

Responses to Corporate Lay-Offs: Survivor Guilt in the Workplace

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Abstract

In an online experimental study, participants responded to workplace scenarios in which the main character was promoted at work, while a secondary character was laid off. Participants were randomly assigned to one of four scenarios, which varied only by the relationship closeness of the characters: siblings, friends, acquaintances, or rivals. With increased relationship closeness, the main character was described as displaying significantly less positive affect and significantly more guilt, negative affect, and empathy, as well as more expressions of self-sacrifice and desires to help the laid off coworker.

Background

This study is about the evolutionary-based human propensity to prefer "fairness", share goods and resources despite personal costs, to be uncomfortable when receiving more than others, and to inhibit personal gain and pleasure when misfortune falls upon others. Survivor guilt can be broadly defined as the tendency to experience guilt when one is better off than others. Our program of research has demonstrated that survivor guilt is significantly associated with dispositional empathy, altruism, and omnipotent responsibility for the well-being of others. Extreme survivor guilt predicts a variety of psychological symptoms and inhibitions, such as depression, anxiety, and proneness to shame.

In today's economy most are experiencing stress. Massive lay-offs, and high unemployment rates affect even those remaining in the work force; the retained worker experiences conflicting emotions as they compare their own economic "survival" to the condition of others who are laid off. Survivor guilt and associated inhibitions may be found in response to the suffering of strangers (such as beggars confronted on the streets), as well as when misfortune befalls loved ones, such as family and friends. Current evolutionary theories account for altruism towards strangers (as a function of group selection), and towards loved ones, as predicted by inclusive fitness and reciprocal altruism theory.

Survivor guilt and altruistic motivation may be more intense when directed toward genetically related kin (kin selection theory) and toward those to whom we are committed to enduring relationships (reciprocal altruism theory), however because groups with higher rates of altruism outcompete less altruistic groups in between group selection, kindness to strangers is more common than is often assumed. The present study was designed to assess the degree to which survivor guilt and other emotional and behavioral responses are expressions of relationship closeness, and if survivor guilt leads to inhibitions of pleasure even in relationship to strangers or enemies.

Method

Procedure

In an internet-based experiment, participants responded to a story describing a skilled manager ("Sara") being promoted during a time of layoffs, while another skilled manager was laid off. Participants were presented with one of four stories that varied only in the relationship closeness between the characters: Sara's sibling, Sara's best friend, a distant work acquaintance, and an unethical rival. Participants wrote narratives about what they thought the main character would think, feel and do. Narratives were assessed for emotional and behavioral reactions predicted by the participants and responses were compared across the experimental conditions.

Participants

Narratives were obtained from 231 participants (80.2% female, 19.8% male.) Ages ranged from 19-78 years ($M=32.9$, $SD=10.2$). Approximately 95% of participants lived in the United States. The sample was predominantly (80.2%) of European ancestry; 4.3% were of Asian and 1.4% of African ancestry. The sample was highly educated, 13.1% with doctoral degrees, 18.1% masters degrees, 13% some graduate education; only 2.5% had only a high school education or less. The sample sizes for the experimental conditions were as follows: Sibling, $n=62$;

Friend, $n=55$, Acquaintance, $n=55$; and Rival, $n=59$. There were no significant demographic differences between conditions.

Instruments

Two methods were used to examine the content of participant narratives. In the first, two independent judges, blind to experimental conditions, rated each narrative for expressions of positive emotions, sadness, anger, empathy for the coworker, survivor guilt, desire to help the coworker, and expressions of self-sacrifice. The rating scales ranged from 1 (not present in the narrative) to 6 (strongly expressed in the narrative). Intraclass correlations for assessing inter-rater reliabilities ranged from .65-.83.

In the second method, narratives were analyzed using the Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC; Pennebaker et al., 2007) text analysis program. The LIWC provides relative frequencies for over 70 categories of language. In this study, we examined positive emotions, negative emotions, social words, and the specific emotions of sadness, anger, shame and guilt.

Results

Tables 1 and 2 present sample means, by experimental condition, for the judges' ratings and LIWC relative frequencies of word categories. Because most variables suggested linear trends in mean levels according to relationship closeness, we used generalized linear models (SAS GENMOD) to predict judges' ratings and LIWC relative frequencies from relationship closeness. In these analyses, experimental conditions were coded by relationship closeness as sibling=1, friend=2, acquaintance=3, and rival=4. Results of the linear model analyses are shown in Table 3.

The results for the judges' ratings of the narratives demonstrated that as relationship closeness increased, there was a significant decline in expressions of positive emotions, and significant increases in expressions of sadness, empathy, survivor guilt, anger, desire to help the coworker, and mentions of possible self-sacrifice for the sake of the co-worker.

The LIWC analyses produced results that were largely consistent with the judges' ratings. As relationship closeness increased, the narratives contained more relative frequencies of social words, negative emotion words, and anger. The effect of relationship closeness on shame approached significance.

In addition to the trend analyses, we also used single-sample t -tests to compare mean response levels within each experimental group to the theoretically lowest possible levels afforded by the variables. For the judges' ratings, we test the null hypothesis that the population mean = 1 (the lowest level of the rating scale); for the LIWC categories, we tested the null mean = 0.

For the judges' ratings, the sibling and friend conditions were significantly different from the null model on all variables. For the acquaintance and rival conditions, both groups differed significantly from the null on all variables except anger and expressions of self-sacrifice. For the LIWC categories, all experimental groups differed significantly from 0 on all variables except shame.

Table 1. Mean Judges' Ratings of Narrative Content

| | Condition | | | |
|-------------------|-----------|--------|----------|-------|
| | Sibling | Friend | Acquaint | Rival |
| Positive Emotions | 2.94 | 2.88 | 3.34 | 3.68 |
| Sadness | 1.79 | 1.70 | 1.52 | 1.25 |
| Anger | 1.32 | 1.15 | 1.08 | 1.11 |
| Empathy | 4.23 | 4.25 | 3.34 | 2.83 |
| Survivor Guilt | 4.30 | 4.10 | 3.20 | 2.75 |
| Desire to Help | 3.53 | 3.45 | 1.71 | 1.57 |
| Self-Sacrifice | 1.77 | 1.37 | 1.04 | 1.02 |

Table 2. Mean Percent of LIWC Categories

| Words | Condition | | | |
|------------------|-----------|--------|----------|-------|
| | Sibling | Friend | Acquaint | Rival |
| Social | 18.33 | 19.52 | 14.33 | 12.82 |
| Positive Emotion | 4.56 | 8.39 | 5.43 | 5.20 |
| Negative Emotion | 3.80 | 3.76 | 3.16 | 3.17 |
| Anxiety | 1.62 | 1.96 | 1.53 | 1.37 |
| Anger | .44 | .33 | .10 | .13 |
| Sadness | 1.04 | 1.08 | 1.04 | .86 |
| Guilt | 1.03 | 1.42 | 1.24 | 1.19 |
| Shame | .05 | .02 | .01 | .00 |

Table 3. Model Estimates from Prediction of Narrative Content from Relationship Closeness

| Ratings | β | SE | χ^2 |
|------------------------------|---------|-----|----------|
| Positive Emotions | -.26 | .06 | 22.9*** |
| Sadness | -.18 | .05 | 12.3** |
| Anger | -.07 | .03 | 4.5* |
| Empathy for co-worker | -.51 | .05 | 86.8*** |
| Survival Guilt | -.55 | .06 | 74.7*** |
| Desire to help co-worker | -.76 | .07 | 108.6*** |
| Expression of self sacrifice | -.26 | .05 | 28.4*** |
| LIWC | β | SE | χ^2 |
| Positive Emotions | -.01 | .02 | .21 |
| Negative Emotion | -.07 | .03 | 5.17* |
| Social words | -.13 | .02 | 83.60*** |
| Sadness | -.06 | .05 | 1.01 |
| Anger | -.48 | .13 | 14.22*** |
| Shame | -1.09 | .63 | 3.01† |
| Guilt | .03 | .05 | .25 |

†=p<.10 *p<.05 **p<.01 ***p<.001



Conclusions

These results suggest that workplace layoffs leave the retained work force experiencing empathy-based survivor guilt toward those who have lost their jobs. These workplace "survivors" tend to experience a range of negative emotions and inhibit their own pleasure at advancement. The negative psychological consequences are likely to be strongest when family and extended kin-like friendships are among those who suffer from economic hardships. However, the adverse and inhibiting guilt is likely to be found in everyone remaining, including toward those who were direct competitors. A serious problem for employers is the decrease of productivity of those remaining. Further research must determine whether survivor guilt (and its emotional and motivational consequences) is the source of this drop in productivity when a company is downsizing.

The Story

Sara has worked for Smith F & P, a well known office machinery and duplicating business for 10 years. She works as an Operations Manager, has been a loyal employee, and has only missed two weeks of work due to illness during her years of employment for the firm. Sara's [sister, best friend, an acquaintance, long-time rival] also worked for ten years in another division of Smith, as a Sales Manager. Her [variable] has been a loyal employee, and missed little work in her years of employment for the company. The company was hit hard by the technology crash in the Silicon Valley. Everyone knew that layoffs were coming, as business orders were diminishing week by week. And then the layoffs began. Sara found herself working harder than ever, hoping against hope that she would not be among those laid off. Her [variable] also found herself working harder than ever, hoping she would manage to avoid being laid off, despite the decrease in business in her division. At the first of the month the company announced that a number of employees had been laid off. At the same time, Sara received the news that she was being promoted to headquarters and would be taking on greater responsibility. Her boss told her that her [variable] was among those who had just been laid off.

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For Further Information

If you require additional information, please contact Lynn O'Connor at lynnoc@aol.com. The survey is available at www.eparg.org/wright/life. To view a PDF of the poster go to www.eparg.org/wright/life/poster.pdf.

Related projects can be found at the Emotions, Personality and Altruism Research Group website, www.eparg.org.