Survivor Guilt Predicts Depression and Anxiety in Iranian Immigrants

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NOTE: This project was initiated and carried out before the era of Trump. Responses were collected prior to February 2016.

Abstract

The depression and high anxiety experienced by immigrants to the United States have usually been attributed to the loss of culture, and community in the country of origin. In fact, leaving behind economic, political and social problems, immigrants are often better off after migration. Though living in improved conditions many find themselves burdened by survivor guilt as they worry intensely about the family and friends they left behind. Survivor guilt, known to be associated with psychological problems, may be the hidden cause of the depression and high anxiety in immigrant populations. In a study of 122 Iranian immigrants we contrasted survivor guilt with migratory grief/loss, finding survivor guilt a better predictor of both depression and anxiety.

Introduction

This study examined the role of survivor guilt in the depression and anxiety commonly experienced by immigrants. The complex process of immigration has most often been focused on loss, including loss of family members, friends, community, status, social networks, language of origin, culture and the familiar environment. Immigrants are also noted for problems associated with the discrimination and negative stereotyping common for any "out-group." Living in their own communities, immigrants also face numerous subtle stressors including the absence of familiar others, contributing to emotion dysregulation: the faces and even the language is unfamiliar and the ordinary if complex web of relationships is disrupted, leaving a vulnerability to anxiety and depression.

The picture of the immigrant is that of a victim, alone and lost in an unfamiliar and unforgiving world. This ordinary perspective on the life of the immigrant, the "victimization" perspective on people who have moved to the United States from another country may, in and of itself, be biased, painting a picture of the immigrant as a victim, tormented by loss. While loss may play a role in the formation of depression in immigrants, the heavy focus it is given may be inaccurate and in fact may be a way to denigrate the strength and pride common to immigrant populations. When discussing immigrants as victims who have lost their original home, psychologists and other social scientists may have left out the success accompanying immigration.

People usually leave their country of origin because of adverse political, economic and psychological conditions. They migrate because of political oppression or because there is little or no access to viable income producing opportunities. People migrate in the quest for a better life style, and for an improved financial situation. People may flee their country of origin because it has been taken over by a violent political party, or because they have been associated with a militant group of social activists, for example. People migrate in the search for a more stable political and economic situation; they migrate to improve the life they may be able to create for themselves and for their families.

The immigrant, in contrast to the victim so often described, is, in comparison to the friends and family members remaining in the country of origin, a story of strength and success. To some extent, the "American dream" is the story being enacted by immigrants, who are sometimes better off than the people who are living in the country of origin.

This study aimed to provide an alternative explanation for depression and anxiety noted in immigrants. The loss mentality focused upon in immigrants may be a fallacy, contributing to the negative stereotyping, marginalization and discrimination immigrants are facing in many social situations. For clinical psychologists working with immigrants, this fallacy may be leading to psychotherapy focused on loss instead of seeing the problems of the immigrant as part of the problem that occurs when people are winning.

Prior research has demonstrated a powerful association between survivor guilt, anxiety and depression in people who are successful. Survivor guilt is based on the pathogenic belief that being successful and happy may be dangerous to others, making them feel inadequate by comparison.

Methods

Participants and Procedures
Participants were 122 English-speaking migrants (70% female) from Iran, ranging in age from 20 to 71 years (M=43.2, SD=13.9). Age at migration were as follows: under 18 (47%), 19-30 (40%), 31-40 (9%), and 41-50 (8%). Most participants migrated to the United States (82.5%), with other locations as follows: Canada (3.9%), England (.97%), Germany (1.9%), Israel (1.9%), Malaysia (.97%), Sweden (.97%), Switzerland (1.9%), and 4.9% with no response. Over 85% considered themselves to be middle class or higher in socioeconomic status. About 50% of participants identified as Muslim, 26% as having no religious affiliation, and the rest reported a variety of other religions. About 53% reported feeling the need to leave Iran, while 47% responded they did not feel the need to leave.

Participants were recruited through online list serves of Iranian organizations and through social media advertisements. Participants who responded to recruitment were invited to participate in an anonymous online survey and were directed to the Survey Monkey website.

Measures
In addition to completing a demographic and migration background survey, participants completed the following standardized measures:
Interpersonal Guilt Questionnaire. Participants completed the Survivor Guilt and Omnipotent Responsibility Guilt subscales of the IGQ-67 (O'Connor, Berry, et al., 1997), a reliable and valid self-report measure of empathy-based interpersonal guilt. Survivor guilt is guilt over being better off than others, such as having greater financial success, better relationships, and generally better well-being. Examples of survivor guilt items are "I conceal or minimize my success" and "It makes me very uncomfortable to receive better treatment than the people I am with." Omnipotent responsibility guilt is an irrational, unrealistic sense of responsibility for the well-being of others. Example items are "I feel bad things may happen to my family if I do not stay in close contact with them" and "It is very hard for me to cancel plans if I know the other person is looking forward to seeing me."

The Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale (CES-D). The CES-D is a widely used, valid, and reliable 20-item self-report scale used to measure current levels of depressive symptoms in the general population (Radloff, 1977).

Generalized Anxious Temperament (GAT) Scale. The GAT (Akiskal, 1998) is a valid and reliable 26-item self-report instrument measuring self-related worry and worry related to others. The GAT total score was used in the present study.

Migratory grief and loss questionnaire (MGLQ). The MGLQ (Casado & Leung, 2001) is a 20-item scale designed to assess the experience of grief and loss associated with immigration. Migratory grief is conceptualized to consist of three components: idealization of the homeland; searching and yearning; and identity discontinuity. High scores on the MGLQ have been associated with levels of depression in a variety of migrant populations.

Results

We first examined the zero-order correlations between psychological symptom measures (depression and anxiety) and psychological predictor variables (migratory grief/loss and the two measures of interpersonal guilt). Results are shown in **Table 1**. The grief/loss measure and both guilt scales were significantly associated with the psychological symptom measures. Survivor guilt had a substantially stronger association with both symptom measures compared to the grief/loss measure.

Table 1
Pearson correlations between psychological symptoms and measures of migratory grief/loss and interpersonal guilt scales.

	Depression (CES-D)	Anxiety (GAT total)
Migratory Grief/Loss	.25*	.20*
Survivor Guilt	.36**	.56**
Omnipotent Responsibility	.22*	.52**

*p<.05   **p<.01

To determine the relative contribution of guilt versus migratory grief and loss in predicting depression among participants, we conducted two multiple regressions, one for each interpersonal guilt scale (Survivor Guilt and Omnipotence Responsibility Guilt). In each regression, the guilt and migratory grief/loss scales were entered simultaneously as predictors. The results of the regressions are shown in **Table 2**. Both IGQ scales significantly predicted depression when controlling for migratory grief/loss, but grief/loss only approached significance in predicting depression when controlling for the IGQ guilt scales.

Table 2
Multiple regressions predicting depression (CES-D) from the Migratory Grief and Loss Scale and Survivor Guilt and Omnipotence Responsibility Guilt.

Predictors	B	SE	Beta	t	p
Migration Grief and Loss	.13	.07	.18	1.97	.052
IGQ Survivor Guilt	.23	.07	.33	3.57	.001
Migration Grief and Loss	.13	.07	.18	1.79	.076
IGQ Omnipotence Guilt	.23	.10	.23	2.25	.026

We also used multiple regressions to predict anxiety symptoms (GAT total score) from the guilt scales and the migratory grief/loss scale. We conducted two multiple regressions, one for each interpersonal guilt scale (Survivor Guilt and Omnipotence Guilt). In each regression, the guilt and migratory grief/loss scales were entered simultaneously as predictors of anxiety. The results of the regressions are shown in **Table 3**. Both guilt scales were significantly associated with anxiety, but the migratory grief/loss measure was not significantly associated with anxiety in either regression model.

Table 3
Multiple regressions predicting anxiety symptoms (GAT total score) from the Migratory Grief and Loss Scale, Survivor Guilt, and Omnipotent Responsibility Guilt.

Predictors	B	SE	Beta	t	p
Migration Grief and Loss	.17	.16	.09	1.05	.295
IGQ Survivor Guilt	.95	.15	.54	6.21	<.001
Migration Grief and Loss	.08	.17	.04	.45	.651
IGQ Omnipotence Guilt	1.33	.25	.50	5.35	<.001

Survey
The questionnaire is closed but can be viewed:
https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/iranmigrate

Contact
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Discussion

Results of this study found that, as predicted, depression and anxiety in Iranian immigrants were significantly correlated with survivor guilt proneness. While grief and loss also predicted depression, survivor guilt proneness was more strongly predictive of depression. Prior research found depression to be significantly correlated with survivor guilt in a patient population. In addition, it has been found that survivor guilt affected employees' abilities to enjoy a promotion when other employees were being laid off, pointing to survivor guilt in the workplace and the inhibition of pleasure, commonly seen in depression. The results of the present study illustrate the important role survivor guilt may be playing when working with immigrant populations suffering from depression.

The current study found that individuals who are more prone to survivor guilt are more at risk of developing anxiety after migration, which points to the importance of exploring anxiety symptoms in immigrants. Understanding the conditions of an immigrant's country of origin including political and religious conflicts, can provide us with a better understanding of the immigrant experience. Factors such as time of immigration, reasons for immigrating, and the type of news immigrants are exposed to can also affect levels of anxiety. For example, immigrants who originated from countries that are consistently on the news and portrayed in a negative light which highlight high stress situations would be subject to more worry and anxiety over those left behind.

For clinicians working with clients who have immigrated, while not ignoring the loss-related factors, a focus on underlying survivor guilt, of which the client may be unaware, is likely to be fruitful. In addition to the central role played by survivor guilt in this pathology, this change in focus would shift the entire perspective on immigrant psychology. The immigrant, instead of being perceived as a loss-sensitive victim, would be realistically seen as successful and the shift from victim to winner is inherently psychologically supportive.

In our increasingly global world, with high rates of migration/immigration, clinicians are necessarily adopting a multi-cultural perspective in treatment. If survivor guilt is a significant predictor of depression and anxiety in immigrants, it is a finding clinicians need to know and understand in order to be effective, independent of theoretical orientation.