Survivor Guilt Predicts Depression and Anxiety in Iranian Immigrants

Parisa Shoja a, Jack W. Berry b, Lynn E. O'Connor a, David J. Stiver c and Alexandra Keller a

a The Wright Institute, b Stanford University, c Graduate Theological Union

Presented at the Annual Convention of the Western Psychological Association, Sacramento, CA April 27-30, 2017

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 dimension of depression and high anxiety in immigrant populations. In a study of 122 Iranian immigrants we contrasted survivor guilt with migratory grief, finding survivor guilt a better predictor of both depression and anxiety.

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=10.9). Age at migration were as follows: under 18 (14%), 19-30 (40%), 31-40 (9%), and 41-50 (8%). Most participants migrated to the United States (63.5%), with other locations as follows: Canada (3.9%), England (1.9%), Germany (1.9%), Italy (1.9%), Malaysia (1.9%), Sweden (1.9%), Switzerland (1.9%), and 4.9% with no response. Over 85% considered themselves to be middle class or higher in socioeconomic status. About 55% of participants identified as Muslim, 36% as having no religious affiliation, and the rest reported a variety of other religions. About 55% reported feeling the need to leave Iran, while 45% responded they did not feel the need to leave.

Participants were recruited through online listservs 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 Guilt Responsibility subscales of the IGQ (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 include “I feel guilty about my success” and “I wish I could do more to make up for what I’ve taken away.”

- Generalized Anxious Temperament (GAT). The GAT (Akinbami, 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.

- The CES-D (6). 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 (Kroenke, 2001). The CES-D is a three-item composite: idealization of the homeland; searching and yearning; and identifying and coming to terms with the legacy of the MGLQ.

- The MGLQ (Casado & Leung, 2011) is a 26-item scale designed to assess the experience of grief and guilt of the problem that occurs when someone else is present. The MGLQ has been conceptualized to consist of three components: individualization of the homeland; searching and yearning; and identifying and coming to terms with the legacy of the MGLQ.

- The depression and anxiety measures were significantly associated with both guilt scales. Survivor guilt had a substantially stronger association with both symptom measures compared to the grief/loss measure.

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 and anxiety measures 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 1 Pearson correlations between psychological symptoms and measures of migratory grief/loss and interpersonal guilt

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>CES-D</th>
<th>Anxiety (GAT total)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>MGLQ</td>
<td>-0.07</td>
<td>0.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Survivor Guilt</td>
<td>-0.07</td>
<td>0.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Omnipotent Guilt</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To determine the relative contribution of guilt versus migratory grief and loss in predicting depression among participants, we conducted multiple regressions, one for each interpersonal guilt scale (Survivor Guilt and Omnipotent 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 MGLQ and Survivor Guilt and Omnipotent Responsibility Guilt

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictor</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>SE</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>MGLQ</td>
<td>-0.06</td>
<td>0.17</td>
<td>-0.40</td>
<td>0.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Survivor Guilt</td>
<td>-0.26</td>
<td>0.19</td>
<td>-1.37</td>
<td>0.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Omnipotent Guilt</td>
<td>0.37</td>
<td>0.20</td>
<td>1.85</td>
<td>0.07</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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 are well-known predictors of depression, survivor guilt proneness was more significantly 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’ ability to engage in a promotion when other individuals were not present. In both settings, pointing the survivor 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 immigration, and the type of news immigrants are exposed to can also affect levels of anxiety. For example, immigrants who originated from countries that are currently on the news and portrayed in a negative way may be more susceptible to high stress situations would be subject to more worry and anxiety than those left behind.

For clinicians working with clients who have immigrated, not to neglect the factors that stress-related fears, 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, these factors could shift the entire perspective on immigration. The immigrant, instead of being considered to have a less-sensitive victim, could be seen as suffering from process and the shift from victim to winner is inherently psychologically supportive.

In our increasingly global world, with high rates of immigration, clinicians are necessarily in a position to provide 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.