

MORALITY IN EXPERIENCES OF GENERALIZED RESENTMENT

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents an interpretative phenomenological analysis of the experience of generalized resentment with relation to morality and the philosophical notion of resentment. In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with 9 participants screened and purposively selected for experience with resentment. All interviews were transcribed verbatim and subjected to interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). Three inter-related superordinate themes and two miscellaneous ones are discussed: (1) strong moral perceptions, (2) perceptual framework, (3) generalization of resentment, alongside a fourth miscellaneous themes segment. Regarding generalized resentment, participants stated that strong moral perceptions created a perceptual framework that generalized and intensely re-presented both related-unrelated external factors as negative, causing moral conflict. Distinct resolutions included diminished exposure, reduced proximity, and re-presentations of external factors or perceptual framework. The findings are discussed in relation to resentment and resentment literature.

Keyword: *Resentment, resentment, moral psychology*

1. INTRODUCTION

Interpersonal relationships involve internal reactions to external events. External events perceived negatively facilitate internal reactions of shame, humiliation, revenge, vengeance, and resentment [1]. In particular, shame, humiliation, and envy result in reactive emotions (i.e. anger, resentment) [1] [2]. One particular reactive emotion of indignation, resentment, is a moral reaction to perceived transgression. In the active form, resentment influences judgment [3]. Literature documents this influence of resentment on judgements and moral attitudes as an association between resentment and morality [1] [4].

Wurmser's work lists six components for resentment: aggressive desires, concealment of aggressive desires, justice and fairness values, incapacity (to act), generalization or displacement of vengeance, absolutist morals [1]. Other components include a preference to blame, biased causal determination, and perceived wrongful deprivation [2]. Resentment labels the external factor as harmful to the self [2] [4] [5]. External factors are reconfigured to displace responsibility: a personal incapacity (to act) becomes the the fault of external obstacles or threats. Personal agency, a prerequisite for self-determination, is hindered by this focus on blaming the external factor [6]. While the objective reality of the event may differ, this biased perception leads to the experience of resentment. The process of resentment described appears to correspond to Friedrich Nietzsche's morality of resentment comprising a 're' presentation of reality and transvaluation [2] [7], and Max Scheler's extension of *ressentiment* comprising an absence of or negative agency [8]

Friedrich Nietzsche's resentment involves a state of universalized abstraction that influences the individual's personality wherein it results in contempt for the previously coveted (transvaluation) [4] [9]. Max Scheler's *ressentiment* comprises a generalized state of repressed emotions of vengeance, rage, envy, spite, contempt, and malevolence [1] [10]. The generalized attitude is not appended to a singular event, object, or individual and instead becomes a framework for perceiving and evaluating external reality [2] [3].

Interpersonal relationships also involve forgiving. Forgiveness and resentment are determined by threat perception [11]. A sense of incapacity to act out retributively towards the threat or perceived transgression reduces the probability of forgiveness [12]. Forgiveness necessarily requires a renunciation of the resentful, vengeful, or spiteful attitudes [12].

Exploratory studies of morality often consider the influence of social factors on individual morality [13], some of which are perceptions of external events, cultural influences, and narratives. Individuals often act in accordance to said narratives [14]. Culturally, childhood experiences and family are large determinants of the social factors that influence morality [13] [15]. An exploration of social factors must necessarily consider the nature of the factors themselves. There is a paucity of social science research regarding resentment and its association with morality in individuals despite philosophical and theoretical work. The phenomenological focus of this article addresses the experience of generalized resentment in relation to morality.

2. METHOD

Ethical approval for the study was granted by the Institutional Review Board. Ten graduate student participants, aged $m = 22.5$, were purposively recruited based on experiences of resentment and homogeneity in moral development at the graduate school level [16]. The Revised Kuppaswamy Socioeconomic Status Scale screened for middle socioeconomic status and nuclear family type to increase sample homogeneity [17]. An experience of resentment checklist was derived from [1] and [9] (items “perceived moral injury”, “sense of wrongful deprivation”) for the selection interview. Individuals raised outside India or receiving mental health treatment were excluded. The remaining 9 participants agreed to participate in the research.

A reflective and flexible design was adopted for exploration and participant-based direction. Interpretative phenomenological analysis, selected also for its focus on exploring phenomena through experiences, informed the preparation of the semi-structured interview guide [18]. The two expert validated interview guide contained four segments, comprising (1) introduction, (2) resentment, (3) morality and family, and (4) generalization to *ressentiment*. Open-ended questions within-segments were further probed through prompts and clarifications occurred when necessary. Interviews ranged from 50-60 minutes and participants received consent forms and verbal instructions regarding withdrawal, voluntariness, and anonymity. For data credibility, both member check and data audit occurred.

2.1 Data Analysis

All interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed for recurrent themes using IPA [18]. IPA’s focus on idiographic experiences were counterbalanced by presenting a series of recurrent themes supported by extracts from a relatively homogenous sample. The analytic process involved three stages of iterative reading and double hermeneutics: (1) preliminary interpretations in context, (2) adding comments, and (3) discerning final themes and forming theme groups [18]. The final list of themes were then documented for review; the final selection of excerpts reflects both essence and range of participant experience at idiographic and generic levels [18]. The excerpts follow a confidential numerical system and are shortened where necessary with bracketed ellipses [...].

3. RESULTS

This paper presents three superordinate themes of: (1) strong moral perceptions, (2) perceptual framework, (3) generalized perceptions, and a fourth category of miscellaneous recurrent themes, determined by frequency.

3.1 Strong Moral Perceptions

Several participants reported strong moral perceptions. A number of participants articulated having strong moral foundations, overt early experiences, or family influence on moral development.

P5: “My morals, I would personally say, and they have always been very strong. Obviously, when I feel a strong, negative emotions like anger or resentment even, I would say that I tend to make harsh choices, which I feel, which honestly disturbs me a lot”.

P4: “I think it developed in childhood, probably started off with sibling issues [...] bitterness basically and just, anger towards my family”.

Others attributed the strength of their moral perceptions to a sense of vulnerability or lack of security.

P7: “Yeah, you can see, it started at the early ages when I started feeling quite neglected”.

P9: “So, I'd say initially it's, it's mostly when, um, it comes to insecurities”.

3.2 Perceptual Framework

The general account of a perceptual framework vis-a-vis resentment involved the influence of physical proximity or exposure to the perceived threat and a gradual development of a negative perceptual framework.

P3: “I feel [resentment] has made me a negative person as well because in the actor judging the other person or wishing that negative to another person you tend to enforce more negative thoughts within you and thinking negative thoughts, negative”.

Physical exposure or proximity to the perceived threat intensified the perceptual framework, the process of which generated doubt. As a consequence, several participants faced moral conflict regarding their resentment.

P2: “It kind of plays with your head and I had to question myself in terms of like I had to take a genuine proper step back from everything, and shut myself out. And it wasn't just pulling away from friendship, it was cutting off. So, I had to cut off, cut off, cut myself off from-from everything and everybody”.

P5: “Strong morals have always been there. So, they're always very strict about this good, this is bad. The binary is always very, very strong, and I try to inculcate, I try to embody that in my own nature, and I, and I tried to, I try my level best, but as I said, this, this, this, I don't know honestly right now, I don't know how, how clear these distinctions really are”.

For most of the participants, the state of moral conflict was maintained due to active exposure and proximity to the perceived threat. Most participants recognized this effect, six of which worked to either cut off or represent the external factor differently. One participant, P7, reported difficulties with the re-presentation.

P3: “I, I feel that in this whole year I've become very open towards everyone I've tried, I have become more patient to understand what [that] person is trying to say because everyone has their different experiences and different moralities, and everyone has had different childhood and values are different”.

P4: “And then, how, how I cope with it is basically, is basically by convincing myself that it's just a, it's just a situation and it's not permanent. It must be just, be a miscommunication, misunderstanding situation. So, it's important to kind of understand the situation [...] just move on”.

P7: “It's very difficult for me to bring, to make sense of things, like I said it's very difficult for me to, to understand that everything doesn't revolve around me, and I need to, and everyone has their own reasons for doing what they're doing”.

A recurrent account of openness to different perceptions and changing or ‘re’ presenting the perceptual framework, is used to abate the moral conflict.

P2: “Allows me and gives me the space to kind of to explore that person, as a person instead of like me, judging them beforehand”.

P5: “My immediate thought is to know this is not my fault, this, this is because of x y z reasons in my life, which I think often prevents me from perhaps actually understanding what the other person is saying and perhaps not instantly jumping onto a negative association”.

3.3 Generalized Perceptions

For some participants, the perceptual framework of resentment was generalized to external factors. The external factors were unnoticed prior to the generalization and were unrelated to the external perceived threat or source of resentment yet emerged during generalization.

P4: “It overtakes the entire life”.

P9: “When resentment takes over and you start looking at the world with resentment and when you start spotting elements of things that you resent in everyday life, when, I mean, they've always existed, but these are the things that you started noticing recently”.

P2: “I think the hidden resentment that I felt towards a lot of people, [...] I think it started spreading to them as well because I started, started like resenting them”.

With the perception growing in generalizability and intensity over time, resentment’s moral and reactive components were overtly visible to the participants.

P3: “Should also pay the consequences, should also – that person should understand that what – like they should understand the gravity of the thing they did to me [...] it’s the same level of wrong to the other person”.

P9: “Ha serves you right, something along those lines, you know, taste of your own medicine and stuff like that”.

3.4 Miscellaneous Themes

Articulations on religion and authentic self occurred with lesser frequency. Religious factors, influenced by childhood and family experiences, caused an early shift in the negative perceptual mechanism for some participants.

P2: “I try not to want the worst for someone, cause like so, like the whole Christian part of me does not allow me, not allow me, I don’t see anything good in me hating anybody”.

Most participants articulated a concern for their ‘authentic self’ during the period of doubt and moral conflict.

P3: “My whole sense of self and my whole sense of that, was a lie, and there’s a lot of self-doubt and issues”.

P5: “I try to not focus and come back to my more authentic self”.

4. DISCUSSION

The present findings extend previous philosophical and social science work on components of resentment [1] [2] [10], in an interdisciplinary manner. All articulations reaffirmed the components of resentment while providing some social factors (exposure, proximity, perception, generalization). The nature of resentment and its components were determined by nature of their moral perceptions. Participants’ existing morality was disturbed by resentment and the consequent resentful, vengeful, spiteful thoughts, perceptions, or attitudes. For a few participants, however, resentment appears to be associated with an equal retributive act from their end. Generally, when differences did

occur between the perceived 'authentic self' and the self influenced by resentment, it resulted in moral conflict and intense doubt. The resolution of this moral issue involved five measures: (1) distancing or limiting exposure to related-unrelated sources, (2) re-presenting either the source or changing the perceptual framework, (3) resolving the moral conflict, (4) relying on religious ideas of morality, and (5) returning to the perceived 'authentic' self. Notably, no participant spoke of forgiveness, in relation to resentment or morality. Morality appears to be a central component of generalized resentment, determined by social factors such as childhood, religion, and doubt.

Little qualitative research has been conducted on philosophical-psychology or the moral elements of resentment. While this study extends previous work on resentment, it also contributes to primarily to associations between philosophical and social science conceptions of resentment. Drawing from philosophical and social science literature, the findings are considered in the context of conceptions of resentment from both Nietzsche and Scheler. Participant experiences resemble *ressentiment*, drawn from *re-sentire* (Latin) for re-feel [19]. It is possible that social factors, presented or otherwise, facilitate this perpetual re-feeling leading either to moral conflict, resolved through a shift in perceptual framework, or generalization of resentment. The generalized form of resentment examined do not involve Nietzsche's transvaluation (of values) [19]. However, it does resemble *ressentiment*'s component of suffering caused by an inability to integrate or forget the external source [19]. This rudimentary presence of Scheler's *ressentiment* is visible in the emergence of repressed emotions, creating an intense attitude against the source of resentment, and later generalizing beyond the perceived threat or source [1] [2]. While previous studies examined resentment from either a philosophical or social science perspective (e.g. [20]), the present research attempts at examining the associations between the two.

5. CONCLUSION

This article highlights the social factors influencing morality in the experience of generalized resentment, determined by Nietzsche and Scheler's work on resentment and *ressentiment* [19]. The IPA findings of factors include perceptual mechanism based on morality, exposure and proximity to perceived threat or source of resentment, generalization, and perceptions of the self. To date, much of the extant resentment literature has been restricted in its methodological and conceptual approach towards experiences of resentment. *Ressentiment*, addressed primarily through concepts derived Friedrich Nietzsche and Max Scheler, is considered in the present article to be an extension of the experience of resentment vis-a-vis morality. With regard to limitations, purposive sampling resulting in an atypical sample likely involved a selection bias. Though studies of experiences do not involve generalizing from sample representation but from the derived concepts [21], those recruited may have a particular experience of resentment adhering to the checklist used to fulfill the objectives of the research. Like all qualitative research, the researcher must be considered, though bracketing, inductive interview format, and member check occurred.

There are certain clear implications from the findings. Participants were aware of the moral complexities underlying experiences of resentment as well the measures necessary for resolution. However, participants struggled with carrying through with the re-presentation of the negative perceptual framework, distancing, and preventing the generalization of resentment. Clinically, this highlights a need for professionals to consider generalization when working with resentment or resentful, vengeful, and spiteful, attitudes. Specific approaches to determining sources or perceived threats and the emerging repressed emotions may address the generalization process reported by participants. Working with individuals on morality can address resentment's impact on perceptions, judgements, and attitudes [1] [4]. It is worth noting that openness to perceptions, distance, and re-representation of the negative perceptual framework were intuitively used by participants to reduce or abate resentment.

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