



Conceptualizations of guilt and the corresponding relationships to emotional ambivalence, self-disclosure, loneliness and alienation

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ABSTRACT

Researchers examining guilt using the Test of Self-Conscious Affect (TOSCA) have suggested that guilt is an adaptive emotion that drives people to take reparative actions such as confessing or apologizing for one's transgressions. These researchers have found guilt to be inversely related to negative emotions such as anger, hostility, and resentment. Other researchers claim that the TOSCA measure does not capture the complexity of the guilt construct and that it does not address some of the maladaptive aspects of guilt. O'Connor and her colleagues developed a more encompassing measure of guilt, the Interpersonal Guilt Questionnaire-67 (IGQ-67). They argue that guilt can be linked to irrational beliefs, may be maladaptive, and can lead to emotional distress. The present study examined the relationship between the two conceptualizations of guilt to psychological outcomes. The results indicated that TOSCA guilt was negatively related to loneliness and this relationship was mediated by self-disclosure. IGQ-67 guilt was positively related to loneliness and alienation; these relationships were mediated by emotional ambivalence. The findings provide researchers with a clearer understanding of the guilt construct and its emotional and behavioral correlates.

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1. Introduction

Many researchers claim that guilt is an adaptive emotional response because it motivates the guilty individual to acknowledge his or her misdeed and to take actions to rectify the wrongdoing (Keltner & Buswell, 1996; Tangney, Miller, Flicker, & Barlow, 1996; Tangney, Wagner, Fletcher, & Gramzow, 1992). However, the association between guilt and interpersonal empathy, reparative action and other pro-social behaviors may be contingent upon the different assessments of guilt that are used (Ferguson & Crowley, 1997; Harder, Cutler, & Rockart, 1992). For example, research has shown that the Test of Self-Conscious Affect (TOSCA), the most common tool used to assess guilt, primarily measures mild and adaptive aspects of guilt, which can be alleviated through reparative behaviors (Fontaine, Luyten, De Boeck, & Corveleyn, 2001; Luyten, Fontaine, & Corveleyn, 2002). It was further argued that maladaptive aspects of guilt are underrepresented in the TOSCA (Luyten et al., 2002). Naturally, reparative behavior associated with a particular form of guilt would be considered adaptive and would be associated with positive consequences.

If the TOSCA only assesses the positive aspects of guilt, then existing relationships between guilt and measures of psychopathology may be undetectable using this measure (Luyten et al., 2002). Other measures which assess multiple components of guilt

may be differentially related to psychological well being. For instance, O'Connor, Berry, Weiss, Bush, and Sampson (1997) proposed that guilt is a multifaceted construct. They argued that guilt is an adaptive emotion that derives from altruism and concern for others. Correspondingly, guilt may facilitate the maintenance of ties with others with whom an individual feels close. They further argued that like many emotions, guilt may go awry. Guilt may become exaggerated and inhibiting. As a result, guilt may also be a maladaptive emotion that will not be easily rectified, thus leading to distress, inhibitions and psychopathology (O'Connor, Berry, & Weiss, 1999).

O'Connor et al. (1997) divided these exaggerated patterns of guilt into four types: survivor guilt is the pathogenic belief that achieving one's goals and success causes others to suffer by comparison; separation guilt is the belief that to separate or be different from loved ones is a form of disloyalty and will result in harm to the other individual; omnipotent responsibility guilt is the exaggerated belief that one is responsible for the happiness and well-being of others; self-hate guilt is an extreme and maladaptive self-evaluation that may occur in order to cope with mistreatment received from loved ones.

1.1. Consequences of guilt

1.1.1. Loneliness

Loneliness can be defined as "an individual's subjective perception of deficiencies in his or her social relationships" (Russell,

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Cutrona, Rose, & Yurko, 1984, p. 1313). An event that leads to survivor, separation, omnipotent, or self-hate guilt may make an individual wary of confronting the companion. Research suggests that people who are unable to forgive their own transgression against others may feel unworthy of forgiveness. They may ruminate about themselves or the negative event, withdraw from social relationships and consequently feel lonely (Day & Maltby, 2005). Thus, we are predicting a positive relationship between guilt-proneness, as measured by the IGQ-67, and loneliness. In comparison, guilt proneness, as measured by the TOSCA, is associated with taking reparative actions, such as self-disclosure. Being able to relate to others in an open manner is associated with friendships (Rokach, 1989). Therefore, we predict a negative relationship between guilt proneness, as measured by the TOSCA, and loneliness.

1.1.2. Alienation

Personal alienation involves perceiving an inconsistency or split between one's self-image and one's behavior (Korman, Wittig-Berman, & Lang, 1981). A second type of alienation, social alienation, is defined as seeing a separation or difference between the self and others and is strongly associated with being alone (Korman et al., 1981). If guilt is to be defined using O'Connor's definition, a positive relationship between guilt and both forms of alienation should exist. Extending the definition of personal alienation to the realm of guilt, a guilty person may want to maintain a relationship with someone but does not due to the belief that his or her behavior may instead harm the relationship or relationship partner. Additionally, interpersonal guilt may be associated with decreased levels of disclosure and reparative actions. A guilty person may feel that he or she has no control over the guilt and by not disclosing his or her emotions to others, may feel socially alienated or disconnected from friends and society. On the other hand, both forms of alienation may have an inverse relationship with guilt as defined by the TOSCA. If an individual attempts to take a reparative action in order to rectify the actions that led him or her to feel guilty, one's desire and behavior are consistent and the person should feel in tune with the self and no personal alienation. In addition to this, if the reparative action is apologizing to the harmed other or disclosing emotions pertaining to the guilt, then such disclosure would likely lead to levels of social inclusion, as opposed to social isolation. Therefore, the way we define and operationalize guilt will determine its relationship to alienation.

1.1.3. Emotional self-disclosure

According to Tangney's framework, people who feel guilty are likely to engage in some form of a reparative action. This action can include anything from apologizing, to discussing one's guilt (Tangney et al., 1996). Given that Tangney describes guilt as an uncomfortable, yet bearable emotion that can be resolved through reparation; self disclosing may be one method of coping with guilt. Therefore, we predict a positive relationship between guilt, as defined by Tangney, and self-disclosure. Engaging in emotional disclosure should aid in alleviating negative emotional states (Berg & McQuinn, 1989; Lombardo & Fantasia, 1976; Wei, Russell, & Zakalik, 2005). Consequently, we predict that self-disclosure will mediate the relationship between guilt, as defined by Tangney, with loneliness and alienation.

1.1.4. Ambivalence over emotional expression

On the flip side of freely expressing one's emotions, keeping one's thoughts and feelings to the self may be harmful psychologically (Pantchenko, Lawson, & Joyce, 2003; Zech, de Ree, Berens-chot, & Stroebe, 2006). One variable that may contribute to a failure to disclose may be whether the individual is emotionally ambivalent. According to King and Emmons (1990), a major assumption of our society is that the expression of emotion is both

healthy and necessary while we also believe that remaining calm and unaffected is beneficial. This inconsistency may result in individuals being confused or unsure about whether or not they should express their emotions, such as guilt. This ambivalence can be manifested in many different forms, such as, having the desire to express the emotion but being unable to, expressing the emotion but later regretting it, or expressing the emotion but not wanting to (King & Emmons, 1990).

Guilt, as defined by O'Connor, may be associated with feelings of emotional ambivalence. The desire for an individual to disclose emotions to someone close in order to alleviate feelings of guilt coupled with the inability to do so out of fear of harming the other person may result in an internal conflict and rumination regarding how to cope with the guilt. These individuals may want to express their guilt to others, but choose not to because they do not know how, they do not know if it is the best thing to do, they feel as though it will not help, or they fear they may regret expressing the emotion afterwards. The inability to cope with the situation and the fear of causing a permanent rift in the relationship may lead to feelings of loneliness and alienation. Consequently, we predict that emotional ambivalence is driving a relationship between guilt, as defined by O'Connor, with loneliness and alienation.

1.2. Present study

The present study attempts to examine the relationship between guilt defined by the TOSCA, loneliness, alienation, self-disclosure and emotional ambivalence as compared to the relationship of guilt as defined by the IGQ-67 and the same variables. The specific hypotheses are as follows:

H1–H2: Self-disclosure mediates a relationship between guilt as measured by the TOSCA with loneliness and alienation.

H3–H4: Emotional ambivalence mediates a relationship between guilt as measured by the IGQ-67 with loneliness and alienation.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Participants were 255 introductory psychology students (53% female) at a large Northeastern College. 83% of the participants were between the ages of 18–22. At this institution, 13% of all enrolled undergraduate students are Black, Non-Hispanic, 36% are Asian, 18% are Hispanic, and 33% are white. Participants received course credit in return for their participation.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. The test of self-conscious affect

The guilt scale of the Test of Self-Conscious Affect (TOSCA; Tangney, Wagner, & Gramzow, 1989) was used to assess guilt-proneness. This test is comprised of several short scenarios (10 negative, 5 positive) and four possible reactions to each scenario. A sample scenario is, "You make plans to meet a friend for lunch. At 5 o'clock, you realize you stood him up." Item responses are ranked on a five-point Likert-Type Scale ranging from 1, *not likely*, to 5, *very likely*. The four possible reactions to the above scenario are: "You would think, 'I'm inconsiderate'; You would think: 'Well they'll understand'; You would try to make it up to him as soon as possible; and, You would think: 'My boss distracted me just before lunch.'" A test-retest reliability score of .74 for the guilt scale of the TOSCA was obtained in prior research (Tangney et al., 1992). In the

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