Life in the Office: The Downside to Winning in Social Comparison

[1]Lynn E. O'Connor, [2]Jack W. Berry, [3]Patrice S. Crisostomo, [1]Suluck Chaturabul, [3]Amanda Hume, [3]Stephanie Imp

[1]Wright Institute, Berkeley   [2]Samford University, Birmingham   [3]University of California, Berkeley

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EPARG
emotion, personality, and altruism research group
www.eparg.com

Please address inquiries and reprints to
Lynn E. O'Connor, Ph.D.
Email: LynnOC@aol.com

Abstract

In an experimental online study, 242 people responded to a story describing one highly skilled hard working manager being promoted during a time of layoffs in the wake of the high tech industry crash, while another skilled and hard working manager in another division was laid off. Participants were presented with one of four stories that varied only in the degree of closeness between the characters. Open-ended narrative responses of participants were coded and rated for a variety of emotional and behavioral reactions on the part of the main character. In addition responses were analyzed by the Linguistic Inquire Word Count computer-based method. Results indicated that across all closeness conditions, participants expected the main character to feel, think and do something that demonstrated empathy and survivor guilt towards the less fortunate character. There was, however, a significant linear trend in the levels of empathic responses across the closeness conditions.

Introduction

In the midst of the current neuroscientific discoveries demonstrating our hardwiring for empathy and other-oriented emotions and behaviors, we have been collecting supportive evidence from psychological studies using an instrument measuring empathy-based survivor guilt, broadly defined. With items initially derived from clinical observation, the Interpersonal Guilt Questionnaire-67 has reliably and validly provided an indication of an individual's proneness to experiencing omnipotent feelings of responsibility for the well-being or happiness of others, and proneness to believing that being happy or successful is likely to make another person, often a loved one, feel inadequate by comparison. From our studies we have increasingly come to consider proneness to survivor guilt in daily life both a personality factor associated with depression and at the same time a predictor of altruism directed towards strangers.

In gene-centric evolutionary theory altruism has often been considered to be a hidden form of selfishness, in that acts of altruism were thought to be the result of inclusive fitness, kin selection, or reciprocal altruism among close associates. It has been assumed that people are not likely to extend altruism towards strangers. However, in ours and other species there are numerous examples of acts of altruism extended towards strangers, and this may be particularly characteristic of our species. Our proneness to altruism extended towards strangers may help us, as an international community, come together to overcome the pending environmental disasters. Therefore, understanding this psychological characteristic we call survivor guilt may be important in helping us bring people together as a group and mega group, even while it continues to have a negative or depressigenic effect on individuals.

Our studies of survivor guilt were first designed to investigate and substantiate the clinical observation that people who are high in proneness to survivor guilt are also likely to suffer from depression. Having demonstrated this correlation through cross-cultural studies, we found ourselves moving out of the clinic and into a focus on survivor guilt in "daily life." In our recent studies we have been trying to determine the extent to which this emotion significantly predicts kindness to strangers in real world situations, as well as how it functions in ordinary relationships of varying degrees of intimacy. The present study "Life in the Office" is the second experimental study of reactions people have to surpassing others, of differing degrees of closeness. The first study was conducted on a college campus and investigated reactions to surpassing others in a college class.

In the current study we examine the presence of survivor guilt in a contemporary high-tech office. Survivor guilt appears to occur in the face of inequity—be it deliberate or simply a matter of luck—and is demonstrated in relationships that are intimate, and relationships that are more distant. Furthermore in this study we included one condition in which there is a relationship that represents feelings that might be expressed from an "ingroup" to an "outgroup" member upon whom misfortune falls.

Figure 1. Levels of emotion or behavior categories (Workplace Rating Scale) by closeness of relationship

For all emotion categories, there was a statistically significant linear trend from highest closeness (family) to lowest closeness (rival).
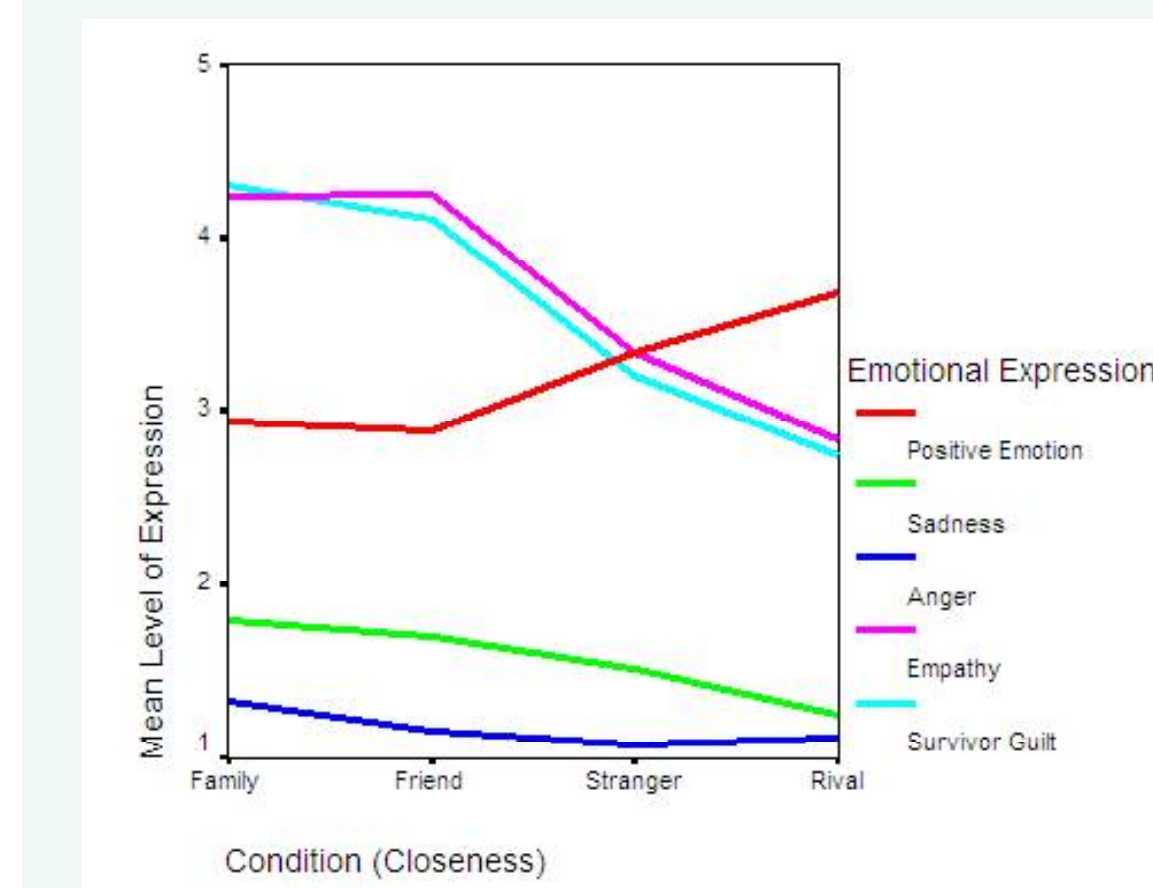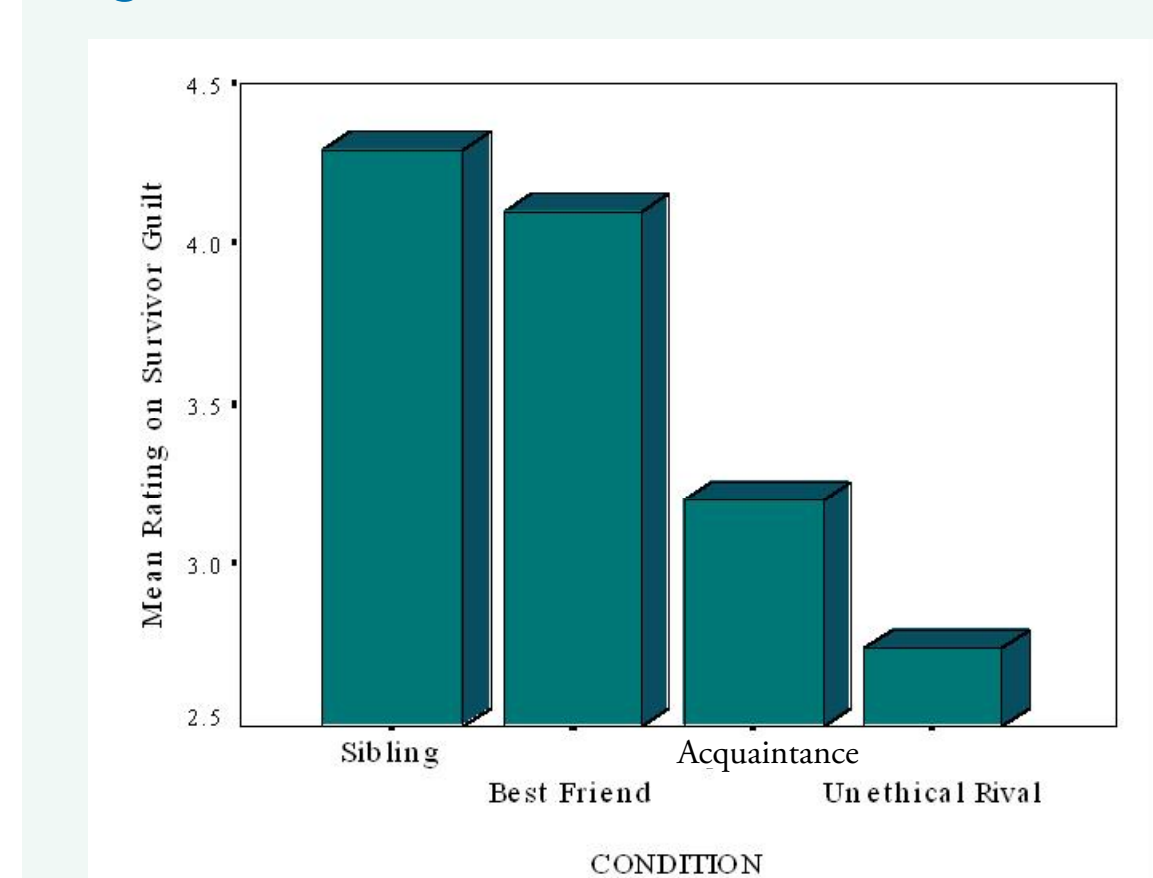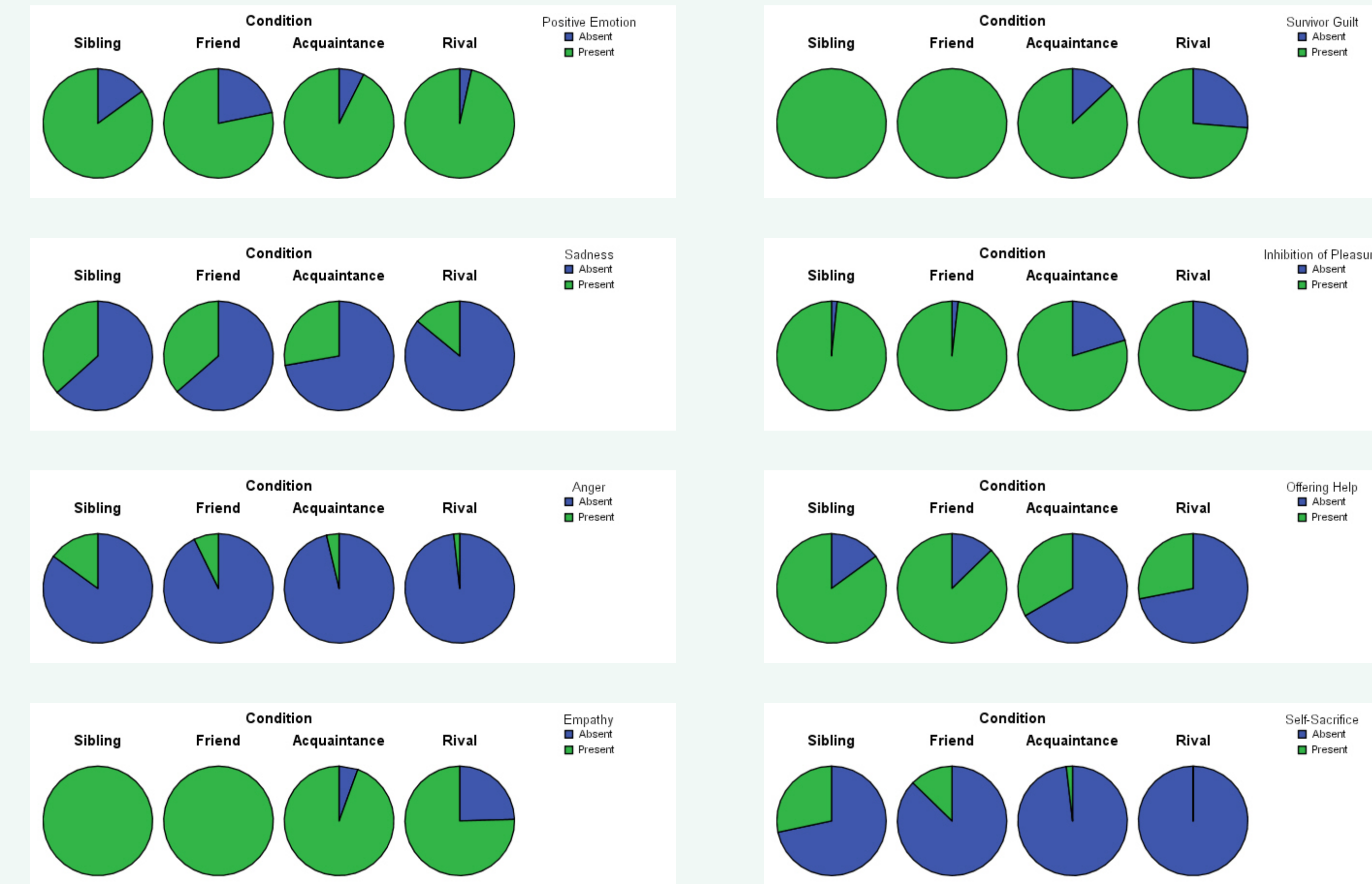

Figure 2. Survival Guilt and Conditions

Figure 3. Comparing each condition or behavior catgegory.

Methods

PARTICIPANTS

Two hundred and forty two participants (47 men, 186 women, and 9 who reported no gender) were solicited for this anonymous Internet-based experimental study through an advertisement displayed in multiple cities of the U.S., in the "Volunteer" section of Craigslist, an online advertisement service. Ages ranged from 19 to 76, with a mean age of 32.9. The sample was predominantly European American (79%), and highly educated with over 90% having completed some college or graduate level education.

INTSTRUMENTS

Interpersonal Guilt Questionnaire-67 (IGQ-67 O'Connor, Berry, Weiss et al, 1997.)
Dispositional Altruism Scale (Berry & O'Connor, 2002)
Brief Five-factor Inventory-44 (BFI; John, Donahue, & Kentle, 1991)
Workplace Emotion Rating Scale (WERS; Chaturabul & O'Connor, 2007) is a 9-item rating scale, derived from a theme analysis conducted by a group of research assistants, blind to the condition of each narrative. Items included: Positive emotions; Sadness; Anger; Empathy; Survivor Guilt; Omnipotent Guilt; Inhibition of Pleasure; Helping Behavior; and Self-Sacrifice. Two independent judges, blind to the condition represented in the narratives, rated each narrative on the WERS. Inter-rater reliabilities were all above .7 with the exception of Omnipotent Responsibility Guilt, which was deleted in the final analysis due to the inadequate reliability between raters on this item.
Linguistic Inquiry Word Count (LIWC; Pennebaker) is a qualitative data analysis program based on dictionaries of word categories, including self-referential words (e.g. I, me); social words (they, them, her, him); positive emotion words (happy, pleased); negative emotion words (sad, angry); and cognitive words indicating how much someone is actively thinking about the topic (think, wonder). The software parses text and provides the relative frequencies of words that fall into the dictionary categories that one is likely to feel upon witnessing difficulties experienced by another person.

PROCEDURE

Participants who volunteered to participate in this study were divided into four experimental groups in accord with the month of their birthday. All participants were presented with one of four possible stories. The stories varied only in the relationship between the main character, Sara, and a second character. Each story described a high-tech company during early 21st Century, when the economic crash of high tech industries was occurring. In the story Sara, a loyal and hardworking manager, is promoted, while the secondary character, another hardworking manager in a different division, is laid off. In condition 1, the secondary character is Sara's sibling; in condition 2, she is Sara's best friend; in condition 3 she is a distant acquaintance; and in condition 4, she is a rival who had behaved unethically during their long years working for the company. We asked the participants, after reading the story, to describe in a written narrative how they believed Sara would feel, think, and what she might do, after hearing about her co-worker's situation. Following the request for narratives, the participants were asked to complete the standardized measures described above.

Acknowledgements

Results

Results were derived from analysis of the narratives using two methods: 1) From ratings indicated for each of the randomized narratives by independent judges, using the 9 items on the Workplace Emotions Rating Scale (WERS) and 2) The Linguistic Inquiry Word Count (Pennebaker). One-way ANOVAs were used to compare the four conditions representing varying degrees of closeness. Linear trend analyses were used to examine patterns of means across the conditions. Results demonstrated significant linear trends for all scales on the WERS (see Figures 1 and 2). The same procedure was used for five word categories from the LIWC. There was a significant linear trend for social and cognitive categories. Mean scores on the subscales of the IGQ and the DAS failed to demonstrate significant differences between conditions, indicating that dispositional factors were not influencing differences across conditions. Results demonstrated that more intimate relationships generated narratives with higher empathy, survivor guilt, the inhibition of pleasure, helping behavior and self-sacrifice. In most analyses the sibling and best friend conditions were similar to one another, but differed significantly from the acquaintance and unethical rival.

In order to ascertain the absolute presence of empathic concern, guilt, helping behavior, and other related variables, we identified all narratives in which one or both raters judged the emotion category to be completely absent. We then compared the four experimental conditions on the presence or absence of each emotion or behavior category (See Figure 3). In chi-square analyses, we found significant differences in each of the eight emotion or behavior categories, demonstrating that presence or absence of each variable was dependent on the condition, representing the relationship between the main and secondary characters. From these figures it may be observed that despite the closeness or lack of closeness between the characters in the story, surprisingly few people failed to express some level of empathy, survivor guilt and inhibition of pleasure as expected emotions and behavior on the part of the main character.

Discussion

The results of this study demonstrated the guilty reactions we tend to feel when our own successes are contrasted to the misfortunes of others, even when there is no relationship between our own condition and that of the less fortunate person. Despite the disconnection between two individuals' lives, people tend to feel irrationally responsible for the troubles visiting others, particularly if they are in close proximity, such as working in the same office, for the same company, in the same family, community, or school. In the present study two workers in the same firm, in different divisions, met different outcomes, the first highly positive, a promotion within the company, and the second defeat and the loss of her job. The source of the job loss lay outside of the control of either employee, but instead rested at the mercy of larger economic forces. Despite this, the employee who was promoted was predicted in narratives written in response to reading about the situation, to feel empathy, remorse, and even guilt for the fate of the less fortunate employee. In the vast majority of the narratives, the successful employee was unable to fully enjoy her promotion and instead she was worried about the fate of the less fortunate colleague, even when the colleague had been an unethical rival.

These results demonstrated that the degree of discomfort, empathy, guilt, and efforts to help, followed a linear course with the greatest discomfort and efforts to help experienced when the less fortunate was a sibling, next a best friend, then an acquaintance and finally a rival. This pattern emerged in most of the categories of reactions, demonstrating the importance of equity in familial relationships and extended kin-like friendships. Although the strength of discomfort diminished as the relationship distance increased, nevertheless in most cases it was present, and was responsible for inhibitions of pleasure at one's own advancement. This speaks to the condition of employees in the wake of lay offs so common in our present economy. It is known that the people "left behind" in the office, who remain employed, become far less effective workers after layoffs. This study suggests that survivor guilt towards those who have been laid off may be an important contributor to decreased efficiency in post-layoff work settings, and that managers in positions of authority after layoffs will do well to work on alleviating the survivor guilt in those remaining at the workplace.