

Empirical Articles

Understanding interpersonal guilt: Associations with attachment, altruism, and personality pathology

JESSICA LEONARDI,¹ FRANCESCO GAZZILLO,¹ BERNARD S. GORMAN² and DAVID KEALY³

¹Department of Dynamic and Clinical Psychology, and Health Studies, "Sapienza" University of Rome, Rome, Italy

²Derner School of Psychology, Adelphi University, Garden City, New York, USA

³Department of Psychiatry, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Canada

Leonardi, J., Gazzillo, F., Gorman, B. S. & Kealy, D. (2022). Understanding interpersonal guilt: Associations with attachment, altruism, and personality pathology. *Scandinavian Journal of Psychology*.

The aim of this article is to empirically investigate the relationships among interpersonal guilt, as conceived within control-mastery theory (CMT), and attachment, altruism, and personality pathology in an English-speaking sample. An online sample of 393 participants was recruited to complete the Interpersonal Guilt Rating Scale self-report version-15 (IGRS-15s), together with other empirically validated measures for the assessment of attachment, altruism, and personality pathology. On the basis of previous studies conducted in Italian-speaking samples, we hypothesized that survivor guilt, separation/disloyalty guilt, and omnipotent responsibility guilt would be associated with attachment anxiety and avoidance, altruism, and personality pathology; self-hate was hypothesized to be associated only with attachment anxiety and avoidance and personality pathology. Analyses examined bivariate associations as well as the network of partial correlations among variables. The results largely confirmed hypothesized associations, with self-hate evincing the strongest unique association with personality dysfunction. Findings provide a basis for further research regarding interpersonal guilt and personality and relational functioning, with potential implications for clinical conceptualizations of the role of guilt in psychopathology.

Key words: control-mastery theory, guilt, attachment, altruism, personality pathology.

Jessica Leonardi, Department of Dynamic and Clinical Psychology and Health Studies, "Sapienza" University of Rome, Via degli Apuli 1, Rome 00185, Italy. E-mail: jessica.leonardi@uniroma1.it

INTRODUCTION

Numerous authors have highlighted the role of guilt in the development of personality pathology and psychological problems (Bush, 2005; Gazzillo *et al.*, 2018, 2019; O'Connor, Berry & Weiss, 1999; O'Connor, Berry, Weiss & Gilbert, 2002; Tangney & Dearing, 2002). Control-mastery theory (CMT; Gazzillo, 2016; Silberschatz, 2005; Weiss, 1993; Weiss *et al.*, 1986), an integrative, cognitive-dynamic theory of mental functioning, psychopathology, and psychotherapy, defines four different types of interpersonal guilt (Gazzillo *et al.*, 2018, 2019): *survivor guilt*, deriving from the pathogenic belief that having more satisfaction, success, good fortune, or other good qualities than significant others can hurt them; *separation/disloyalty guilt*, deriving from the belief that separating physically or differentiating psychologically from important others can deeply hurt them; *omnipotent responsibility guilt*, which is an expression of the belief that one has the duty and the power to make loved ones happy, so that putting one's needs in the foreground means being selfish; and *self-hate*, which is based on the belief of being worthless, bad, and inadequate and not deserving love, appreciation, or protection. CMT has underlined how these types of guilt are functions of the primary emotional systems of attachment (Gazzillo *et al.*, 2018; Gazzillo, Dazzi, De Luca, Rodomonti & Silberschatz, 2020) and care (Fimiani, Gazzillo, Dazzi & Bush, 2021), and that they are shaped by early experiences with caregivers that led the child to believe that pursuing healthy goals could cause suffering in significant others or endanger the person and their close relationships (Bush, 2005;

Gazzillo, 2016; Weiss *et al.*, 1986). These beliefs cause cognitive errors in assuming causality, so that empathically perceiving distress in others can elicit irrational guilt and pathological forms of altruism.

Several research studies (Faccini, Gazzillo, Gorman, De Luca & Dazzi, 2020; Fimiani, Gazzillo, Dazzi & Bush, 2021; Gazzillo *et al.*, 2018; Leonardi *et al.*, 2020; O'Connor, Berry & Weiss, 1999) showed that all types of interpersonal guilt correlated positively with shame and negatively with self-esteem and mental health (Faccini, Gazzillo, Gorman, De Luca & Dazzi, 2020). They also correlated with worry, rumination, the impostor phenomenon, anxiety, and depression (Fimiani, Leonardi, Gorman & Gazzillo, 2021; Gazzillo, Leonardi & Bush, 2020; Leonardi *et al.*, 2020). Moreover, survivor guilt and omnipotence guilt were found to be stronger in people who grew up feeling that their caregivers needed their support, had more problems than them, or appeared burdened by them or hurt by their separation and individuation (Faccini, Gazzillo, Gorman, De Luca & Dazzi, 2020). Self-hate, which was linked to the attachment and fear motivational systems, but not to the care system (Gazzillo *et al.*, 2018), showed no correlation with empathy, was negatively correlated with social desirability, and seemed to be a virtually omnipresent result of a traumatic past (Faccini, Gazzillo, Gorman, De Luca & Dazzi, 2020).

Such research points to a connection between interpersonal guilt and attachment insecurity. The attachment system is central in human functioning throughout life (Bowlby, 1980). It guides behavior and affects expectations and strategies in important relationships (Bretherton & Munholland, 2016; Meyer, Jones, Rorer & Maxwell, 2015), with behavioral aspects of attachment

Section Editor: Ewa Mörtberg