

Interpersonal Guilt, Empathy, and Depression in Filipino Americans

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Abstract

This study investigates the relationship between interpersonal guilt, empathy, and altruism in an ethnically diverse adult population. A sample of Filipino Americans (n=27), an ethnic group often ignored in mental health research, was compared to a sample of other Asian American (n=60) and European American (n=267) participants. Initial comparisons between Filipino and other Asian Americans found no difference between groups on subscales of guilt, empathy, and altruism. However, comparisons on these constructs between Asian Americans and European Americans showed significant differences. Guilt predicted altruistic behavior towards family, friends and strangers in European Americans while it only predicted altruism towards family in Asian Americans. Ethnic identity and cultural values may mediate the role of guilt in prosocial behavior, playing a more central role in European Americans. Interpersonal guilt may therefore be an especially salient factor in serving a prosocial function for those of European American descent. Further cross-cultural studies are needed to enhance our understanding of the function of guilt in both prosocial behavior and in common mental illnesses.



Introduction

In the midst of the current neuroscientific discoveries demonstrating our empathy, interpersonal guilt, conceptualized as the fear of harming others while pursuing normal developmental goals and aspirations, has been the focus of a program of research conducted by O'Connor and colleagues over the last decade (O'Connor, et al., 1997, 1999, 2002). Results of these studies have consistently demonstrated a connection between interpersonal guilt, depression, and other psychopathologies across cultures (O'Connor, et al., 1999, 2000, 2004, 2005). Interpersonal guilt has also been found to be associated with empathy and acts of altruism (2005). These findings, along with recent studies in neuroscience, suggest the centrality of prosocial motivation and behavior in our species (Greene & Haidt, 2002; Hauser, 2007; Singer, 2005; O'Connor, et al., 2002, 2005).

This study investigates the relationship between interpersonal guilt, empathy, altruism, and depression in a diverse adult population. Previous research found higher rates of guilt among Japanese and other Asian American immigrant populations when compared to European Americans (Asano, et al., 1998; Crisostomo, et al., 2005; 2006; O'Connor, et al.). Immigrant populations are faced with a complex problem: they may experience guilt toward family members and friends left behind in impoverished countries. In addition, they may be at higher risk for psychopathologies resulting from their lack of social support networks and lowered status in a new country. Strong feelings of loyalty and connection to the family (and culture of origin) may be a net result; attempting to separate, or be different from the family of origin may give rise to feelings of guilt, or even betrayal. Thus, particularly the subtypes of Survivor and Separation Guilt, may be implicated in difficulties faced by many immigrant populations, and are hypothesized to be significantly higher in Asian Americans compared to European Americans.

This study reexamines these previous findings in an adult sample of Filipino Americans, as a unique subset of Asian Americans. Similar to many other Asian cultures, there is a large cultural emphasis on social cohesion, smooth interpersonal relationships, family piety, and loyalty. Colonization and occupation by Western countries in the Philippines during the late 19th to mid-20th centuries may have contributed to the emergence of unique Filipino culture and values.

Filipino Americans have become the second largest group of immigrants living in the United States. Nevertheless, the Filipino American population has, for the most part, either been ignored in mental health research, or "squeezed" under the umbrella of "Asian American." The purpose of this study is to examine the association between guilt, empathy, altruism and depression in an adult Filipino American sample, with the expectation that this population will exhibit higher levels of guilt when compared to European Americans.

Results

Table 2. ANOVA Significance Levels comparing European American/Asian Americans and Asian American/Filipino Americans on Empathy-based Guilt, Altruism, and Empathy Subscales

	European American vs. Asian American	Asian American vs. Filipino American
Survivor Guilt	0.769	0.931
Separation Guilt	0.001*	0.251
Omnipotent Responsibility Guilt	0.014*	0.988
Self-Hate	0.975	0.189
Altruism towards Family	0.958	0.603
Altruism towards Friends	0.680	0.294
Altruism towards Strangers	0.003*	0.452
Empathic Distress	0.001*	0.779
Empathic Concern	0.440	0.442
Empathic Perspective Taking	0.559	0.839

* is significant at p<0.01

Figure 1. ANOVA significance levels

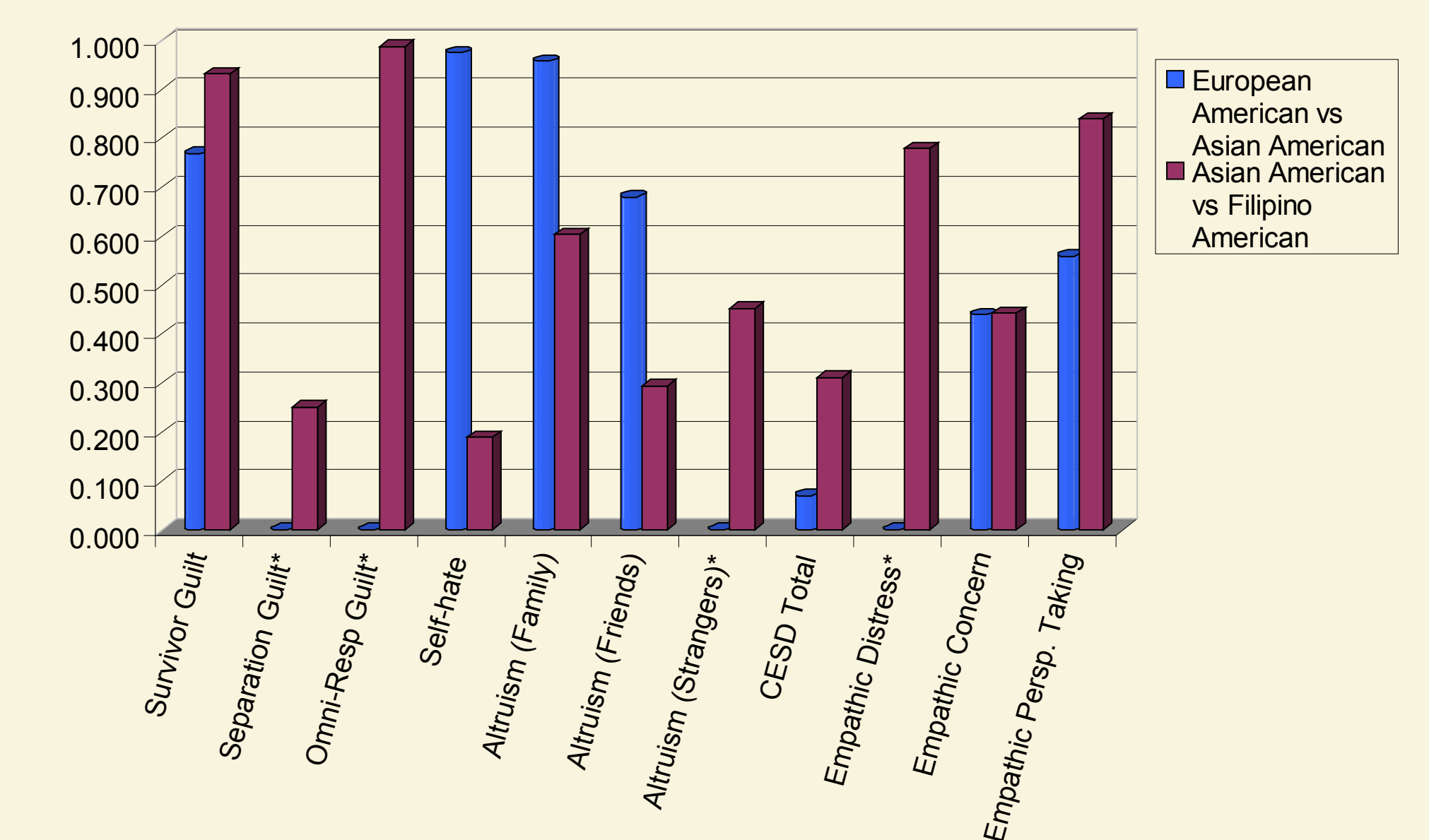


Table 3. Correlations Between Altruism and Empathy-based Guilt Subscales for Asian Americans

	Altruism towards Strangers	Altruism towards Friends	Altruism towards Family
Omnipotent Responsibility Guilt	0.062	0.091	0.179
Separation Guilt	-0.003	-0.052	0.228*
Survivor Guilt	-0.090	-0.123	-0.107

*is significant at p<0.05

Table 4. Correlations between Altruism and Empathy-based Guilt Subscales for European Americans

	Altruism towards Strangers	Altruism towards Friends	Altruism towards Family
Omnipotent Responsibility Guilt	0.051	0.236**	0.193**
Separation Guilt	0.022	0.124*	0.222**
Survivor Guilt	0.229**	0.244**	0.114

*is significant at p<0.05

**is significant at p<0.01

Discussion

Future studies of Filipino American populations are needed to investigate the meaning of our findings. Comparisons between European and Asian Americans demonstrated significant differences; mean scores among Asian Americans are higher in Separation Guilt, Omnipotent Responsibility Guilt, and Empathic Concern. In an analysis of the role of guilt in prosocial behavior, we found that Separation Guilt predicted altruistic behavior towards family members in Asian Americans (Table 3). In contrast, Survivor Guilt, Omnipotent Guilt, and Separation Guilt all predicted altruistic behavior in varying combinations among European Americans (Table 4). Survivor Guilt was not found to be significantly higher in Filipino Americans compared to Asian Americans, nor between European Americans and Asian Americans. This result was unexpected, given the survivor guilt towards family and friends in the country and culture of origin, commonly expressed by immigrant populations.

In summary, guilt predicted altruistic behavior towards family, friends and strangers in European Americans while it only predicted altruism towards family in

Asian Americans. We conclude that ethnic identity and cultural values may mediate the role of guilt in prosocial behavior, playing a more central role in European Americans. Interpersonal guilt may therefore be an especially salient factor in serving a prosocial function (albeit below conscious awareness) for those of European American descent. However, in a prior study O'Connor et al (2005) found that guilt predicted altruism toward others (family, friends and strangers) in men, but not in women, in a sample of mixed ethnicity. It thus is also possible that the results here were biased by the small number of men in the Asian American sample. The higher means in guilt found in two of the three guilt subscales in Asian Americans may be a function of cultural habits of speech, and may or may not reflect true higher levels of guilt and empathic concern in this population. Further cross-cultural studies are needed to enlarge our understanding of the function of guilt in both prosocial behavior and in common mental disorders such as mood and anxiety disorders.

Methods

PARTICIPANTS

Participants (Asian Americans: n=87; European Americans: n=267) were obtained from a larger sample of volunteers who responded to an advertisement on craigslist.org, a web-based public forum. More specific demographic information regarding participants' sexual orientation, education, and religious affiliation are described in Table 1.

INSTRUMENTS

Interpersonal Guilt Questionnaire-67: (IGQ-67; O'Connor, Berry, Weiss, Bush & Sampson, 1997). The IGQ-67 is a 67-item measure, using Likert-type scales to assess guilt. It includes four subscales:

Survivor Guilt is characterized by the belief that being successful or happy will make others feel inadequate simply by comparison (e.g., "It makes me very uncomfortable to receive better treatment than the people I am with").

Separation Guilt is characterized by the belief that if a person separates, leads his or her own life, or differs from loved ones in some way, he or she will cause loved ones to suffer (e.g. "I am reluctant to express an opinion that is different from the opinions held by my family or friends").

Omnipotent Responsibility Guilt is characterized by the belief that one is responsible for the happiness and well being of others (e.g. "I often find myself doing what someone else wants me to do, rather than doing what I would most enjoy").

Self-hate is characterized by the acceptance of negative self-views in order to maintain a connection to parents and loved ones (e.g. "I do not deserve other people's respect or admiration").

Dispositional Altruism Scale: (DAS; Berry & O'Connor, 2002). The DAS is a 45-item instrument, derived from a measure of social support (Vaux, Riedel, & Stewart, 1987). The DAS measures how much support someone tends to extend to others. Respondents indicate how frequently they perform acts of altruism for family members, friends, and strangers in a variety of social situations. Items from this questionnaire include how often the participant "gave money for an indefinite amount of time" and "helped them think about a problem."

Interpersonal Reactivity Index: (IRI; Davis, 1980). The IRI is a 28-item self-

report instrument measuring distinct categories of empathy.

Perspective Taking: the ability to identify with, or understand cognitively the situation experienced by another person.

Empathic Concern: the degree of concern a person tends to feel on witnessing difficult or unpleasant experiences occurring to another person.

Personal Distress: the degree of distress a person is likely to feel, upon witnessing difficulties experienced by another person.

Table 1. Demographic Information

	Filipino American (n=27)		Asian American -without FA sample- (n=60)		European American (n=267)		
	n	%	n	%	n	%	
Gender	Male	4	14.8	13	21.7	33	12.4
	Female	23	85.2	46	76.7	233	87.3
	Gender Unchecked	0	na	1	1.6	1	0.4
Sexual Orientation	Bisexual	0	na	1	1.6	37	13.9
	Heterosexual	26	96.2	56	93.3	220	82.4
	Homosexual	1	3.7	2	3.3	7	2.6
	Sexual Unchecked	0	na	1	1.6	3	1.1
Education	8th grade or below	0	na	1	1.6	2	0.7
	Some H.S.	0	na	1	1.6	2	0.7
	H.S. Diploma	2	7.4	1	1.6	7	2.6
	Some College	7	25.9	15	25	75	28.1
	Some Graduate Sch	2	7.4	6	10	22	8.2
	A.A./A.S.	1	3.7	1	1.6	22	8.2
	B.A./B.S.	7	25.9	27	45	72	27
	M.A./M.S.	4	14.8	3	5	45	16.9
Religion	M.D.	0	na	0	na	3	1.1
	Ph.D.	1	3.7	3	5	4	1.5
	Other degree	0	na	2	3.3	12	4.5
	Religion Unchecked	0	na	4	6.7	3	1.1
	Buddhist	0	na	8	13.3	1	0.4
	Catholic	26	96.2	10	16.7	74	27.7
	Hindu	0	na	3	5	0	na
	Jewish	0	na	0	na	35	13.1
	Muslim	0	na	0	na	0	na
	None	0	na	11	18.3	50	18.7
Other	1	3.7	4	6.7	28	10.5	
Protestant	0	na	20	33.3	76	28.5	

Limitations

Future studies of Filipino American populations might take into account cohort effects, education, gender, recency of immigration, and acculturation differences among participants. Furthermore, this study aggregated European American subgroups into a larger ethnic category for methodological purposes. The distinction between Filipino and European Americans allowed this European American sample to serve as a standard control on which to evaluate the experience of Filipino Americans. Our European American participants, however, represent groups with very different histories, customs, and cultural identities. It is possible that an examination of groups of European Americans separated

by culture of origin, for example Italian Americans, Irish Americans, Jewish Americans, and Northern European Americans might produce a different picture and the role of guilt in depression as well as in prosocial behavior might be further illuminated. Many of our participants completed some college and or even graduate studies, and we do not know how class and social status may have played a role in the findings. Participation in the study was predicated upon access to computers, Internet savvy, and willingness to devote 30 minutes or longer to complete the study.