better, more moral person. Successful narratives do not just structure the experience into a

meaningful shape, they have “instructional and directing properties” too (Munro & Belova, 2009, p90). They:

“demonstrate a meaningful succession of events. Things happen for a reason. And then they are over. Time passes. Things change. There remains open a possibility for recovery/redemption.” (O’Brien, 2007, p218).

To move beyond guilt is to find the emotional closure (Goldie, 2003); a meaningful way of embedding this particular emotion experience into the larger experience of which it is part, the *lifeworld*, and the overarching narratives of the individual.

### **3. Conclusions**

Drawing on first person accounts, we have argued for a theoretically and experientially informed model that attempts to map how guilt unfolds through time. Guilt feelings are experienced initially as atemporal and overwhelming, such that subjective experience of time is arrested. In this moment, the psychological pain of the guilt feelings is experienced as an eternal present, with no sense of progression into the future. As chronological time progresses, the individual is able to overcome this temporal collapse through agentic action (taking a decision, doing something) and guilt feelings shift into the background. However, guilt then unfolds into parallel returns as the experience is first relived, and then re-written in temporal loops. Guilt is relived, pre-reflectively, through a bodily return, as guilt feelings pop up unexpectedly. Guilt is experienced as intrusive and anachronistic. Secondly, in order to take reflective account of this painful and disorienting felt experience, a second temporal loop traces the same arc as the first in order to re-write the experience through a narrative return. Narratives attempt to make sense of the bodily feelings and to incorporate them into an overarching life-narrative, but these often stutter and struggle. Through the tentative *tâtonnement*

process, a narrative that can adequately contain the bodily experience may be found. This narrative may be one of forgiveness, maturity or self-development. For some this process may never reach a conclusion, but for others, like Sam, the synthesis of bodily experience and narrative results in progression. The individual no longer feels 'stuck' in an eternal return of intrusive, haunting guilt feelings, but is able to move beyond their guilt experience.

The development of a model of this type was made possible through our two-stage analytic process. The first stage was a multi-modal hermeneutic-phenomenological inductive approach that supported the collection of 'experience-near' accounts (Boden & Eatough, 2014). The second stage was an abductive analysis that enabled us to extend, broaden and deepen our initial findings through dialogue with the conceptual literature. Drawing on the work of Peirce, Tavory & Timmermans (2014, p5) suggest that abductive analyses involve "creative inferential process". In this way, the analysis is generative and aims to result in new theoretical insights, such as our model. This would not have been possible, we believe, if it were not for the strong phenomenological-hermeneutic commitment in the initial studies. The patient 'dwelling' in the data and expansive interpretative strategies enabled us to develop a strong foundation from which to leap into the philosophical literature without losing sight of the participants' lived experience.

Emotion experiences involve specific patterns of bodily feeling (localised and diffuse, foreground and background), particular experiences of lived time (accelerated, decelerated or arrested), and specifically formed narratives (more or less adequately accounting for felt experience and context). The model presented here rests on the understanding that lives unfold through time, first bodily at a pre-reflective level, through feelings that tell us about our relation to ourselves and the world, and secondly

through narratives that structure and temporalise lived experience. Despite our participants describing retrospective experiences, the combination of the initial methodology and the insights from narrative theory in the abductive analysis have enabled us to disentangle, at least to some degree, the complexities of how felt-sense and (re)narration are inherent in the guilt experience. When bodily experience and narrative find a way to calibrate that results in a synthesis, the person experiences a sense of closure and contentment. Experiences of body and time that had become prominent in the emotional experience, return to their transparent states. The person no longer finds themselves lost or caught out, but returns to experiencing themselves in a flowing, at-homelike engagement with the world. In this way, feelings, temporality and narrative play an interweaving role in the process of 'working through' a difficult emotional experience.

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