Abstract:

In an online anonymous survey, we compared 96 Latino first-generation undergraduate students to 105 Latino non-first-generation students on measures of empathy-based guilt (Survivor Guilt, Separation Guilt, and Omnipotent Responsibility Guilt), depression, and Satisfaction With Life. Latino first-generation students reported significantly higher levels of empathy-based guilt, depression, and lower levels of satisfaction with life compared to their non-first-generation student peers.

Introduction

This study examined the relationship between collegiate generation status and empathy-based guilt among Latino college students. The parents of first-generation college students (FGCS) had no college experience. Empathy-based guilt is defined as an often difficult emotion that arises from the belief that one has harmed another. Prior research has suggested that empathy-based guilt is significantly correlated both with depression and, in some cases, altruistic behaviors.

Our hypothesis is that one significant challenge that affects Latino FGCS more than their non-FGCS peers is empathy-based guilt about pursuing personal education goals, believing that they are educationally and economically separating from their family and thus experience guilt, depression, and low levels of satisfaction with life about surviving their less privileged upbringing.

Methods

Participants were obtained by way of announcements on listserve and websites. They were invited to voluntarily participate anonymously in an online survey located on The Emotions, Personality & Altruism Research Group (EPAR) website. Standard measures listed below along with an anonymous demographic questionnaire were included. A total of 201 adults participated in the study as described in Table 1. There were no significant demographic differences between the FGCS and non-FGCS samples.

Instruments

(Interpersonal Guilt Questionnaire-67 (IGQ-67); O’Connor, Berry, Weiss, Baush, & Sampson, 1993). The IGQ-67 is a self-report measure consisting of 18-items with a Likert-type rating scale. All questions are answered on a scale of 1-5, with 1 indicating “very untrue of me or strongly disagree,” and 5 indicating “true of me or strongly agree.” The measure is divided into four subscales: survivor guilt, separation guilt, omnipotent responsibility guilt, and self-neglect guilt. The questionnaire measures types of intergal guilt associated with conversations about harming others (O’Connor et al., 1997). The survivor separation, and omnipotent responsibility guilt subscales measure levels of guilt related to harming others. The self-neglect subscale measures a form of guilt in which people accept an extreme negative view of themselves in order to maintain a connection to loved ones. For this study, only the survivor guilt, separation guilt, and omnipotent responsibility guilt scales were used.

The Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale (CES-D; Radloff, 1977). The CES-D Scale is a screening instrument for major depression. It is a self-report measure made up of 20-items. Each item is associated with a four-point Likert-type rating scale with the lowest rating (0) indicating no symptom presence, and the highest rating (3) indicating symptoms “most or all of the time.” The CES-D is designed to measure symptoms of depression that have occurred over the past week, such as hopelessness, fatigue, and poor appetite.

The Satisfaction With Life Scale (SWLS; Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985). The SWLS is a self-report measure consisting of 5-items with a Likert-type rating scale. All questions are answered on a scale of 1-7, with 1 denoting “strongly disagree” and 7 denoting “strongly agree.” Higher scores reflect greater satisfaction with life as a whole (Pavot & Diener, 1993).

Results

Individuals’ samples. Heats were used to compare Latino FGCS to non-FGCS on empathy-based guilt (e.g., Survivor Guilt, Separation Guilt, and Omnipotent Responsibility Guilt), depression, and Satisfaction With Life. Descriptive statistics and test results are shown in Table 2. FGCS scored significantly higher than non-FGCS on Survivor Guilt (p = .067) and Omnipotent Responsibility Guilt (p = .040). The Satisfaction With Life scale in the Latino FGCS sample was significantly lower in Satisfaction With Life than non-FGCS (p = .029). There was no significant difference between the two groups on Separation Guilt and Depression. These results were not confounded by demographic factors, as the FGCS and non-FGCS groups did not differ in age, gender, marital status, or marital status.

Pearson’s correlations assessed the relationships among empathy-based guilt, depression symptoms, and Satisfaction With Life (see Table 3). There was a significant correlation between Survivor Guilt and Depression (r = .36), and between Omnipotent Responsibility Guilt and Depression (r = .57). There was also a significant negative correlation between Survivor Guilt and Satisfaction With Life (r = .37).

In an exploratory component of the study, students provided open-ended narratives regarding their personal feelings about being in college. Narratives were analyzed using the Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count program (LIWC; Pennebaker, 2007), which provides relative frequencies for a variety of word categories (self-references, social words, positive emotions, negative emotions, cognitve words). Independent samples t-tests compared the two groups of students on word category percentages (see Table 4). Results showed a significantly higher percentage of self-referential words for FGCS compared to non-FGCS.

Finally, a qualitative analysis identified four broad themes across the narratives: Benefits, Positive Feelings, Negative Experiences, and Pressures to Succeed. Table 5 shows the frequencies of the themes in the FGCS and non-FGCS samples. The groups were similar on all themes, and the most referenced theme for both groups was positive feelings about college.

Discussion

The results from the Latino first-generation college student sample on empathy-based guilt and Satisfaction With Life were consistent with the hypotheses and previous research regarding guilt and altruism. These results suggest that when a Latino student enrolls in a college to become a professional and, when he or her parent has attended college, they will experience higher levels of Survivor Guilt and Omnipotent Responsibility Guilt, and lower Satisfaction With Life than Latino students whose parents have not attended college. Results also suggest that Latino FGCS experience an exaggerated sense of unwarranted responsibility and concern for the well-being and happiness of others compared to non-FGCS. For FGCS, Omnipotent Responsibility Guilt may be due to the belief that they are the cause of the family’s unhappiness and that they are responsible for fixing it.

These findings appear to be consistent with much of the existing theory and research on first-generation college students. FGCS can struggle with survivor guilt, both as a result of their academic success, which can lead to socially and economically surpassing their parents, would harm their less successful family members simply by comparison.

This study also provided support for a significant correlation between empathy-based guilt, specifically Survivor Guilt and Omnipotent Responsibility Guilt, and depression. In addition, research showed a significant increase in correlation between Survivor Guilt and Satisfaction With Life. These findings suggest that for Latino college students, regardless of collegiate generation status, levels of Survivor Guilt increase, levels of depression increase, and levels of Satisfaction With Life decrease. Additionally, as levels of Omnipotent Responsibility Guilt increase, so do levels of depression for Latino college students. More research is needed in order to understand the details of the source and effects of Survivor Guilt and Omnipotent Responsibility Guilt among this population.

For further information, please contact Adrianna Gonzalez Hooper at agonz93@gmail.com or Lynn O’Connor at jlynnoc@lynnoc.com.