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,
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, Berenschot, & Stroebel, 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 incon siderate’; 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
present study, the internal consistency of the responses to this measure was .90. A confirmatory factor analysis based on the study sample confirmed the unifactor structure of responses to this measure and yielded acceptable fit indices (RMSEA = 0.06; CFI = 0.95; AGFI = 0.89; NNFI = 0.94).

2.2.2. The interpersonal guilt questionnaire - 67

The Interpersonal Guilt Questionnaire-67 (IGQ-67; O’Connor et al., 1997) was also used to assess guilt proneness. The IGQ contains 67 items which attempt to measure four types of guilt: survivor guilt (22 items), separation guilt (16 items), omnipotent responsibility guilt (14 items) and self-hate (15 items). A sample item from the survivor guilt subscale is, “It makes me uncomfortable to receive better treatment than the people I am with”. A sample item from the separation guilt subscale is, “I feel that bad things may happen to my family if I do not stay in close contact with them”. A sample item from the omnipotent guilt subscale is, “It is very hard for me to cancel plans if I know the other person is looking forward to seeing me”. A sample item from the self-hate scale is, “I always assume I am at fault when something goes wrong”. Items are ranked on a five-point Likert-type scale. Items were summed across scales to form one composite score. Studies have reported the internal consistency of responses to each of the four subscales. These scores have ranged from .82 to .85 for survivor guilt, .82 to .83 for separation guilt, .74 to .83 for omnipotent guilt, and .84 to .87 for self-hate (O’Connor et al., 1997). In the present study, an internal consistency coefficient for the total measure was .88. A series of confirmatory factor analyses based on the study sample were conducted for each subscale. The unifactor structure of the self-hate scale was confirmed and yielded acceptable fit indices (RMSEA = 0.07; CFI = 0.96; AGFI = 0.88; NNFI = 0.96). The fit indices for the remaining three subscales provided comparatively less support of unifactor structures (RMSEA = 0.10–0.13; CFI = 0.63–0.80; AGFI = 0.67–0.82; NNFI = 0.48–0.76). Sample size restrictions prohibited us from testing all of the items together in a four factor model.

2.2.3. The emotional self-disclosure scale

The Emotional Self-Disclosure Scale (ESDS; Snell, Miller, & Belk, 1988) was administered to participants in order to assess their willingness to disclose their emotions to a friend or relationship partner. The scale contains a total of 40 items. The ESDS has eight subscales, each containing five items. The subscales on the ESDS are: likelihood to disclose feelings related to depression, happiness, jealousy, anxiety, anger, calmness, apathy, and fear. For example, participants had to indicate how likely they were to disclose the topic with a friend or relationship partner at, “times when you felt discouraged”. Item responses are ranked on a five-point Likert-Type Scale ranging from 1, not at all willing to discuss, to 5, totally willing to discuss. Items were summed to form one composite score. Past research obtained internal consistency coefficients ranging from .83 to .95 and test-retest reliability coefficients ranging from .35 to .76 (Snell et al., 1988). Similarly, the internal consistency of the responses to this measure in the present study was .96. A confirmatory factor analysis of the measure based on the study sample confirmed a single higher order factor that encompasses two first order factors, and yielded acceptable fit indices (RMSEA = 0.08; CFI = 0.90; AGFI = 0.86; NNFI = 0.91).

2.2.4. Ambivalence over emotional expressiveness questionnaire

The Ambivalence over Emotional Expressiveness questionnaire (AEQ; King & Emmons, 1990) was administered to participants to assess their ability to express their emotions, both positive and negative. The scale contains a total of 28 items. A sample question from the scale is, “It is hard to find the right words to indicate to others what I am really feeling”. Item responses are ranked on a five-point Likert-Type Scale ranging from 1, never, to 5, very often. King and Emmons (1990) reported an alpha reliability coefficient of .89. In the present study, the internal consistency of the responses to this measure was .94. A confirmatory factor analysis based on the study sample confirmed a single higher order factor that encompasses two first order factors, and yielded acceptable fit indices (RMSEA = 0.08; CFI = 0.95; AGFI = 0.76; NNFI = 0.95).

2.2.5. The university of california los angeles loneliness scale

The University of California Los Angeles Loneliness Scale (UCLA Loneliness Scale; Russell, 1996) was administered to all participants. The scale is designed to gauge the extent to which participants felt lonely. This measure contains 20 items that are ranked on a five-point Likert-Type Scale ranging from 1, never, to 5, always. A sample question is “How often do you feel alone?” An overall higher score on this scale indicates that one is very lonely. Reverse scoring for nine items is used. Items were summed to form one composite score. A test-retest reliability coefficient of .73 has been obtained in previous research (Russell, 1996). In the present study, the internal consistency of the responses to this measure was .91. A confirmatory factor analysis based on the study sample confirmed the unifactor structure of this measure and yielded acceptable fit indices (RMSEA = 0.10; CFI = 0.92; AGFI = 0.75; NNFI = 0.91).

2.2.6. Scales of personal and social alienation

The Personal and Social Alienation scales (PAS and SAS; Korman et al., 1981) are usually administered as part of an overall measure entitled the Philosophy of Life. The Personal Alienation Scale is designed to assess an individual’s sense of separation or estrangement from the self. This measure contains eight items. A sample question is, “I feel that my daily activities don’t reflect my real interests and values”. The Social Alienation Scale is designed to assess the degree to which an individual feels separated from others. This measure contains 10 items. A sample item reads, “It is almost impossible for one person to truly understand the feelings of another”. Item responses are ranked on a five-point Likert-Type Scale ranging from 1, very non-descriptive, to 5, very descriptive. An overall high score on each scale represents a high degree of alienation. Two items are reverse coded on each of the two scales. Items are summed to form one composite score. A test-retest reliability coefficient of .92 was demonstrated (Korman et al., 1981). In the present study, the internal consistency of the responses to this measure was .76. A confirmatory factor analysis of the measure based on the study sample confirmed a single higher order factor that encompasses two first order factors, and yielded acceptable fit indices (RMSEA = 0.08; CFI = 0.90; AGFI = 0.86; NNFI = 0.88).

2.3. Procedure

Participants signed an informed consent form and then completed the following questionnaires in a random order: TOSCA, IGQ-67, ESDS, UCLA Loneliness Scale, AEQ, PAS and SAS. After the completion of all questionnaires, participants were debriefed and the nature of the hypothesis and the study was revealed.

3. Results

Table 1 presents the intercorrelations of the variables available for the mediation analysis. The Baron and Kenny (1986) procedures were followed to test whether self-disclosure mediates a relationship between TOSCA guilt and loneliness. Analyses revealed that all of the conditions for mediation were satisfied. The results of the first regression indicated the presence of a relationship between changes in guilt proneness and loneliness, $F(1, 254) = 7.41, p < .01$ ($\beta = -.17$). The second equation, which regressed TOSCA guilt on...
significant predictor of alienation (β = .24). Lastly, loneliness was regressed on both guilt proneness and self-disclosure. The results indicated that the overall equation was significant, $F(2, 253) = 25.50, p < .001$. Examination of the beta weights showed that self-disclosure was the most important predictor of loneliness, (β = −.38, p < .001). Consistent with expectations, guilt proneness was no longer a significant predictor of loneliness, (β = −.08, p < .19). Thus support was found for Hypothesis 1, self-disclosure did mediate the relationship between TOSCA guilt and loneliness. Support was not found for Hypothesis 2 as TOSCA guilt did not predict alienation, $F(1, 254) = .06, p < .80$ (β = .02), which nullifies the need for further analysis.

Similar procedures were used to test Hypotheses 3 and 4. Hypothesis 3 predicts that emotional ambivalence will mediate the relationship between IGQ guilt and loneliness. A relationship was found between changes in guilt proneness and loneliness $F(1, 254) = 14.42, p < .001$ (β = .23). Second, IGQ guilt was a significant predictor of emotional ambivalence $F(1, 254) = 77.13, p < .001$ (β = .48). Lastly, emotional ambivalence and IGQ guilt were added together as predictors of loneliness. The results indicated that the overall equation was significant $F(2, 253) = 26.12, p < .001$. Examination of the beta weights showed that emotional ambivalence was also a significant predictor of loneliness, (β = .39, p < .001), and guilt proneness was no longer a significant predictor of loneliness (β = .04, p < .51). Thus support was found for Hypothesis 3.

Hypothesis 4 predicts that emotional ambivalence will mediate the relationship between IGQ guilt and alienation. IGQ guilt significantly predicted alienation, $F(1, 254) = 25.01, p < .001$ (β = .30). As mentioned above, the relationship between IGQ guilt and emotional ambivalence was found to be significant. Lastly, alienation was regressed on both IGQ guilt and emotional ambivalence. The results indicated that the overall equation was significant, $F(2, 253) = 37.60, p < .001$. Examination of the beta weights showed that emotional ambivalence was also a significant predictor of alienation (β = .43, p < .001) and guilt proneness was no longer a significant predictor of alienation (β = .09, p < .14). Thus support was found for Hypothesis 4.

### 4. Discussion

This study attempted to investigate the relationship between different conceptualizations of guilt and various measures of psychological distress. Emotion researchers generally view guilt as an adaptive moral affect that stems from people’s negative evaluation of their own behavior (or lack of behavior) when an internalized standard has been violated. Guilty people are often motivated to counteract the impact of their actions by confessing, apologizing or making amends (Baumeister, Stillwell, & Heatherton, 1994; Tangney, 2001). In line with these predictions, the present study found that guilt proneness, assessed with the TOSCA, was associated with an increased likelihood to disclose emotions, and a decrease in loneliness. However, prior empirical work suggests that the TOSCA may not measure the entire guilt construct (Luyten et al., 2002). Guilt proneness related to the fear of harming others in the pursuit of one’s own goals may be one aspect of the construct that remains undetectable with the TOSCA (O’Connor et al., 1997). In the present study, the IGQ-67, a questionnaire designed to measure interpersonal guilt, was found to be positively related to emotional ambivalence, loneliness and alienation. The results imply that contrary to popular opinion, guilt is not always an adaptive emotion and has the potential to lead to negative consequences for the guilty party.

The results of the present study also indicated that the relationship between IGQ-67 guilt and loneliness and alienation was mediated by emotional ambivalence. The IGQ-67 measure assesses clinically relevant categories of guilt that seem conflict laden and do not allow for reparative action to be taken. If discussing one’s feeling is fraught with ambivalence, and is in fact associated with loneliness and alienation, then this type of guilt may lead individuals to undermine their chances of maintaining supportive and satisfying relationships. Rather than initiating action (through self-disclosure), guilt experienced from this perspective seems to generate isolation. It would seem that the IGQ-67 is tapping into guilt that is more of a solitary internal phenomenon and that this type of guilt is not necessarily relationship-enhancing.

The lack of a relationship between TOSCA guilt and alienation was surprising. It seems that just because people are willing to discuss their emotions, does not mean that their emotions are understood or that others were able to empathize. Future research could investigate whether the relationship between TOSCA and alienation would be moderated by perceptions of others’ compassion, empathy and understanding.

A conceptual analysis of the two guilt measures reveals an alternative interpretation of the findings. It appears that the items that comprise the IGQ-67 relate to how prone people are to feeling guilty whereas the TOSCA relates to how someone reacts or copes with feeling guilty. People who are prone to feel guilty may also be susceptible to feeling lonely, alienated, and emotionally ambivalent but these feelings may diminish when people take reparative actions to address their perceived transgression. As our sample size was not large enough to successfully examine this alternative explanation empirically, this is another possible avenue for future research.

It must be noted that all the data for this study was collected through questionnaires and no causality can be assumed. Additionally, individuals in our investigation may have given inaccurate responses due to social desirability or because they are not adequately in touch with their emotions. Further, another important limitation of our investigation is that no information was included on ethnicity. As guilt has been found to vary among individuals by cultural background, which may be indirectly measured by ethnicity or religion (Kitayama, Mesquita, & Karasawa, 2000), future studies that replicate or modify our study should include an ethnicity item with their demographic items.1

The findings reported here have implications for practicing clinicians. The results emphasize the importance for clinicians to be able to distinguish between different types of guilt; guilt that is reparative in nature versus guilt that is not so easily worked through. Clinicians working with this latter conceptualization of guilt may benefit from understanding the complexity of this affective state and its association with loneliness and alienation. It would be useful for future research to examine whether clinicians are adept at distinguishing between these two types of guilt experiences. A clinical appreciation of these distinctions might lead to disparate therapeutic approaches to the different types of guilt.

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1 We thank an anonymous reviewer for this idea.
In conclusion, future research would benefit from systematically examining guilt that is not so easily recoverable. What are the costs of this type of guilt? Are there ways to work through the associated emotional conflicts and psychological distress? The literature is replete with data supporting the notion that guilt can also be an aversive state that has a dark side when it remains internal, and may not be easily resolvable.

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References


