



Empathy-based Guilt in Latino First-Generation College Students

Adrianna G. Hooper^a, Jack W. Berry^b, David J. Stiver^c, Lynn E. O'Connor^a, Suluck Chaturabul^d, Kevin W. Choi^a, Yanlin Li^a and Toni Li^a
a The Wright Institute, b Samford University, c Graduate Theological Union, d Western University of Health Sciences College of Pharmacy

Presented at the Annual Convention of the Association for Psychological Science, San Francisco, CA May 22-25, 2014

EMOTIONS,
PERSONALITY
AND ALTRUISM
RESEARCH GROUP
WWW.EPARG.ORG



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.

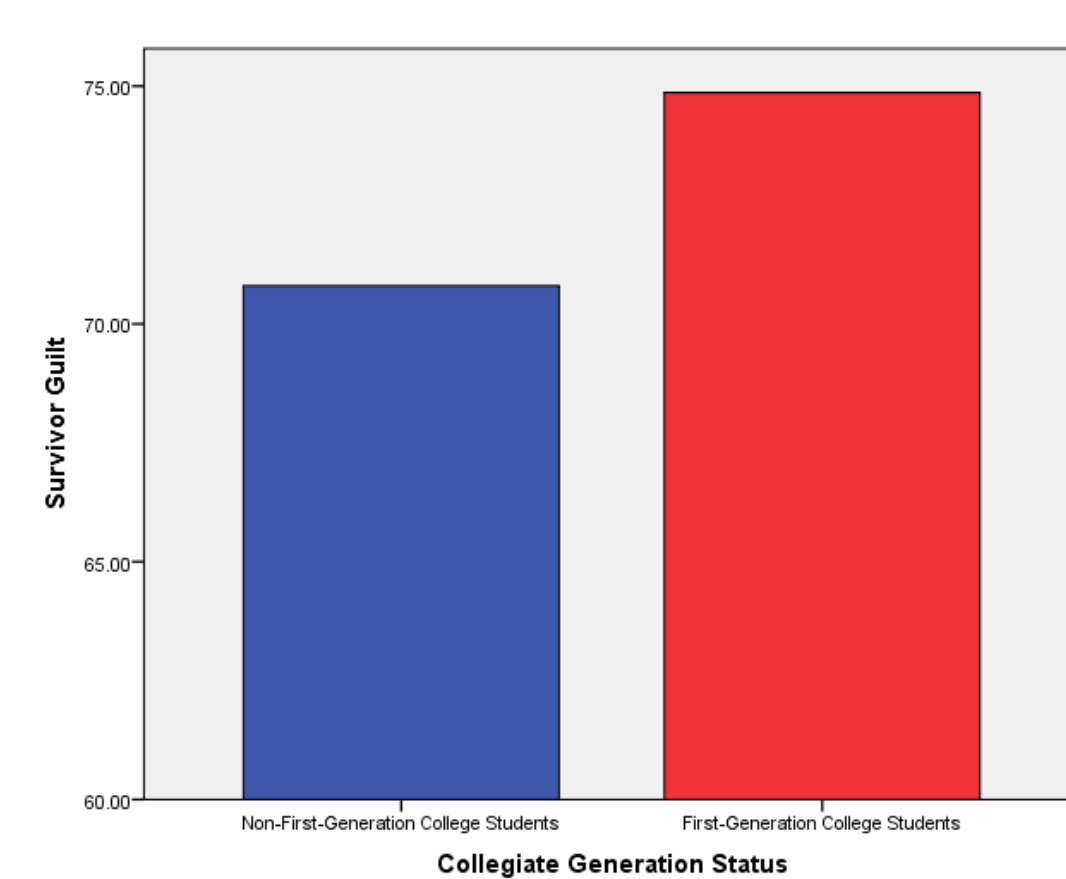


Figure 1. Survivor Guilt Differences Between FGCS and Non-FGCS

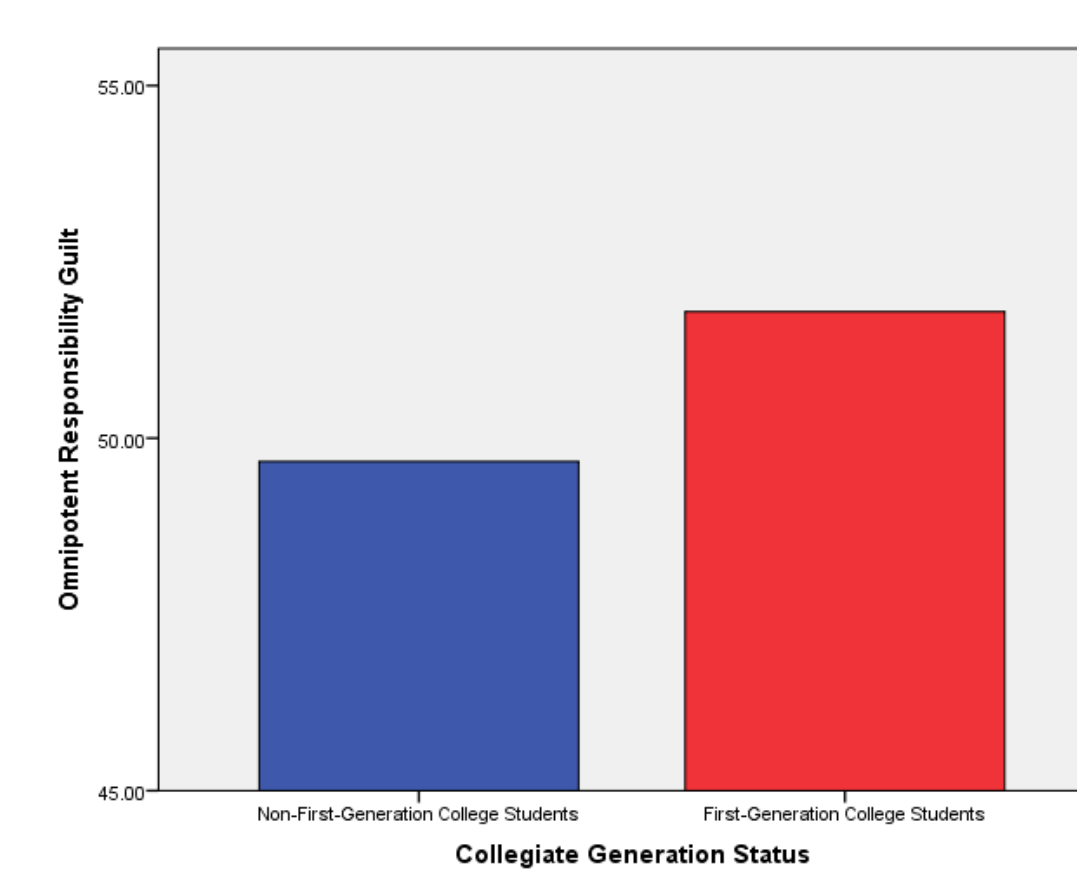


Figure 2. Omnipotent Responsibility Guilt Differences Between FGCS and Non-FGCS

Methods

Participants were obtained by way of announcements on listservs and websites. They were invited to voluntarily participate anonymously in an online survey located on The Emotions, Personality & Altruism Research Group (EPARG) website. Standard measures listed below along with a 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, Bush, & Sampson, 1997). The IGQ-67 is a self-report measure consisting 67-items with a Likert-type rating scale. All questions were answered on a scale of 1-5, with 1 denoting "very untrue of me or strongly disagree," and 5 denoting "very true of me or strongly agree." The measure is divided into four subscales: survivor guilt, separation guilt, omnipotent responsibility guilt, and self-hate guilt. The questionnaire measures types of irrational guilt associated with concerns 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-hate 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 common 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 were 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

Independent-samples *t*-tests 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 ($p = .007$) and Omnipotent Responsibility Guilt ($p = .040$) (see Figures 1 and 2). The Latino FGCS sample was significantly lower in Satisfaction With Life than non-FGCS ($p = .005$). There was no significant difference between 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, collegiate level, 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 ($r = .17$). There was also a significant negative correlation between Survivor Guilt and Satisfaction With Life ($r = -.27$).

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, cognitive 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 analyses 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.

Table 1. Participants

	FGCS		Non-FGCS		
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent	
<i>Ethnicity</i>	Mexican	67	80.7	70	76.1
	Latino (Other)	16	19.3	22	23.9
<i>Gender</i>	Male	28	29.2	31	29.5
	Female	68	70.8	74	70.5
<i>Collegiate Level</i>	Freshmen	27	28.1	21	20.0
	Sophomore	22	22.9	20	19.0
	Junior	25	26.0	31	29.5
	Senior	17	17.7	23	21.9
	5 th Year Senior	3	3.1	8	7.6
<i>Communication</i>	Daily	56	58.3	59	56.7
	Once per week	31	32.3	31	29.8
	Once per month	8	8.3	11	10.6
	Holidays only	0	0	2	1.9
	Seldom or Never	1	1.0	1	1.0
	<i>Marital Status</i>	Married	7	7.3	8
Partner		11	11.5	8	7.6
Single		76	79.2	88	83.8
Divorce		2	2.1	1	1.0

Table 2. Collegiate Generation Status Differences

	FGCS (n = 96)		Non-FGCS (n = 105)		<i>t</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	
Survivor Guilt	74.86	10.44	70.80	10.50	2.75**
Separation Guilt	44.40	8.97	43.00	9.05	1.10
Omnipotent Guilt	51.79	7.30	49.67	7.25	2.07*
CES-D	18.82	12.83	17.59	10.94	0.71
SWLS	21.28	6.84	24.10	7.10	-2.85**

* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$
Note. Omnipotent Guilt = Omnipotent Responsibility Guilt subscale of the IGQ-67; CES-D = Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale; SWLS = Satisfaction With Life Scale.

Table 3. Correlations Among Standardized Scales

	Surv. Guilt	Sep. Guilt	Omnip. Guilt	CES-D	SWLS
Survivor Guilt	—	—	—	—	—
Separation Guilt	.40**	—	—	—	—
Omnipotent Guilt	.59**	.56**	—	—	—
CES-D	.36**	.11	.17*	—	—
SWLS	-.27**	-.13	-.04	-.48**	—

* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$
Note. Surv. Guilt = Survivor Guilt subscale of the IGQ-67; Sep. Guilt = Separation Guilt subscale of the IGQ-67; Omnip. Guilt = Omnipotent Responsibility Guilt subscale of the IGQ-67; CES-D = Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale; SWLS = Satisfaction With Life Scale.

Table 4. Narrative Word Category Differences

	FGCS (n = 91)		Non-FGCS (n = 38)		<i>t</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	
Self References (I, me)	11.78	6.41	15.86	8.52	-2.95**
Social Words	5.30	4.28	4.95	5.57	0.39
Positive Emotions	5.78	13.23	7.56	8.43	-0.76
Negative Emotions	1.55	3.01	1.49	2.74	0.12
Overall Cognitive Words	6.62	5.67	6.25	5.69	0.33
Word Count	45.88	42.91	34.57	32.83	1.44

* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$

Table 5. Broad Narrative Themes

	FGCS (n = 91)		Non-FGCS (n = 38)	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
Benefits	37	19.89	11	19.30
Positive Feelings	68	36.56	25	43.86
Negative Experiences	38	20.43	10	17.54
Pressure to Succeed	43	23.12	11	19.30

Note. Positive Feelings = Positive Feelings About College; Negative Experiences = Negative College Experiences.

For further information, please contact Adrianna Gonzales Hooper at a.gonza258@gmail.com or Lynn O'Connor at lynnoc@lynnoc.com