

Chapter V. Guilt

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Working draft

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This chapter is part of a book-length project that examines the experiences of twenty-five fathers and thirty-five mothers whose children have significant “problems” (i.e. learning disabilities, drug and alcohol addictions, mental health difficulties, and physical or developmental delays). In the past decade, a number of scholars have written about the intensive nature of contemporary childrearing ideologies and practices. Given this climate of “anxious parenting,” how do parents cope with the experience of having a child who is “less than perfect?” The paper at hand explores how mothers and fathers experience the guilt associated with having a “problem child.” It is a working draft and does not yet have a references page. For questions and comments, please contact me via email at aafranci@ucdavis.edu.

Lauren and I met for breakfast at a chain restaurant located directly off the highway near her home. Leaning on a cane in order to steady herself, Lauren was overweight and visibly tired. After ordering our food, I asked her to tell me about her family. Lauren, who also has an adult son, adopted her twin daughters soon after they were born in the Philippines. She and her husband were living and working there at the time, although Lauren returned to the United States with her daughters two years later. Now ten years old, both girls have what doctors call PDD, or Pervasive Developmental Disorder. Their speech is delayed, and they have learning problems that make it difficult for them to complete schoolwork in mainstream classrooms. Since experts widely consider PDD to be a neurological problem, and since Lauren’s daughters are adopted, I didn’t anticipate that guilt would be a salient feature of her experiences. However, when I asked Lauren if she ever felt guilty about the twin’s difficulties, she replied,

... my kids favorite show when they were little was Teletubbies. And the Teletubbies don't speak very clearly... and [my daughters] loved it, and they'd get up and dance with it and all that. And this is before they were identified to have any learning problems... in hindsight, maybe I shouldn't have let 'em watch Teletubbies. Maybe they [missed] the critical window for them to learn language. Maybe they're speaking Teletubby (laughs)... Same with Barney. They loved Barney. Maybe something [about that] purple dinosaur damaged their brain cells in some way (laughs).

At first, it seemed like Lauren was answering in jest, and I could not tell whether or not she took these musings seriously. As she continued, however, it became clear that she had a great deal of anxiety and self-doubt. She said,

Maybe I should have read more to them. Maybe we should have gone on nature hikes everyday... my daughters had cholic for nine months... were they deprived of nutrition that they needed when the brain was developing in a certain way? ...I always say, "Did I do enough?" Maybe we need to make another batch of cookies and they'll learn. Or instead of hauling them to therapy five days of week, we'll just do it [once a week]... and then [I think], I need to go out and find some other test or some other assessment for them to do. Maybe I'm just not doing enough to identify what it is that will help them learn.

Anyone who knows Lauren would be dismayed. She is a stay-at-home mother and has been very involved in her daughters' lives. In addition to seeking treatment for their disabilities, she has enrolled them in Girl Scouts, karate classes, and swim lessons. She has fought tirelessly against schoolteachers and administrators who believe that the girls should be placed in special education classrooms, and she does paid work for a local organization that offers support to parents whose children have special needs. Despite these efforts, she wonders if she does enough. She even feels guilty for not being more politically active. She wondered aloud,

Maybe I need to advocate more... I go through spells of being very involved in stuff outside of my children but in connection with special education stuff... I mean, I'd love to be one of these people where I got out there [and tried] to become politically active. And I know that's important. But I just can't be the one to carry the banner. Somebody else

has to do that... and that's guilt. I think that's one area that I have a lot of guilt over.

We know from previous scholarship that parenthood in the contemporary United States is characterized by anxiety and self-doubt (Warner 2005, Stearns 2003, Malacrida 2003, Hays 1996, Thurer 1994). As discussed in [an unwritten chapter], parents' guilt is linked to the perceived vulnerability of children (Stearns 2003, Zelizer 1985, Aries 1962), the proliferation of scientific and pseudo-scientific knowledge of childhood development (Stearns 2003), and the popularity of child-centered parenting methods (Stearns 2003, Hays 1996, Thurer 1994). The notion that parents are culpable for children's problems is conveyed to parents through child-rearing manuals, movies, and television programs.¹ As illustrated in the previous chapter, parents also encounter blame during their face-to-face interactions with strangers, professionals, family members, and friends. It is not surprising, then, that parents like Lauren feel guilty when their children have problems. But what is the social significance of such emotions? Do parents try to ameliorate guilt and self-doubt, or are these feelings inevitable when one has a troubled child?

In the words of Baumeister et. al. (1994), "guilt is something that happens between people rather than just inside them" (243). Guilt originates in social interaction, stemming from one's belief that that he or she has violated a social norm (Gecas 1997), harmed someone (Baumeister et. al. 1994), or benefitted at another's expense (Hassebrauck 1986). While people typically think of guilt as an undesirable emotion, social psychologists note that guilt encourages individuals to uphold social norms and compensate for the damage caused by their perceived transgressions (Baumeister et. al. 1994, Tangney 1990, Zahn-Waxler & Kochanska 1990). From this perspective, the expression of guilt indicates desirable qualities such as empathy, concern, and good will.

Put differently, “feeling guilty is a way of showing that one cares” (Baumeister et. al. 1994:247).

In the case of parents whose children have problems, it appears that guilt is a response to the taken for granted notion that parents are to blame for everything that happens to their children. Indeed, this has been the analytical focus of previous research. At the same time, a social psychological approach suggests that guilt is more than an emotional reaction. By expressing guilt, parents signify that they care for their children and the problems they face. Furthermore, guilt compels action, and parents often respond to self-blame in ways that reproduce dominant ideologies of child rearing. In Lauren’s case, for example, feeling guilty about not advocating on behalf of children with special needs indicates to herself and others that she cares about advocacy, even though she doesn’t have enough energy to become more involved. At the same time, her anxiety and self-doubt about caregiving urge her to constantly re-evaluate her parenting strategies as she continues to seek treatment and remains intensely involved in her daughter’s lives. In short, we must consider the possibility that guilt is one of the characteristics that qualifies Lauren as a “good” mother, as defined by contemporary American standards.

In the discussion that follows, I explore parents’ experiences with guilt and self-doubt. I begin by describing parents’ concern that they had caused their children’s problems. These data illustrate that any type of problem, regardless of its perceived origin, had the potential to cause guilt. I then discuss guilt management, noting that while medical and genetic labels did not necessarily protect parents’ from self-blame, sympathetic “experts” and disease or disability accounts sometimes ameliorated parents’ feelings of culpability. Next, I consider how parents’ guilt and anxiety about caretaking

serves as a form of signification, rather than a simple emotional response. While parents believed they should do everything possible to help their children, pervasive uncertainty and the proliferation of child rearing advice often made it impossible for them to do so. I hypothesize that the expression of guilt functioned to demonstrate parents' ongoing commitment to their children, even when they believed they had not "done enough" as parents. While most fathers expressed some degree of self-doubt, men appeared to spend less time dwelling upon these experiences than their counterparts. In the final section of this chapter, I draw from previous scholarship on gender and emotion work to discuss observed differences between mothers and fathers.

"What did I do wrong?": Self-Doubt, Guilt, and the Question of Causation

Children's problems led most of the parents I interviewed to question their child rearing abilities at one time or another, regardless of the child's age or type of problem. Mothers and fathers tended to describe self-doubt as inevitable, given the circumstances, and many wondered whether or not they had caused their children's problems. When I asked Andrea, for example, if she blamed herself for her daughter's truancy and excessive use of drugs and alcohol, she said,

I think you always wonder. "What did I do or didn't do that may have caused this? Did I miss something?" You always do... I grew up in circumstances way different. There were seven in our family. I thought my parents did a horrible job, [but] we all turned out really well, successful. And what's the difference? You know? What is the difference?

Matt, who I introduced briefly in the last chapter, has both a step-son with disabilities and a biological son with drug and alcohol problems. His comments regarding his biological son were similar to Andrea's. He stated,

I don't want to say it's my fault because it's not my fault... [but] I think you always go, "What can I do different?" or "What could I have done? At this moment in time, what could I have done differently?" And so, you never know... "What did I do wrong then to make him this way now?" ...I don't know. You just don't know.

The initial question of fault was typically followed by more specific questions about the things that parents might have done incorrectly. In the case of children who have congenital disabilities, mothers frequently questioned their prenatal care and whether or not they caused damage to their children in utero. Kathy, whose son has cerebral palsy, commented,

For a long time I blamed myself... I was like, "What did I do?" I was searching within my nine months of pregnancy and thinking, "Okay, what did I do wrong? Maybe when I did this," or, "Maybe I didn't drink enough water," or "Maybe I didn't exercise."

While it was typically mothers who worried about having done something wrong during pregnancy, one father thought that he might have caused his son's troubles by fighting too much with his ex-spouse while she was pregnant. When I asked Daniel if he had ever felt guilty about his eighteen-year-old son's ongoing learning problems, he said,

Yeah! Oh, absolutely... and I've thought about this from the womb. We never fought physically by any stretch. But we fought verbally all the time. Especially toward the end... the fighting was incredibly intense when [he] was in the womb. And I've thought, how did that affect him? I believe that, that it can and could... I felt guilty about that.

Instead of releasing parents from culpability, biological accounts of children's problems sometimes led to further self-doubt or guilt.² It was not uncommon, for example, for parents to feel guilty about passing along "bad genes." Joan believes that her son inherited a predisposition for mental illness from her side of the family, something that she used to feel bad about. She explained,

I felt that it was my fault. And the reason I thought it was my fault is because of my genetic background. This seems to be something that does affect the males in our family from the same father. The girls are fine, we're the strong [ones]... so I blamed myself for a long time.

Even in cases of adoption, genetic accounts did not automatically exempt parents from self-blame. Like Lauren, many adoptive parents wondered if they had done something wrong. Jen and her husband have two biological children and two adopted children. One of their adopted daughters, Hailey, had been diagnosed with Fetal Alcohol Syndrome, a developmentally disabling condition that occurs when a birth mother has consumed too much alcohol during pregnancy. Jen found it more difficult to connect to Hailey than with her other children, and it made her feel guilty, despite the FAS diagnosis. When one of Hailey's schoolteachers noticed a behavioral change, she asked Jen if anything was "going on at home." Jen recalled,

That really threw me, actually for days. Because then I thought, "It's all because it's been different with her!" ...it was horrible. It scared me. Because I thought, "Oh gosh, I'm not doing something right," you know? Yeah, I totally blamed myself. Oh, I was a mess.

Although it was less common, some parents specifically identified the bad parenting practices they believed contributed to their children's troubles. This was more likely to occur among the parents of teenaged children with emotional or behavioral problems, possibly because bio-medical accounts of teen rebellion and substance abuse are less widely accepted. Rachel, for example, believed that her daughter's suicide attempt and ongoing problems in school were partly the result of her and her husband's inconsistent rule-setting. She said,

We're being *horrible* parents to [my daughter]. We were much better parents to my [son] because we were more consistent... I don't mean horrible parents in terms of not being there to nurture her and stuff like

that. But I mean in terms of discipline and all the stuff that's really so important... we're *terrible* at it!

I interviewed Joel – Rachel's spouse – on a separate occasion, and he made similar comments. He added that he felt guilty about his and Rachel's marital problems, saying,

I do feel a little bit guilty that we've been such poor models for [our children] on how to have a non-dysfunctional marriage and household... we've screwed up royally, you know, in a lot of respects. Our limits have never been consistently enforced, and that's a big mistake. And I know that doesn't occur in every household. There are households where parents are able to be consistent. But not ours.

For some parents, guilt stemmed not from a perceived failure to discipline, but from a perceived over-involvement or over-investment in their children's affairs. Phil, who I introduced in the previous chapter, wondered if his son had gotten into trouble because he had placed too much pressure on him to achieve in sports. He stated,

Oh, it's been a year and a half, two years of guilt... I'm a huge sports fan. And I had a kid who was a pretty good athlete. And I've often asked myself, "Did I push him too much? Did he think that was the only thing that was important to me about him?" And I haven't gotten that impression from him through all of this. But there is constant guilt.

I interviewed Phil alongside his spouse, Mary. She felt guilty about their son's problems for similar reasons. She said,

I totally felt guilty. I was sure it was everything I had done wrong, though I didn't know what it was. If we had it to do over again, I know a lot of things I'd do different... [our son] was never abused or neglected or anything. My kids have always come first. Maybe *too* much... I just think that I've overindulged them.

Based on these accounts, it appears that all parents are at least susceptible to self-doubt, regardless of their children's ages or types of problem. Since some parents hold themselves accountable for actions that most would consider innocent and unintentional – such as the passing down of genetic predispositions – the possibilities for self-blame are

endless. Despite the ubiquitous nature of self-doubt, however, the experience of guilt was usually short-lived. Many of the parents I interviewed used the past tense when speaking of guilt. While most questioned their parenting, none believed in unequivocal terms that they had caused their children's problems. In fact, a few parents said they didn't experience any guilt at all, as I discuss in the next section. How do parents master guilt when self-doubt is so pervasive? How is it that some mothers and fathers do not seem to experience self-doubt in the first place? These are the questions that I now address.

“I felt no guilt”: Avoiding and Managing Self-Blame

A handful of parents stated that they had never doubted themselves or their parenting skills when it came to their children's troubles. One such participant was Carol, a mother whose thirteen-year-old son has Asperger's Syndrome. In the previous chapter, I noted that before her son had received a formal diagnosis, school teachers had blamed Carol and her husband for his problems. When I asked Carol whether or not she had internalized this blame, she responded in no uncertain terms. She said,

Oh, I felt no guilt. I think because of my training [as a special education teacher] and because I kept researching it and researching it. And finally I was beginning to get validated by other professionals. I was more angry.

In Carol's case, formal training, research, and the legitimation of experts allowed her to eschew guilt even when people suggested that she was at fault. Indeed, “expert” opinions helped a number of the parents I'd interviewed manage their self-blame. Joan, quoted in the previous section, said that her son's doctor assured her that she was not culpable. She also sought personal counseling in order to help her cope with her son's mental health

problems, and her own therapist persuaded her that she had been a good mother. Joan recalled,

...it took a lot of convincing from his therapist, the psychologist that did the testing... and my own therapist that I eventually ended up going to, that it wasn't my fault. That I am a good mother and I'm a loving mother.

Similarly, one mother wondered whether or not she could have encouraged her daughter's bisexuality. She later talked with a doctor of psychology who put her mind at ease. The mother said,

I asked a friend, who is a psychologist, I said, "Is the fact that she and I are physically so close, could this have had anything to do with her physical interest in women?" ...and he said "No, it doesn't work that way." And that was probably the only thing that I thought, "Did I encourage this somehow? Did I bring this on?" Because she and I are pretty much joined at the hip, real huggy and everything. And he said "No, that's not how it works." And that was probably the moment that I would have felt some guilt.

Like Carol, many of the mothers I interviewed had previous experience in education or childhood development. A majority also had conducted their own research about their children's problems, something that I discuss in more detail in [an unwritten chapter]. Based on the knowledge they'd accumulated, some mothers believed that certain labels or diagnoses would hold them more culpable than others. For example, Paula – whose eight-year-old son was eventually diagnosed with ADD – commented,

I was praying he wasn't emotionally disturbed. I was going, "Oh, God, I don't want to go down that road." ...I worked with emotionally disturbed kids during undergrad, and my guess is that their background was that they were sexually abused or something. And I thought, "No, that's not the case with my son. There's no abuse going on with him." So where's, where would this be coming from, being emotionally disturbed?

As stated above, medical and biological accounts did not necessarily protect parents from self-doubt or guilt. However, the former sometimes held them less accountable than the

latter. Paula's spouse, Mike, recalled how their doctor simultaneously diagnosed their son with ADD and assured them that their parenting skills were not to blame for their son's problems. Mike said,

Then it came time for the findings, and [the doctor] says, "Well the good news is it's not your parenting style. You're doing as well and more as can be expected... based on ten traits that are indicators of ADD/ADHD, [your son] has eight of 'em real strongly." And he says, "So considering he has eight of 'em real strongly, you guys are doing amazingly well."

In some cases, parents were faced with the choice between a medical diagnosis or an assault on their parenting practices. Given these options, they advocated in favor of labels or diagnoses that did not implicate them in their children's problems. Martha's daughter Amy, for example, had been struggling in school since kindergarten. The schoolteachers believed her daughter was simply unmotivated and implied that Martha and her husband weren't parenting her correctly. Martha, in contrast, believed her daughter suffered from a learning disability. She said,

It became really evident that this kid just was having learning problems. Numbers, everything was being flipped, dyslexic-type style... [she] couldn't handle the work... [but she] appeared to be not wanting to be bothered, lazy, you know, all kinds of labels... [the teacher kept saying], "She has the potential... she's able to do this, she doesn't want to be bothered... we expect more."

Having a child with a disease or disability may be preferable to having a child who is "lazy," since parents presumably have more control over the latter. Indeed, Coles (1987) argues that middle-class parents readily accept learning disabilities as an account for their children's problems because it releases them from blame. As I discuss in more detail below, however, medical accounts are often accompanied by new possibilities for guilt, often giving parents the sense that they haven't "done enough" on behalf of their children.

That being said, there were a few cases in which disease or disability accounts seemed to assuage parents' guilt completely. Cindy, for example, has five adult children. She has been a member of Alcoholics Anonymous for a number of years, and while she believes that all of her children struggle to some degree with substance abuse, she does not experience guilt. She explained,

It makes me sad that they might have the disease, but I can't control it. I didn't cause it, and I can't cure it... if I hadn't come to that, with the help of Al-Anon and my twelve-step group therapy, I wouldn't be able to live with myself.

As this quote demonstrates, organizations such as Alcoholic Anonymous sometimes had a strong influence on parents' understanding of their children's problems. In some cases, framing a child's problem in terms of disability or disease required a great deal of work, and parents' involvement in advocacy and support groups gave them access to ready-made accounts. As noted above, genetic "distance" did not automatically free adoptive parents from guilt. Nonetheless, a few parents did say that they did not feel guilty because their adopted children's problems had been genetically inherited. Sam's daughter is adopted, has ADD, and has struggled in school since junior high. When I asked him whether or not he had ever felt guilty about her problems, he replied,

There are indications in the literature that the problem is hereditary. And I know that I don't have it, and I know that [my wife] doesn't have it... so if [it is] hereditary, she got it from her birth mother's side or the father... so I suspect there is a direct correlation there... I think quite frankly that that's where it came from. That there is a correlation... I don't really think from a guilt perspective there could ever be anything... Because I know it didn't come from us. It's not possible to have come from us. It's something she was born with.

While it was less common, some parents held their teenaged children accountable for rebelliousness or drug and alcohol addictions. In doing so, they released themselves

from self-blame. Steve, whose sixteen-year-old daughter had become addicted to cocaine, believed that he had given his children every opportunity to succeed. His daughter, he said, had simply made poor choices. He mused,

Do I blame myself for her escalating into a daily cocaine user? Absolutely not... for parenting and how she was brought up, obviously in this whole equation, one is gonna hit on that subject matter. At least one should at some point. And we did. And to tell you the truth, I didn't spend very much time on it. Because I looked at her and said, "Wow." Life in [our town] was pretty good for this kid... It was pretty good for my oldest daughter. It was pretty good for my middle daughter. And it was equally good for my youngest daughter. She didn't have a brand new BMW in the driveway when she was sixteen, but she ended up with a decent used car. Better than the cars we got when we were kids. Excuse my language, [but] she was a kid in a nice area that had the world by the balls, okay? [She] made some *shitty* choices.

As I discussed in the previous chapter, children's problems sometimes threatened to associate their families with "undesireable" groups, such as poor people and people of color. While the parents I interviewed did not often use class-based narratives to ameliorate their self-blame, we can imagine that being able to financially provide for one's child helps parents to manage guilt when that child has problems. In any case, when parents were able to frame their children as responsible for their own problems, it made them feel less guilty.³

In the end, it was the firm belief that they had done their best that allowed most parents to eventually set aside guilt and self-doubt about having caused their children's problems. Andrea, quoted in the previous section, concluded,

It doesn't do any good to do that, to beat yourself up about it. I mean, I know in my heart that I tried to be the best mom I could. And that's all you can do, really. That's all you can do is try to be the best mom you can.

When mothers talked about “doing their best,” they were usually referring to the standards set by dominant child rearing ideologies. Such standards required them to spend a great deal of time, energy, and money working on their children’s problems. Martha, for example, said that she read so many books to her daughter that she would often forgo what she saw as her other obligations as a stay-at-home mother. She said,

I didn’t feel guilty because in my heart of heart I knew that I was giving her a great deal of support. We meant a lot to each other, and I knew that. I knew that we could get through it if we just kind of stuck together... we used to read. I read to her continuously. I mean, when the chips were down, we were on the couch reading. I mean (sigh), we had so many books, it was ridiculous... there were lots of dinners that weren’t made when my poor husband got home and was ready to eat because we had curled up in bed and we had been reading for hours.

As this quote illustrates, mothers sometimes managed or evaded guilt by mothering their children more “intensively” as described by Hays (1996). This inevitably raises the question, how much is enough? How do parents know when they’ve done their best? As I discuss in the next section, most parents found that even their best efforts were lacking in some way. This had to do not only with dominant parenting ideologies – which suggest that there should be no end to parents’ self-sacrifice – but also with medical uncertainty and the proliferation of treatment possibilities for children’s problems. Given this context, guilt not only compels parents to act on behalf of their children, but it might actually *substitute* for action as an expression of care when parents feel as though they have not “done enough.”

“We will know we tried awfully hard”: Guilt as Good Parenting

Until now, I have been discussing parents’ self-doubt and guilt about possibly having caused their children’s problems. Parents also worried a great deal about how they were responding to their children’s troubles and whether or not they were doing everything

they could to alleviate them. The fear of *future* guilt – about not having done enough – often propelled parents into action, aggressively seeking treatment for their children’s problems. Claire, for example, was in her first year of a PhD program when her son was diagnosed with Autism. She made the immediate decision to postpone her graduate work and contacted a regional organization that helps parents secure medical and educational services. With their help she received funding from the state to implement an intensive home program for her son. She turned one of her bedrooms into a therapy room and spent the next two years working with behavioral, speech, and occupational therapists trying to improve her son’s condition. She explained,

[You have to fight] to get the *best* services possible because better services usually mean better outcome. And what I hear from parents who didn’t put up the fight... is they live with guilt. *Terrible* guilt. Because they think, “What if I had? What if I’d gotten [a home program]...? What if I’d gotten those thirty hours per week as opposed to ten hours in the state preschool...?” Because if you miss the window of opportunity, you’ll never know.

Phil made a similar comment about the choice to send his son, Adam, to a therapeutic boarding school. Adam had been using drugs and getting in trouble for a couple of years, and his parents had tried a number of treatment options, including private counseling and an outpatient recovery program. Their son’s bad behavior had continued, and Phil and Mary were at their wits’ end when they decided to send him to an out-of-state wilderness program and boarding school designed to treat teens with substance abuse problems. Adam tried to run away when he learned of his parents’ intentions, and they had to forcibly restrain him when representatives from the school arrived to transport him to the wilderness site. Phil said that part of the decision to proceed was driven by his and his wife’s desire to avoid future guilt. He commented,

Part of the thing about sending him to [the boarding school], sending him to the wilderness, was that if we didn't do that, if things didn't turn out okay, we would have the constant feeling that we should have done that. Despite all the hardship it caused and how difficult it was to go through [that]... [if we had] let him leave, we would have had to live with it. Now, if something happens when he comes back, we're gonna continue to make efforts, but we will know we tried awfully hard. And part of that is the guilt you would feel.

As these stories illustrate, guilt and the fear of guilt compel action. Parents like Claire and Phil seek expensive and intensive treatments for their children in part because knowing they've done everything they could do to help their children offers some degree of protection against self-blame. But as I ask above, how much is enough? Moreover, which treatments are the "correct" treatments? As Stearns (2003) points out in his historical analysis of American parenting, the last century has witnessed an explosion of scientific and pseudo-scientific research on childhood development. This has resulted in a wealth of information about how parents should raise their children, and much of what is published focuses on how to prevent or treat children's problems. Parents whose children have drug or alcohol problems, for example, can choose among a variety of treatment options, such as psychotherapy, psychiatry, twelve-step programs, wilderness camps, therapeutic boarding schools, or "tough love." Similarly, parents whose children have autism must decide whether or not to seek a comprehensive home program, speech or occupational therapy, behavioral modification, medication, animal or music therapy, or a special diet. Given the sheer number of possibilities, it seems improbable that any parent could do "everything possible" to treat his or her children's problems.

As we might expect, then, few parents felt as though they actually had done everything in their power to help their children. Parents' lingering sense of guilt about not having done enough, however, was not necessarily an internalization of the notion

that they were bad parents. This type of guilt seemed to signify to themselves and others that they were good but imperfect parents who were unable to do everything that “should” have been done. Bill, who I introduced in the previous chapter, is the father of a sixteen-year-old boy who has had a seizure disorder and developmental disabilities since he was a young child. While doctors remain unsure about the cause of the boy’s problems, they have broadly framed his disabilities in terms of autism. Acutely aware of all the treatment possibilities available to children with autism, Bill said that he feels guilty for not pursuing more therapies when his son was young. He stated,

Do I blame myself for not getting more services? Yes. For not doing what might be considered the right thing... Seizure maintenance right now, the ketogenic diet has come into vogue... I leave some of these autism meetings and think, “Oh man, why wasn’t I doing this?” [Some organizations say] you have to have forty hours of behavioral intervention [per week]...” but you think, forty hours! How do you fit it into your family life? You know, I know my child is important, and I know his development is extremely important, but you can’t tell me forty hours for two months is going to cure him.

It’s clear from this quote that Bill doesn’t necessarily believe that a home program would have significantly altered his son’s prognosis. In terms of the ketogenic diet, Bill actually had proposed it as a course of treatment, but his son’s doctors had dismissed the idea out of hand. Why, then, does Bill express guilt about not obtaining more services? I suspect that in such cases, guilt served as form of communication, providing emotional “evidence” of parents’ good intentions, even when they felt as though they should be doing more on behalf of their children.

I am not hypothesizing that parents’ guilt is purely performative, but I am suggesting that - like all emotional expression - it has a performative element. As Hochschild (1979) argues in her classic piece on the sociology of emotion, social

situations are governed by “feeling rules,” or the shared expectations for how people are “supposed” to feel in any given context. Guilt is no exception. We expect reformed convicts to feel guilty about their crimes, for example. People who have committed offenses cannot change the past, but we expect – at the very least – for them to express remorse over their actions. Similarly, parents may not be able to do everything that they think “should” be done on behalf of their children. When they fall short of the actions that would have marked them as “good” parents, guilt functions as a substitute expression of care.

We must consider the possibility, then, that according to contemporary standards of child rearing, the “bad” parent is one who does *not* express guilt when they believe their parenting performance has been insufficient. A number of mothers who I interviewed, for example, felt guilty about getting angry at their troubled children. Paula – the mother from the previous section who hoped that her son wasn’t emotionally disturbed – said that during a particularly difficult period, she viewed her son as “the enemy.” Before the boy started taking medication for his ADD, he was violent with other children and had been asked to leave his private preschool. Paula said that she often lost her temper, which made her feel horrible. She commented,

I feel bad that I yell at him. Not that I think yelling can be eliminated one hundred percent, but I need to stop myself more. Because that’s bad for him, for him to be yelled at by me... before his diagnosis when he was four, it got really bad... I was angry all the time. And he even told me, he said, “Mommy, how come you’re angry with me? How come you don’t like me?” ...that was an awakening, like a slap in my face. Like, “Oh, I better change! I better change, I better change.”

Paula acknowledges that some yelling is inevitable, although she expresses guilt about losing her temper too often. When judged from the perspective of contemporary child

rearing standards, what kind of mother would Paula be if she did *not* feel guilty in this situation? I suspect that the unapologetic mother who gives her son the impression that she doesn't like him would be considered by most to be a malevolent figure.

The thoughts of another mother illustrate this point more clearly. Jessica's six-year-old son has an unidentified problem with social and behavioral manifestations. Like Paula's son, he has had violent episodes and has hurt other children. At times when his behavior escalated beyond her control, Jessica would lock herself and his younger sibling in a bedroom while he clawed at the outside of the door with a fork. Needless to say, there were times when Jessica lost patience, and she felt bad about losing her temper with her son. She explained,

When I do raise my voice in those times, I worry what that's doing to his self-esteem... I mean, I'm very concerned about that as it is already.... I don't want him to feel worse than he already does... [Children] do internalize that, and they think, "She doesn't love me." I constantly say, "I love you... you're wonderful." I try and fortify all of that... when I do make a mistake, I almost always apologize.

In Jessica's mind, parenting is risky business, and the stakes are high. She believes that if she expresses anger about her son's threatening behavior, she will make him think he doesn't love her, thereby damaging his self-esteem. Such beliefs reflect the pervasive notion that children are fragile (Stearns 2003, Zelizer 1985) and that mothers can do irreparable harm if they don't parent their children "correctly." Given this ideology, we expect "good" mothers to feel guilty when they make "mistakes." Guilt signifies care when a parent's actions do not.

The final point to be made about the performative or "communicative" nature of guilt is its power to diminish perceived inequalities between individuals. Baumeister et. al. (1994) explain,

[One function] of guilt is to redistribute emotional distress within the dyad. After a transgression, the victim is presumably suffering while the transgressor has benefited. If the transgressor feels guilty, however, his or her enjoyment is diminished, and the transgressor's guilt may make the victim feel better. In this way, emotional equity is restored (247).

The framework of guilt as an emotional equalizer helps to make sense of parents' guilt about their treatment of the "problem" children's siblings. Siblings were one of the most common sources of guilt among the parents I interviewed. Some parents worried that because their troubled child required so much of their time and energy, they were neglecting their other, non-troubled children. Claire has a second son and worries that she doesn't give him enough attention. She commented,

I'm actually kind of concerned about our older son because [his brother] takes so much time, you know? Like we went on a trip, and [our older son] takes [a medication]... I remembered [our younger son's] medication, but I hadn't remembered [our older son's]... and I thought, "You know, this is just emblematic. I give so much to [my younger son]" And in school I just expect [my other child] to take care of himself, you know?

Some parents had the opposite experience, which is that they felt more connected to their "normal" children, and felt guilty about having less intimate relationships with their troubled children. Jessica commented,

I do feel guilty for being more connected with his brother. And sometimes I wonder if his brother sees that. I think he does. I think he must see that. And then I (laughs) try and make things even sometimes. But sometimes it just feels hollow, you know, like I'm just doing it to try and even things out a bit.

In cases when parents felt as though they had treated one child better than another, guilt prompted them to reallocate their affections. When they were unable to do so – or when their efforts felt "hollow," as Jessica describes – guilt may have worked to diminish the inequality, particularly if they expressed their guilt to the "neglected" child.

"Well there's not much I can do about it now": Motherhood, Fatherhood, and Guilt

So far, I have provided a general discussion about how parents experience and manage guilt. I have also posited that guilt sometimes serves as a form of signification that might actually mark men and women as “good” parents when their efforts fall short. I now turn my attention to the topic of gender and parent-guilt. The data presented thus far suggests that both mothers and fathers were susceptible to self-doubt and guilt. Among many of the couples I interviewed, either both of the parents doubted their parenting skills or neither of them did. As stated in the introduction, however, fathers tended to spend less time dwelling on these thoughts and feelings during their interviews. It also was less common for fathers to express guilt about not having “done enough” for their children in terms of seeking treatment or advocating for services.

There are a number of possible reasons for these observed gender differences. The first and perhaps most obvious explanation is that the women I interviewed were disproportionately responsible for day-to-day childcare. We might expect that the more time and energy a parent spends caring for his or her children, the more likely he or she is to feel guilty when they have problems. Participants themselves did not discuss this as a reason for guilt, but it is quite possible that the routine “doing” of parenting encouraged self-blame.⁴

A related hypothesis is that self-doubt and guilt were more salient for mothers because they were disproportionately affected by stigmatization. As discussed in the previous chapter, the isolation resulting from courtesy stigma was more salient for the mothers I interviewed, and women were more likely to experience the enacted stigma of being a bad parent. Since self-doubt and guilt are, in part, responses to stigmatization – particularly in the case of the bad parent label – we can conceptualize such feelings as

indicators of the extent to which a parent has internalized people's negative perceptions. Martha and Henry's experiences lend weight to this hypothesis. Their only daughter had been struggling in school since kindergarten, and by fourth-grade, her difficulties with schoolwork were becoming the focus of family life. As I discuss above, schoolteachers kept suggesting that Martha and Henry were doing something wrong. While Henry rejected the implication of blame at the outset, Martha initially took teacher's suggestions to heart. When I asked her whether or not she had internalized their blame, she said,

Yeah, at first I was thinking, "Okay, I gotta change things! We gotta find out what the situation is here!" So I started getting these books. And "Okay, we need, like, a calendar! We need daily chores! We need little stars! We need stickers! We need a bugle in the morning!" All of which were equally as disasterous. I mean, still not the right approach. My husband has a little more enlightened approach... he would say, "What? What? They're not going to blame us. That's the typical educational approach. I'm not goin' for it."

As I noted in a previous section, Martha eventually managed her self-doubt by reasoning that she was doing everything in her power to help her daughter. Nonetheless, it is clear from this quote that while her husband didn't entertain the suggestion of guilt, teacher's claims compelled Martha to re-evaluate her parenting strategies.

Another possible reason that mothers might have expressed greater self-doubt or guilt than fathers is that the feeling rules governing these emotions differ for men and women. To the extent that guilt signifies empathy, it is more culturally appropriate for women to experience and express feelings of self-blame (Benetti-McQuoid and Bursik 2005). The men I interviewed were less verbose than women about self-doubt and guilt, and this corresponds to dominant notions of how men and women are "supposed" to emote. These dynamics might have been accentuated in the context of this research since parental roles are highly gendered. Bill, who in a previous section expressed regret about

not pursuing more treatment options for his son's seizure disorder, said that he never felt as though he had caused his son's problems. He commented,

My wife struggles with [guilt]... you know, moms struggle with the fact that, "How could I have produced a child like this?" And it's like, "Don't beat yourself up... it's not worth it, it's over and done with." One will never know... did mom trip and fall one day while she was pregnant? ...and it's like, "No, you can't go that way. You're no use to me or us if you're gonna play the blame game. It doesn't make any sense. You did what you're supposed to do with all your prenatal vitamins, the appointments you did, you took the precautions that a reasonable person would do. That's all!" ... It doesn't do any good, you know, to be that way.

Here Bill suggests that mothers struggle with guilt *in general*. If people view guilt as a "feminine" or "maternal" emotion, fathers might be reluctant to express feelings of self-doubt or self-blame.

Joel and Rachel's interviews provide further support for this line of thinking.

Both members of the couple expressed guilt about marital strife and inconsistent parenting. Joel took a matter-of-fact tone when he commented,

Well there's not much I can do about it now. So I don't constantly berate myself about it. There are times when I feel kind of crummy about it. But it is what it is. It's not that we didn't have good intentions. We had good intentions.

Rachel also stated that guilt wasn't a "productive" emotion, but she talked at length about her feelings before reaching this conclusion. When I asked her why she felt guilty about her daughter's suicide attempt, she replied,

Because I'm a mom! (laughs) I don't know, because I'm Jewish (laughs)... I mean, it's my fault anyway because she has my genes. And there's so many ways in which I look at her and I see myself in terms of emotional stuff and reactions. You know, everything being a crisis... [that's] certainly the way I was as an adolescent... there was obviously a communication breakdown. [My daughter] was obviously perceiving a level of stress that I wasn't clicking into... obviously feeling a sense of being overwhelmed and not knowing what to do with it. So yeah... I

failed with the genes I gave her, I failed (laughs) with seeing where she was at. I failed with not teaching her strategies for dealing with the feelings. I failed with not picking it up in the moment, and then I triggered it. So yeah, of course I feel all those things... that's not gonna change. But it's also kind of not productive in a lot of ways.

Joel's quick dismissal of guilt adheres to dominant constructions of masculinity. Many people believe that men are essentially "instrumental" and women are essentially "emotional," particularly in the context of familial roles. This ideological dichotomy arose during industrialization when people started to associate men with the "public" sphere of wage labor and women with the "private" sphere of caretaking (Cott 1993). While there was significant variation among men and women, many of the fathers in this study adhered to the standards of hegemonic masculinity when it came to emotional expression.

Rachel's statement that she feels guilty simply because she is a mother illustrates a final, related point. As I have argued, guilt is an emotional *expression* that signifies concern and commitment when action falls short. As discussed in Chapter 3, the research of Erickson (2005; 1993) and Coltrane (2000) proposes that the demonstration of affection, encouragement, appreciation, and empathy is a central part of the carework that family members are expected to perform. Like other types of domestic work, it appears that emotion work is one of the common ways that many women "do gender" in the context of family life (Erickson 2005).⁵ To the extent that mothers, rather than fathers, are responsible for emotion work within the family, we can expect that they will continue to express more guilt than their counterparts.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I've explored how parents experience and manage the self-doubt and guilt related to their children's problems. These data suggest that parents are susceptible to such emotions regardless of context, although expert opinion and disease or disability accounts have the potential to release parents from feelings of self-blame. While it is reasonable to conceptualize guilt as a response to stigmatization, the central theme of this discussion is that guilt is more than just an automatic response. Guilt is also an expression that demonstrates to self and others that one cares and is committed to a relationship when one's actions might be interpreted otherwise. I hypothesize that when parents express guilt about not having "done enough" on behalf of their children, they have not necessarily internalized the notion that they are bad parents. On the contrary, guilt marks them as good parents according to contemporary American standards of childrearing. Of course, the rules of parenting and emotional expression differ for men and women, which might explain why mothers tend to elaborate on their feelings of self-doubt and guilt. The fact that fathers spend less time discussing such emotions might reflect a gendered division of labor within home, which includes emotion work.

These data also demonstrate how guilt is both an outcome of intensive parenting and a mechanism by which intensive parenting is reproduced. The belief that parents are responsible for everything that happens to their children compels guilt, and the actions that parents take to reduce or prevent guilt reinforce dominant child rearing ideologies. This discussion of guilt – together with the chapters focusing on grief and stigma – provides a context for the topics I pursue in the next two chapters. Chapter five explores mothers' strategies for securing medical and educational resources for their children, while chapter six explores the role that parents take in developing disease and disability

accounts of children's problems more generally. In these chapters, I focus on how parents advocate for their children in the context of educational and medical institutions. In doing so, I give further attention to how parents manage the grief, stigma, and guilt associated with having a "problem child."

¹ For a general review of contemporary parenting advice, see chapter three of Hays (1996) *Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood*. Thurer (1994) provides examples of mother-blame in contemporary popular culture in chapter seven of *The Myths of Motherhood*.

² This finding is not altogether surprising. While some speculate that the medicalization or "geneticisation" of deviance renders individuals helpless – and therefore blameless (Conrad & Schneider 1992[1980]) – others argue that biological accounts have created new possibilities for agency (Lemke 2004, Rose and Novas 2004, Novas & Rose 2000, Robertson 2000). As Hallowell et. al. (2006) write, "the genetic subject is a consumer of genetic tests, a maker of choices, a taker of decisions, an active subject" (970). This is not to suggest that some participants did not employ disability or disease accounts in order to manage stigma or guilt; rather, it is to say that such narratives were not inevitable, and some felt culpable for their children's genetic problems.

³ In her research on a support group for the parents of "troubled" teenagers, Godwin (2004) also found that parents applied a rhetoric of personal responsibility in order to manage feelings of guilt and maintain "good-parent" identities.

⁴ In his study of gender and household labor, Coltrane (1989) finds that for some men, the mere "doing" of child care encourages what people think of as a "maternal" instinct. The same may be true of guilt.

⁵ Here Erickson (2005) is building on scholarship that draws from West and Zimmerman's "doing gender" approach to explore the persistent finding that women perform a majority of routine housework and childcare (Coltrane 2002, Berk 1985, Ferree 1990).