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Intensity of Habitual Guilt in Men and Women: Differences in Interpersonal Sensitivity
and the Tendency towards Anxious-Aggressive Guilt *The Spanish Journal of Psychology*,
vol. 12, núm. 2, noviembre, 2009, pp. 540-554,
Universidad Complutense de Madrid
España

Available in: <http://www.redalyc.org/articulo.oa?id=17213008014>



The Spanish Journal of Psychology,
ISSN (Printed Version): 1138-7416
psyjour@sis.ucm.es
Universidad Complutense de Madrid
España

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Intensity of Habitual Guilt in Men and Women: Differences in Interpersonal Sensitivity and the Tendency towards Anxious-Aggressive Guilt

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In this study we analyzed gender differences in the intensity of habitual guilt, as well as those in interpersonal sensitivity and the tendency towards experiencing feelings of guilt with a high anxious-aggressive component. The 360 participants (adolescents, young adults and adults) were asked to relate one of the situations that most frequently caused them to experience guilt and to rank its intensity and that of 9 other emotions they may have experienced at the same time on a 7-point scale. These scales were used to obtain the scores for the anxious-aggressive component of guilt. Two interpersonal sensitivity measures were used: the IRI *Empathic Concern* scale and an ad hoc measure focusing on the guilt produced by interpersonal events (*Interpersonal Guilt*). Habitual guilt was found to be more intense in women than in men in all age groups. The results suggest that this difference is linked to differences in interpersonal sensitivity and the tendency to experience types of guilt with a high anxious-aggressive component.

Keywords: guilt intensity, gender differences, interpersonal sensitivity, empathy, anxiety.

Se analizaron las diferencias de género en intensidad de la culpa habitual, así como en sensibilidad interpersonal y tendencia a experimentar formas de culpa con un alto componente ansioso-agresivo. Se pidió a los 360 participantes –adolescentes, jóvenes y adultos de ambos sexos– que relataran una de las situaciones que más frecuentemente les hacían experimentar sentimientos de culpa, y que señalaran en escalas de 7 puntos, junto a su intensidad, la de 9 emociones más que podían experimentar al mismo tiempo. A partir de estas escalas se obtuvieron las puntuaciones del componente ansioso-agresivo de la culpa. Se utilizaron dos medidas de sensibilidad interpersonal: la escala de *Empathic Concern* del IRI y una prueba *ad hoc* de culpa provocada por situaciones interpersonales (*Culpa Interpersonal*). La culpa habitual era más intensa en las mujeres que en los varones en los tres grupos de edad. Los resultados sugieren que estas diferencias responden a diferencias en sensibilidad interpersonal y en la tendencia a experimentar formas de culpa con un alto componente ansioso-agresivo.

Palabras clave: intensidad de la culpa, diferencias de género, sensibilidad interpersonal, empatía, ansiedad.

This study is part of a research project funded by the University of the Basque Country (Project code: 1/UPV 00227.231-H-14897/2002).

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Research into gender differences in relation to guilt suggests that, although there are certain issues which engender more guilt in men than in women (Etxebarria & Pérez, 2003; Ferguson & Eyre, 2000), this emotion tends in general to be felt more intensely by women (Bybee, 1998; Harvey, Gore, Frank, & Batres, 1997; Hoffman, 1975; Lutwak & Ferrari, 1996; Lutwak, Ferrari, & Cheek, 1998; Lutwak, Panish, Ferrari, & Razzino, 2001; Tangney, 1990; Tangney & Dearing, 2002; Walter & Burnaford, 2006). This is the case, at least, in western countries characterized by a greater degree of individualism and a higher level of female participation in society (Fischer & Manstead, 2000). Previous studies with Spanish sample groups support the same conclusion (Etxebarria, 1992, 1994). Nevertheless, in an earlier study with a group of adolescents aged between 15 and 19 and adults aged between 25 and 48, we found this gender difference in the adolescent group but not in the adult group, in which the men's scores were very close to those of the women (Etxebarria, Isasi, & Pérez, 2002). Although different from the hypothesized result, these findings do not actually contradict the conclusions of the previous studies with Spanish sample groups, since all such studies were carried out with adolescents. Most of the studies carried out in other countries have also focused on subjects at university age or lower, and have not gone any further. So what happens later in life? Do the differences between the genders disappear or do women continue to experience more intense feelings of guilt than men? And in either case, what is the underlying reason for these gender differences as regards the intensity of guilt?

This study was designed with two basic objectives in mind: firstly, to see if the results of our previous study were replicated, or, on the contrary, if the data supported the original hypothesis which predicted a higher intensity of guilt in women in the adult group as well; and secondly, to try to explain the differences in intensity of guilt by testing several hypotheses, some of which were suggested by the results obtained in the aforementioned study.

In the previous study, we found a strong parallel between the intensity of guilt in the different age and gender subgroups, and the proportion of interpersonal events reported by the subjects of these subgroups as antecedents of this emotion (events in which the individual's action or omission affected others). This parallel suggests that the differences in intensity are related to the quantity of interpersonal events reported by the different subgroups. However, the fact that, in that study, male adolescents reported fewer interpersonal events than the other subgroups may be due to two reasons: firstly, that they were exposed to fewer potentially guilt-inducing interpersonal events; or alternatively, that they were equally exposed to such interpersonal events but were less sensitive to them. We favored the latter explanation, since there is no evidence to suggest that boys are exposed to fewer interpersonal events than girls. We therefore hypothesized that the different

proportion of interpersonal antecedents reported by the different subgroups reflected a different level of interpersonal sensitivity, or in other words, a difference in the subgroups' tendency to respond with guilt to potentially guilt-inducing interpersonal events (situations in which, by action or omission, the individual harms another person). Furthermore, a number of theoretical and empirical studies support the association between feelings of guilt and another basic interpersonal sensitivity index: empathy (Ishikawa & Uchiyama, 2002; Tangney, 1991; Tangney, Marschall, Rosenberg, Barlow, & Wagner, 1994; Thompson & Hoffman, 1980). Bearing all this in mind, in this study we aimed to test the hypothesis that age and gender differences in the intensity of habitual guilt were, to a large extent, the result of differences in the level of interpersonal sensitivity between the different subgroups.

Research into gender differences in this field shows that women tend to have more interpersonal concerns than men, and that problems in interpersonal relationships tend to evoke guilt (*interpersonal guilt*) and moral dilemmas more often in women (Etxebarria et al., 2002; Gilligan, 1982; Shields, 1991). This seems to reflect a greater tendency towards empathy in women. The data on gender differences with regard to empathy, however, are not entirely consistent. The question as to whether or not significant differences are found seems to depend, to a large extent, on how empathy is defined and measured. Following a wide-ranging review in which they closely analyzed what exactly was measured using the different measures, Eisenberg and Lennon found significant differences in favor of females as regards empathy (understood as the *affective* response that arises from an understanding of the emotional state or situation of another person) in questionnaire measures (Eisenberg & Lennon, 1983; Lennon & Eisenberg, 1987); however, they failed to find gender differences in studies in which empathy was measured using physiological or unobtrusive observations of non-verbal behavior. More recently, in a meta-analysis of relevant studies not included in the Eisenberg and Lennon (1983) review, Eisenberg and Fabes (1998) found that, although the differences were not significant in the non-verbal physiological and facial measurements, they were relatively pronounced in the self-report studies and moderate in the observational studies (those using mainly a combination of facial and behavioral reactions).

On the basis of these data, in this study we hypothesized that women would show higher levels of interpersonal sensitivity (interpersonal guilt and empathy) than men, and that as a result, habitual guilt would be more intense in women than in men.

Nevertheless, the intensity of habitual guilt is probably not only related to a higher or lower level of interpersonal sensitivity. In a previous study using the same sample as in the present one (Etxebarria & Apodaca, 2008), we confirmed that subjective experiences of guilt include two

basic emotional components - one empathic and the other anxious-aggressive - with the former being the predominating factor in some experiences and the latter in others. The *empathic* component mainly includes a feeling of sympathy for the person affected by the individual's actions or omissions, as well as a certain element of sadness; the anxious-aggressive component, on the other hand, includes anxiety, outward anger and inward anger, as well as, once again, a certain element of sadness. These results, which provide empirical support to the only apparently contradictory propositions of both Hoffman (1982, 1998, 2000) and Freud (1923/1961, 1930/1961), suggest that age and gender differences in the intensity of habitual guilt may also be related to a different tendency in the various subgroups to experience types of guilt with a high anxious-aggressive component.

No previous studies have been carried out regarding the possible difference between the sexes as regards the tendency to experience types of guilt with a high anxious-aggressive component. However, studies on gender differences with regard to anxiety and aggression enabled us to formulate some hypotheses on this issue.

As regards anxiety, the results of the research into gender differences are not consistent (Madden, Feldman Barrett, & Pietromonaco, 2000). While some reviews (Brody & Hall, 1993) conclude that women experience more anxiety than men, others (Larson & Pleck, 1999) suggest that the differences appear only in specific contexts and are related to the use of certain methodologies, particularly self-reports and measurements based on the memory of past experiences. Some data do in fact suggest that the differences found may be due to the methodology used, but there are also a number of theoretical reasons for expecting women to show higher anxiety levels than men: due to their generally lower status and inferior social power, women are particularly given to the cognitive appraisals which underlie anxiety, which in turn makes them more inclined to experience that emotion (Madden et al., 2000). Furthermore, they are also more prone to rumination, something which has also been found to favor anxiety (Nolen-Hoeksema, 1991).

As regards gender differences in aggression, although the prevailing stereotype depicts women as less aggressive than men, a number of studies suggest a greater degree of indirect and relational aggression in women (Crick, Werner, Casas, O'Brien, Nelson, Grotzinger, et al., 1999). There is also a great deal of evidence to suggest that open expressions of aggression are less acceptable in women, who therefore feel more obliged to contain themselves than men. The characteristics of the female sexual role are associated with the suppression of anger, while those of the male sexual role are associated with its external expression (Kopper, 1991; Kopper & Epperson, 1996). When they express anger, women tend to be labeled as hostile and aggressive, while men are described as strong (Shields, 1987; Tavris, 1989). Children think that expressions of anger are more acceptable

in boys than in girls (Birnbaum, 1983; Fuchs & Thelen, 1988). Although women often feel and express anger, they feel less comfortable when they do: after episodes of anger, they feel other negative emotions to a greater extent than men (Deffenbacher, Oetting, Lynch, & Morris, 1996; Deffenbacher, Oetting, Thwaites, Lynch, Baker, Stark, et al., 1996); and in comparison with men, they also feel that their aggression will have worse implications for both themselves and their victims (Fischer, 1993). All this means that women have important reasons for trying to contain their aggression.

Since the external expression of anger and aggressiveness in women is often blocked, these emotions persist in the form of floating aggression, mainly directed against themselves, but often indirectly turned outwards as well. This, coupled with women's greater tendency towards anxiety (as suggested by the research referred to above), led us to hypothesize that experiences of guilt would contain a greater anxious-aggressive component in women than in men.

Based on this hypothesis, as well as the hypothesis presented earlier regarding a higher level of interpersonal sensitivity (interpersonal guilt and empathy) in women, we formulated the hypothesis in this study that habitual guilt would be more intense in women than in men.

Nevertheless, the results of our previous study (Etxebarria et al., 2002) call into question the validity of this hypothesis in adults. In that study, adult males reported the same number of interpersonal events as women, which suggests that men have a similar level of interpersonal sensitivity to women. This would naturally lead us to expect a reduction in the difference between the intensity of habitual guilt in men and women in this age group, which was indeed observed in the study. However, it is highly probable that in our culture, due to the historical and educational context in which they have lived, women aged between 40 and 50 tend to suffer from experiences of guilt with a particularly intense anxious-aggressive component. Although guilt of a highly anxious nature has been a common element in the childhood and adolescence of both genders from this generation, there can be no doubt that women have been subject to more frequent guilt induction, especially with regard to their responsibility to care for others and their sexual behavior. Even at the end of the 1980s, clear differences in this regard were observed between the disciplinary practices used by parents with their sons and daughters (Etxebarria, 1992). If this were the case, if women aged between 40 and 50 were particularly prone to experiencing types of guilt with an intense anxious-aggressive component, then this would increase the difference in the intensity of habitual guilt between men and women in this age group. Bearing all this in mind, it was not easy to formulate a precise hypothesis regarding the difference in this age group. Nevertheless, we were inclined to hypothesize that the intensity of habitual guilt would, in adulthood too, be greater in women than in men.

When designing this study, we were aware right from the start that the self-report measures we intended to use may be distorted by gender stereotypes regarding emotionality and the emotions we were focusing on in particular (Brody & Hall, 1993, 2000; LaFrance & Banaji, 1992; Larson & Pleck, 1999; Shields, 1991). Therefore, the questionnaire used in the study included a series of questions designed to assess the possible effect of gender stereotypes in both the measures and the consequent results.

One limitation of our previous study was the excessive age range of the adult group, in addition to its small size. This made it difficult to interpret the results. It was not easy to determine which adult males felt more guilty and reported more interpersonal events than adolescents of the same sex – whether it was all those aged between 25 and 48, or whether it was predominantly those closer to the age of 50, as we later suspected. In this study, although we maintained the same age range in adolescence, we decided to set up two adult groups, one for those aged between 25 and 33 and another for those aged between 40 and 50. Both groups were relatively large, considering the nature of the study.

Method

Participants

The sample comprised 360 people from three different age groups: a group of 156 adolescents aged between 15 and 19 (81 women and 75 men, $M = 16.87$, $SD = .83$), a group of 96 young adults aged between 25 and 33 (49 women and 47 men, $M = 28$, $SD = 2.6$), and a group of 108 adults aged between 40 and 50 (54 women and 54 men, $M = 44.69$, $SD = 3.43$).

Finding adult participants was a challenge and required a concerted effort. The process was carried out in two ways: firstly, we asked university students to each find a number of participants in the age ranges in which we were interested from among their family members; and secondly, we contacted various sporting and leisure associations, etc. to ask for volunteers to participate in the study. Throughout the whole process much care was taken to ensure a balanced mix of sexes.

The predominant religious faith of the participants was Catholic or generally Christian, although the vast majority was non-churchgoer. They participated voluntarily in the study and were treated in accordance with the “Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct” (American Psychological Association, 1992).

Instrument

Intensity of habitual guilt. Participants responded to a questionnaire in which, first of all, they were asked to describe, in a certain amount of detail, one of the situations

which most frequently caused them to experience feelings of guilt. What we were interested in was analyzing the intensity of the emotional experiences that participants identified in their everyday lives as ‘guilt’. So as not to interfere in this sense, no previous definition was given of this emotion. After being asked why that situation made them feel guilty, they were asked to specify the typical intensity of this experience of guilt on a 7-point scale (1 = *not guilty at all*, 7 = *very guilty*).

Interpersonal versus non-interpersonal nature of the events provoking guilt. In accordance with both Baumeister, Reis and Delespaul (1995) and our previous study (Etxebarria et al., 2002), two trained judges classified the events reported as antecedents of habitual guilt as either *interpersonal* or *non-interpersonal*, depending on whether or not the reports made explicit mention of the act affecting someone else. For example, an event such as “Not visiting my old mother” was coded as interpersonal whereas an event such as “Drinking too much” was coded as non-interpersonal. We ensured that the judges were not aware of either the hypotheses of the study or the gender of the respondent. To analyze the reliability of this classification, both judges codified the responses of 94 subjects independently. The level of inter-judge agreement was high: $kappa = .85$.

Interpersonal sensitivity. Two measures were used to assess interpersonal sensitivity: an *empathic concern* scale and an *interpersonal guilt* measure.

The first measure was the *Empathic Concern* scale from the *Interpersonal Reactivity Index* (Davis, 1980). This scale consists of 7 items which assess the subject’s tendency to experience feelings of compassion and concern for others suffering from misfortune (for example: “I often have tender, concerned feelings for people less fortunate than me”). Participants were asked to indicate how well each of the items described them on a scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*very well*). $Cronbach's\ alpha = .69$.

The *Interpersonal Guilt* measure was developed specifically for this study with the aim of measuring individual differences as regards the tendency to experience guilt in response to *the same interpersonal situations*. This was a basic instrument in clarifying the significance of the differences found in the proportion of interpersonal events reported as antecedents of guilt by the various subgroups - differences which, as stated in the introduction, were open to diverse interpretations in our previous study. If differences were found in the intensity of the guilt experienced in response to the same interpersonal events, then this would enable us to conclude that the differences in the proportion of interpersonal antecedents reported were not simply due to a different level of everyday exposure to this type of situation, but rather - at least in part - to a different level of interpersonal sensitivity.

This measure consisted of 6 situations in which, by action or omission, the main character harms another person. Participants were asked to imagine themselves as the main character and indicate on a scale of 1 to 7 how guilty they would feel in each of the situations (1 = *not guilty at all*, 7 = *very guilty*). The interpersonal guilt score was the mean score for all six stories. *Cronbach's alpha* = .77.

The 6 situations were selected taking into account the results of a previous study which analyzed, in a wide sample of people of different ages and gender, the type of things that made them feel guilty, with said antecedents being classified, on the one hand, as either interpersonal or non-interpersonal (Etxebarria et al., 2002) and on the other, according to a system of 21 more specific categories (Etxebarria & Pérez, 2003). For the design of this measure, the more neutral interpersonal situations were chosen, i.e. those that were most common and in which no significant differences were found between participants of different ages and gender in the more specific descriptive categories. The 7 scenarios designed initially in accordance with these criteria were judged as adequate by two experts in emotion. Nevertheless, in the end we were forced to discard one of them because of the excessive asymmetry and kurtosis of the distribution. The 6 scenarios finally selected are given in the Appendix.

Empathic and anxious-aggressive components of guilt. Immediately after describing one of the situations which most frequently caused them to experience feelings of guilt (*habitual guilt*), participants were asked to indicate, from a list of 9 emotional experiences, whether they experienced one or more of these feelings, in addition to guilt, in the situation they had described. They were asked to specify the intensity of these feelings on a 7-point scale at the side of each of the listed emotions. The list was as follows: "I feel sorry for someone else", "I feel nervous, anxious", "I feel angry", "I feel angry with myself", "I feel worthless", "I feel sad", "I feel disgusted", "I feel frightened", "I feel ashamed" and finally, "Some other emotion".

As mentioned earlier, by using the same sample we had previously confirmed a two-factor model of guilt that postulated the existence of two fundamental factors in experiences of guilt: an empathic factor and an anxious-aggressive factor. The empathic factor basically consists

of the feeling of sympathy, with the feeling of sadness also being present but with less weight. The anxious-aggressive factor mainly includes anxiety, anger and anger with oneself, with sadness also present but again, with less weight (Etxebarria & Apodaca, 2008). This model presented good fit indexes: χ^2 (df) = 30.9 (21); Goodness of Fit Index (*GFI*) = .976; Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (*RMSEA*) = .042; Comparative Fit Index (*CFI*) = .982. Participants' scores for the anxious-aggressive and empathic factors in the present study were obtained on the basis of their scores in the scales included in each factor and the weight of each scale in its respective factor.

All the previous quantitative variables have distribution models that are reasonably close to normality, as shown in Table 1, and may therefore be considered in the analyses presented later.

Gender stereotypes. As LaFrance & Banaji (1992) point out, when an individual is asked about specific feelings in specific situations, as in the case of our habitual guilt measure, gender stereotypes will probably not have too strong an influence; however, when more or less direct self-report measures (such as others described above) are used, these stereotypes may have a certain effect. Therefore, to assess the possible influence of gender stereotypes in these measures, we included four additional questions in the questionnaire. The first two questions aimed to assess the influence of stereotypes by asking participants their opinion regarding the response tendency of individuals of their own sex and age; the two following questions asked them directly about themselves. For example, in the case of adolescent women, the questions were as follows: 1) "Do you believe that girls of your age really say what they feel in this type of test?", with two possible responses (*yes/no*). 2) "If not, which of the following do you think is true?", with two possible responses (*their feelings are really more intense / their feelings are really less intense*). 3) "Do you think that, as you were completing the questionnaire, some of your responses perhaps reflected more what girls of your age are supposed to feel rather than what you yourself actually feel?", with two possible responses (*yes/no*). 4) "If so, then do you think that, deep down, your feelings are:" with two possible responses (*more intense than I said / less intense than I said*).

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics

	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Asymmetry</i>	<i>Kurtosis</i>
Habitual guilt	340	5.1	1.26	-0.63	0.32
Empathy	359	3.66	.64	-0.48	0.34
Interpersonal guilt	359	5.1	5	-0.83	1.12
Empathic component	289	0.54	1	-0.21	-0.84
Anxious-aggressive component	278	.50	172	-0.16	-0.69

Procedure

On the first page of the questionnaire, we stated only that the study aimed to analyze and understand feelings of guilt, and we highlighted the absolute confidentiality of the responses.

The adolescents responded to the questionnaire in their classrooms during class. The adults completed it at home. In all cases, we insisted that participants respond to the questionnaire individually, without talking about their responses to anyone. Similarly, participants were told that they could take as long as necessary to respond to the different questions, but that it was important that they answered them in the order in which they appeared, without going back to a previous question from a later point in the questionnaire.

In order to guarantee the confidentiality of their responses, adults were given a stamped addressed envelope and were asked to place the completed questionnaire inside and return it sealed either by hand or by post. The majority returned the questionnaire by hand. In total, 87% of the questionnaires distributed were returned.

Results

Gender and Age Differences in the Intensity of Habitual Guilt

In order to analyze gender differences in the intensity of habitual guilt, taking into account the age group variable at the same time, a 2 X 3 (gender by age group) between-subjects ANOVA was carried out.

Before carrying out both this and the ANOVAs presented later, we also analyzed the fulfillment of the assumptions and, especially, the normality of the distributions (Table 1) and the homogeneity of variances. In all cases the assumptions were fulfilled and, moreover, the analysis can be considered robust since the groups were both large enough and sufficiently well balanced.

The 2 X 3 ANOVA revealed a statistically significant main effect of gender, $F(1, 334) = 4.52, p = .034, \eta^2 = .013$, observed power = .563. The main effect of age group was not significant, $F(2, 334) = 1.17, p = .311, \eta^2 = .007$, observed power = .257. The interaction effect was not significant either, $F(2, 334) = .59, p = .554, \eta^2 = .004$, observed power = .148. The experiences of habitual guilt reported by women were more intense than those reported by men. Table 2 shows the means and standard deviations for each subgroup in this and all the other quantitative variables.

Gender and Age Differences in the Proportion of Interpersonal Events Reported as Antecedents of Habitual Guilt

In order to analyze whether or not parallel differences were observed in the proportion of interpersonal events reported as antecedents of habitual guilt, we carried out a stepwise logistic regression analysis, introducing sex, age and the interaction between them as explanatory factors. In this analysis, as we expected, the model's fit only showed a statistically significant improvement when the sex factor was introduced, $p < .05$. Table 3 shows the -2LL coefficients in each step. Subsequently, we carried out a cross tabulation

Table 2
Means and Standard Deviations for each Age and Gender Subgroup

		Male			Female		
		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>
Habitual guilt	Adolescents	5.07	1.27	68	5.27	1.17	81
	Adults (25-33)	4.84	1.45	45	5.02	1.28	49
	Adults (40-50)	4.90	1.29	49	5.42	1.15	48
Empathy	Adolescents	3.60	0.63	75	3.74	0.55	81
	Adults (25-33)	3.40	0.82	46	3.71	0.49	49
	Adults (40-50)	3.66	0.63	54	3.75	0.71	54
Interpersonal guilt	Adolescents	4.95	1.12	75	5.42	0.90	81
	Adults (25-33)	4.62	1.07	47	5.10	0.87	49
	Adults (40-50)	5.30	1.09	54	5.07	0.96	53
Empathic component	Adolescents	0.06	0.55	59	0.04	0.49	74
	Adults (25-33)	-0.12	0.63	40	-0.24	0.55	42
	Adults (40-50)	0.03	0.58	39	0.19	0.44	35
Anxious-aggressive component	Adolescents	-0.08	0.51	59	0.01	0.49	70
	Adults (25-33)	-0.16	0.48	39	0.02	0.45	39
	Adults (40-50)	0.04	0.53	38	0.16	0.51	33

Table 3
Fit Tests in Stepwise Logistic Regression

Predictors	-2 LL	-2LL Dif	Dif df	Sig .05
Null Model	302,5008			
Sex	297,1998	5,30	1	*
Sex, Age	294,5362	2,66	2	—
Sex, Age, Sex*Age	294,4508	0,09	2	—

analysis to obtain both the proportion of interpersonal events in each sex and an appropriate hypothesis test statistic, as well as the Phi coefficient as an index of the effect size (Fisher's exact statistic: .021, $df = 1$, $\Phi = .13$). Results showed that, among women, 86.5% of the reported events were interpersonal, whereas among men this percentage was lower, just 76.5%. The difference was statistically significant, although the effect size was relatively low.

Gender and Age Differences in the Interpersonal Sensitivity Measures

Differences in Empathy. A 2 X 3 between-subjects ANOVA carried out to analyze the gender and age differences in empathy revealed a statistically significant main effect of gender, $F(1, 353) = 6.53$, $p = .011$, $\eta^2 = .018$, observed power = .722. The main effect of age group was not significant, $F(2, 353) = 1.59$, $p = .206$, $\eta^2 = .009$, observed power = .335. The interaction effect was not significant either, $F(2, 353) = .91$, $p = .405$, $\eta^2 = .005$, observed power = .206. Women had higher empathy scores than men. Means are presented in Table 2.

Differences in Interpersonal Guilt. A 2 X 3 between-subjects ANOVA revealed statistically significant main effects of both gender, $F(1, 353) = 4.98$, $p = .026$, $\eta^2 = .014$, observed power = .604, and age, $F(2, 353) = 3.70$, $p = .026$, $\eta^2 = .021$, observed power = .677; the interaction was also statistically significant, $F(2, 353) = 3.73$, $p = .009$, $\eta^2 = .026$, observed power = .789. Tukey's HSD test showed that in the adolescent group, interpersonal guilt was significantly more intense in girls than in boys ($p = .038$), while in the 25-33 age group, this difference failed to reach statistical significance ($p = .176$). Furthermore, men in the 40-50 age group scored significantly higher than those in the 25-33 age group ($p = .009$), scoring even somewhat higher than the women in their same age group, although this difference was not statistically significant ($p = .834$). See Table 2.

Gender and Age Differences in the Anxious-Aggressive and Empathic Components of Guilt

A 2 X 3 between-subjects ANOVA carried out to analyze gender and age differences in the anxious-aggressive

component showed a statistically significant main effect of gender, $F(1, 272) = 4.52$, $p = .034$, $\eta^2 = .016$, observed power = .563, and a marginally significant effect of age group, $F(2, 272) = 2.60$, $p = .076$, $\eta^2 = .019$, observed power = .516. The interaction effect was not significant, $F(2, 272) = 1.89$, $p = .828$, $\eta^2 = .001$, observed power = .079. Tukey's HSD test revealed a marginally significant difference between the 25-33 age group and the 40-50 age group ($p = .096$). As we had hypothesized, the anxious-aggressive component was more intense in women in all three age groups, with women aged between 40 and 50 scoring highest of all subgroups.

As regards the empathic component, the analysis of variance showed a statistically significant effect of age group, $F(2, 283) = 6.65$, $p = .002$, $\eta^2 = .045$, observed power = .911. The main effect of gender was not significant, $F(1, 283) = .02$, $p = .894$, $\eta^2 = .000$, observed power = .052. The interaction effect was not significant either, $F(2, 283) = 1.35$, $p = .261$, $\eta^2 = .009$, observed power = .290. Tukey's HSD test showed that the empathic component was lower in the 25-33 age group than in the adolescent group ($p = .008$) and the 40-50 age group ($p = .003$). Means are shown in Table 2.

In order to make the Discussion section easier to follow, figures 1 to 6 contain graphs indicating the scores of the six age and gender subgroups in all the previous variables.

Relationship of the Intensity of Habitual Guilt with the Interpersonal Sensitivity Measures and the Anxious-Aggressive and Empathic Components

The models of relation between the variables were satisfactorily adjusted to the linearity. Thus, in order to analyze their relationship, we used Pearson's product-moment coefficient.

The correlations of intensity of habitual guilt with the interpersonal sensitivity measures were very low with interpersonal guilt, $r(339) = .17$, $p = .001$, 95% $CI = .07 \leq r \leq .29$, and zero with empathy, $r(339) = .05$, $p = .337$, 95% $CI = -.06 \leq r \leq .16$.

The intensity of habitual guilt showed a higher correlation with the anxious-aggressive component, $r(272) = .46$, $p = .001$, 95% $CI = .40 \leq r \leq .72$, than with the empathic one, $r(283) = .26$, $p = .001$, 95% $CI = .15 \leq r \leq .40$.

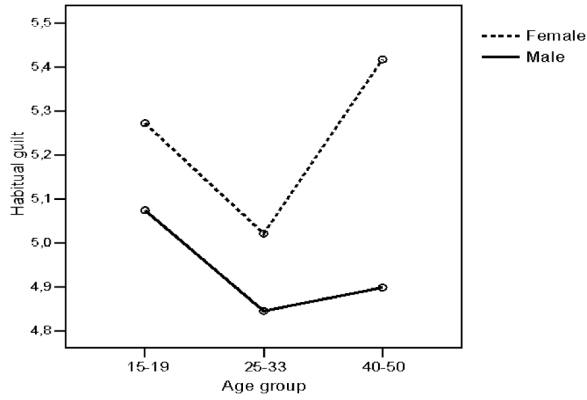


Figure 1. Gender and age differences in the intensity of habitual guilt.

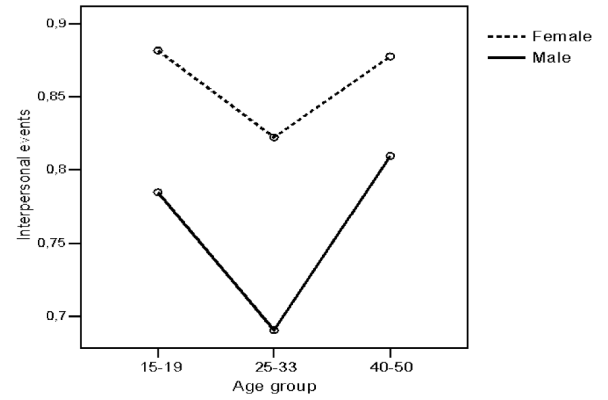


Figure 2. Gender and age differences in the proportion of interpersonal events reported as antecedents of habitual guilt.

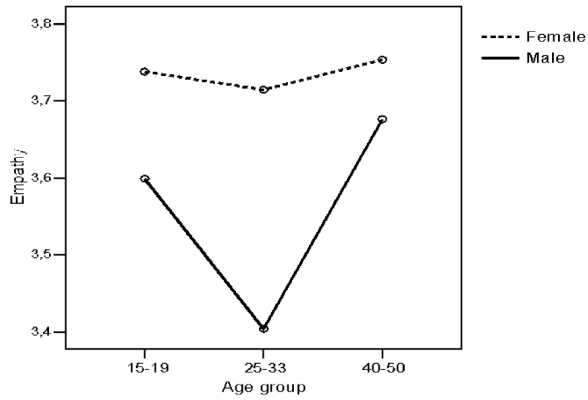


Figure 3. Gender and age differences in empathy.

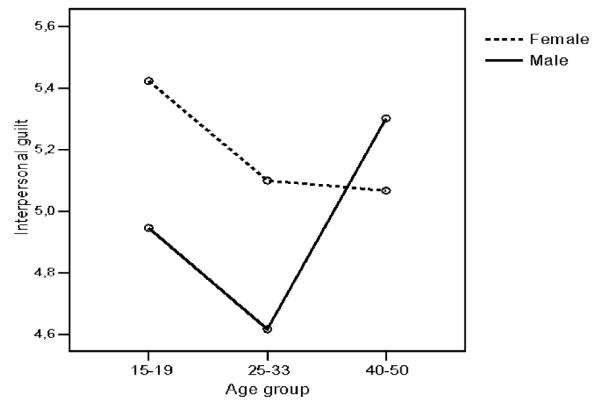


Figure 4. Gender and age differences in interpersonal guilt.

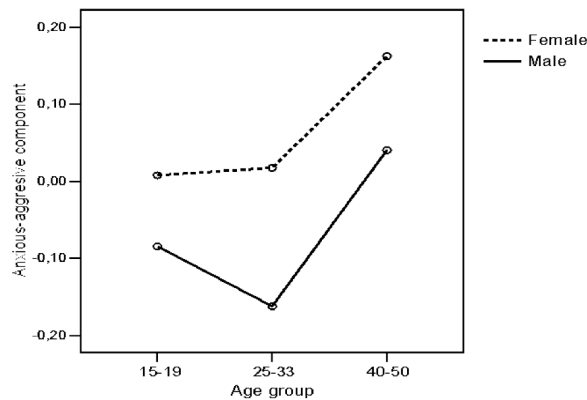


Figure 5. Gender and age differences in the anxious-aggressive component of habitual guilt.

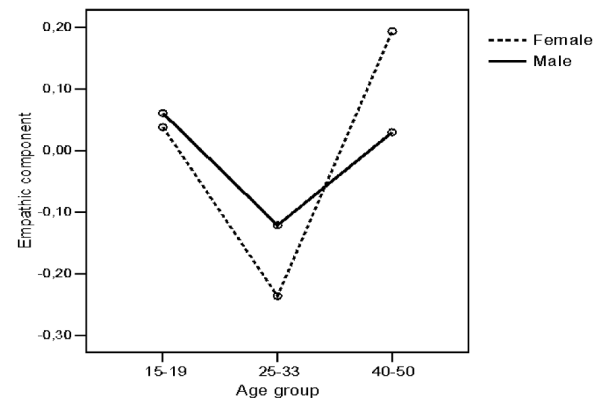


Figure 6. Gender and age differences in the empathic component of habitual guilt.

Assessing the Effect of Stereotypes

Chi-square tests were carried out on the four questions used to analyze the possible influence of gender stereotypes on the results. Table 4 shows the percentages of response to each question for each age and gender subgroup.

Question 1. The vast majority of participants (74%) gave an affirmative answer to the first question, regarding whether or not they believed that in this type of test people of their age and gender really said what they felt. Only a few said that they thought people of their age and gender *did not* say what they really felt, but this opinion was expressed more often by men than by women (36.26% and 16%, respectively). The Chi-square test showed that the difference between the sexes was statistically significant in both the adolescent group, $\chi^2 (1, N = 154) = 19.77, p = .001$, Fisher's exact $p = .000$, and in the 40-50 age group, $\chi^2 (1, N = 101) = 4.49, p = .034$, Fisher's exact $p = .041$. Furthermore, the Chi-square test showed a statistically significant effect of age in men: the percentage of adolescents who responded negatively to the question was higher than that of both men aged between 25 and 33 and those between 40 and 50, $\chi^2 (2, N = 171) = 17.24, p = .001$. In women, the effect of age was marginally significant: the percentage of both female adolescents and women aged between 25 and 33 who responded negatively to the question was higher than that of women aged between 40 and 50, $\chi^2 (2, N = 179) = 5.86, p = .053$.

Question 2. Among the few participants who responded negatively to the first question, the majority responded to the second question by saying that the feelings of people of their age and gender were really *more intense* than they said. No general differences were observed between men and women, with 74.51% of men and 78.12% of women giving this answer. However, among adolescents, significantly more girls than boys said that the feelings in question were in fact more intense, $\chi^2 (1, N = 47) = 5.39, p = .020$, Fisher's exact $p = .022$; in the 25-33 group, the difference - in the opposite sense here- was also significant, $\chi^2 (1, N = 18) = 3.60, p = .058$, Fisher's exact $p = .021$.

It is important to stress that the small number of subjects involved both in this analysis and those regarding the subsequent questions gives rise to a high degree of instability in the results, and renders important differences statistically non-significant. However, the use of Fisher's exact probability coefficient partially resolves this problem.

Question 3. When participants were asked if they believed that their own responses may have reflected more what people of their gender and age are supposed to feel than what they themselves feel, no statistically significant differences were observed between men and women, with only 10.98 % of men 15.2 % of women giving a *positive* answer, $\chi^2 (1, N = 351) = 1.35, p = .245$, Fisher's exact $p = .271$. Nor were any statistically significant differences found in any of the age groups, although the small n of the groups made it hard for significance levels to be reached.

Table 4

Percentages of Response to the Questions to Assess the Possible Influence of Gender Stereotypes on the Measures for each Age and Gender Subgroup

Answers		Male		Female	
		%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>
1. People of my age and gender <i>do not</i> say what they feel in this type of test	Adolescents	53.3	40	19	15
	Adults (25-33)	26.1	12	22.4	11
	Adults (40-50)	20	10	5.9	3
	Total	36.26	62	16	29
2 Their feelings are really <i>more intense</i>	Adolescents	69.7	23	100	14
	Adults (25-33)	100	9	66.7	6
	Adults (40-50)	66.7	6	55.6	5
	Total	74.51	38	78.12	25
3. (...) some of your responses reflected more what people of your age and gender are supposed to feel rather than what you yourself actually felt? <i>Yes</i> .	Adolescents	17.8	13	21.3	17
	Adults (25-33)	4.3	2	8.5	4
	Adults (40-50)	7.4	4	11.8	6
	Total	10.98	19	15.2	27
4. My feelings are <i>more intense</i> than I said	Adolescents	71.4	10	91.3	21
	Adults (25-33)	0	0	100	3
	Adults (40-50)	60	3	62.5	5
	Total	61.9	13	85.3	29

A statistically significant effect of age was found in men: the percentage of male adolescents who responded affirmatively was higher than that of men aged between 25 and 33 and those aged between 40 and 50, $\chi^2(2, N = 173) = 6.26, p = .044$.

Question 4. Finally, among the few who responded affirmatively to that question, in question 4 the percentage of women who said that their feelings were actually *more intense* than they had indicated in their answers (85.3%) was higher than the percentage of men who gave the same reply (61.9%). The difference between sexes was statistically significant in the 25-33 age group, $\chi^2(1, N = 5) = 5.00, p = .025$.

Discussion

We designed this study with a twofold objective: firstly, to check whether the results of a previous study (Etxebarria et al., 2002) were replicated or whether, on the contrary, the data supported the hypothesis of both that study and the present one, which predicted a greater intensity of habitual guilt in women in both adolescence and adulthood; and secondly, to try to account for gender differences in the intensity of such guilt.

As far as the first objective is concerned, the results showed that habitual guilt was more intense in women than in men in all three age groups studied. These results do not correspond to those found in our previous study. They do, however, coincide with what was to be expected in accordance with other studies (Bybee, 1998; Etxebarria, 1992, 1994; Fischer & Manstead, 2000; Harvey et al., 1997; Hoffman, 1975; Lutwak & Ferrari, 1996; Lutwak et al., 1998, 2001; Tangney, 1990; Tangney & Dearing, 2002; Walter & Burnaford, 2006). Bearing this in mind, as well as the improved way in which the adult groups were set up in the present study, these results seem more reliable than those obtained in the previous one. From these results we can conclude that habitual guilt tends to be more intense in women than in men not only in adolescence, but in adulthood also -at least in our current cultural context.

Let us now turn to the second objective. First of all, the analysis carried out to examine whether parallel differences were observed in the proportion of interpersonal events reported as antecedents of habitual guilt showed that women generally reported a significantly higher number of interpersonal events than men. This result was not unexpected since we had found a similar parallelism in the previous study (Etxebarria et al., 2002). What was not clear was its interpretation. Our hypothesis was that men report fewer interpersonal events because they have, in general, a lower level of interpersonal sensitivity.

The analysis of gender and age differences in the interpersonal sensitivity measures showed a significant main effect of gender in one of them: empathy. As hypothesized,

women scored higher than men. However, in the other one - interpersonal guilt - the analysis showed significant effects of both gender and age, as well as their interaction. Interpersonal guilt was significantly more intense in women than in men in the adolescent group, and in the 25-33 age group, the pattern of results was similar, although the difference between men and women was not statistically significant. However, in the 40-50 age group this trend changes: men in this age group scored significantly higher than those in the 25-33 age group, scoring even slightly higher than women in the 40-50 age group, although this difference was not significant.

In this second measure of interpersonal sensitivity we expected to find only a significant main effect of gender similar to that found in the proportion of interpersonal events and empathy. Nevertheless, the results obtained are not really surprising, since as stated above, in the previous study (Etxebarria et al., 2002) we also found that adult men reported a similar proportion of interpersonal guilt-provoking events to women, which we interpreted as reflecting a closure of the gap between levels of interpersonal sensitivity during adulthood. Furthermore, if we compare the results obtained in the proportion of interpersonal events, empathy and interpersonal guilt variables (Figures 2, 3 and 4), we see that there are clear similarities: in all three variables the men's scores tend to be higher in the 40-50 age group than in the 25-33 age group, in which men have very low scores; moreover, in both the proportion of interpersonal events and empathy, in the 40-50 age group there is a slight tendency for men's scores to approach the level of women's ones - a tendency which, in the case of interpersonal guilt, gives rise to a significant interaction.

In short, taken together, the results obtained in the proportion of interpersonal events variable and those obtained in the two interpersonal sensitivity measures (empathy and interpersonal guilt) suggest that, to a large extent, the differences in the proportion of interpersonal events reported by the various subgroups reflect a different level of interpersonal sensitivity: men tend to show a lower level of interpersonal sensitivity than women, although this gap seems to close in the 40-50 age group.

If we now compare these results regarding interpersonal sensitivity with those obtained in the intensity of habitual guilt, we can see that they are consistent with the hypothesis that the differences in the intensity of habitual guilt are to a large extent the result of differences in interpersonal sensitivity in the first two age groups, although not in the 40-50 group, in which habitual guilt was also more intense in women than in men.

In fact, the correlations between the intensity of habitual guilt and the interpersonal sensitivity measures were very low. In part, this may simply be due to the fact that we are talking about correlations of two dispositional variables with a measure of guilt in a specific situation. However, the low correlations may also be due to the fact that the

differences in the intensity of habitual guilt are not only the result of differences in interpersonal sensitivity. As posed by our hypothesis, the said differences may also be the result of differences in the tendency to experience types of guilt with a high anxious-aggressive component, with this tendency being stronger among women in all age groups, and especially in the 40-50 age group.

The analysis of gender and age differences in the anxious-aggressive component showed a significant effect of gender, as well as a marginally significant effect of age group: as we had hypothesized, the anxious-aggressive component was more intense in women than in men; moreover, it was more intense in the 40-50 age group (both men and women) than in the 25-33 one, with women in the 40-50 age group scoring the highest of all groups. These results enable us to understand why gender differences in the intensity of habitual guilt are clear also in the 40-50 age group even though the men of this group show more or less the same level of interpersonal sensitivity as women.

Overall, as far as our second objective is concerned, our results suggest that the differences in the intensity of habitual guilt are, at least partly, the result of differences in interpersonal sensitivity and the tendency to experience types of guilt with a high anxious-aggressive component. In both variables, differences were found between the sexes that run parallel to those found with regard to the intensity of habitual guilt. Although, as mentioned above, the correlations between the intensity of habitual guilt and the two interpersonal sensitivity measures were low, on the whole, our results are consistent with those found in other studies on this question, which generally tend to support this association (Ishikawa & Uchiyama, 2002; Tangney, 1991; Tangney et al., 1994; Thompson & Hoffman, 1980). The correlation between the intensity of habitual guilt and the tendency to experience guilt with a high anxious-aggressive component was much stronger. Unfortunately, this result cannot be compared to those of other studies, since this association has never been analyzed before. However, precisely for this reason, the results obtained regarding this component are especially interesting.

Let us now discuss some specific results in more detail.

The more pronounced presence of the anxious-aggressive component in women deserves special attention. We believe that this result supports a phenomenon with important implications for female psychic dynamics. This is an important phenomenon not only because it entails daily suffering and other immediate negative effects (behavioral inhibition in different areas, greater susceptibility to manipulation by others, and so on), as outlined by Freud (1923/1961, 1930/1961) and supported by subsequent empirical research (Baumeister, Stillwell, & Heatherton, 1994; Etxebarria, 2000), but also because the defenses erected in an attempt to handle this guilt can seriously interfere with interpersonal relationships (Echeburúa, Corral, & Amor, 2001; Miceli & Castelfranchi, 1998).

It is also worth drawing attention to the marginally significant effect of age observed in this variable: the anxious-aggressive component was less intense in participants aged between 25 and 33 than in those aged between 40 and 50. This result suggests that anxious-aggressive guilt, which was omnipresent in the educational practices of Spanish society during Franco's era - in which traditional Catholic thinking had an enormous influence - may have gradually lost strength as a result of the pronounced cultural changes that have come about in Spanish society over recent decades. This is a positive change. However, we see again that female adolescents and women aged between 25 and 33 still score higher in this component than their male counterparts. It therefore seems that women in both groups are still suffering - although in many cases probably as a mere echo - from the effects of educational practices which demand more from women as regards controlling certain behaviors, and which are sometimes mistakenly regarded as having been completely eradicated. Feeling rules and display rules which are more reluctant to accept anger in women (Kopper, 1991; Kopper & Epperson, 1996; Shields, 1987; Tavris, 1989) probably constitute one of the underlying reasons for the more pronounced presence of the anxious-aggressive component in female experiences of guilt. The revision of such rules, and learning how to regulate this emotion appropriately, are therefore undertakings which are both important and timely.

At the same time, as seen earlier, the present study highlights the need to pay special attention to the relatively low interpersonal sensitivity of men, particularly as regards the 25-33 age group. A lack of sensitivity in this area may lead to the absence or excessively low levels of certain types of guilt, mainly those provoked by actions or omissions in the interpersonal realm, which have beneficial effects on both interpersonal relationships and individuals themselves (Baumeister et al., 1994; Hoffman, 1982, 1998, 2000).

However, we should view these conclusions with caution, because the sample, although large, was not randomly selected. Moreover, the measures may have been distorted by gender stereotypes. What can be said about this?

Gender Stereotypes

The analysis of the responses to the questions asked in order to assess the possible effect of gender stereotypes on the measures suggests that we have no serious reason to believe that men's scores, contrary to women's ones, are under-estimated in our study and, subsequently, the gender differences found are merely an artifact effect. Our results suggest that the vast majority of participants report the real intensity of their feelings in this type of measure (answers to questions 1 and 3). Moreover, when they do not say what they really feel, women tend to report less intense feelings than their true ones as much as men do (see question 2) or

even more than men do (question 4). However, among the (very few) participants who said that they believed that others of their gender and age do not say what they really feel (question 1), the proportion of men was significantly greater than that of women. If this answer can be interpreted as reflecting participants' own tendency when reporting their feelings, we cannot totally dismiss the possibility that men's feelings are slightly under-reported in the measures used. Nevertheless, we should take into account that there was no similar difference in the proportion of men and women (also very few) who said that their responses may have reflected more what people of their gender and age are supposed to feel than what they really feel (question 3).

While the analyses carried out to control the possible influence of gender stereotypes do not eliminate this influence, they do provide some relevant cues regarding how such stereotypes may have affected our measures. On the whole, we believe that the results of these analyses enable a reasonable degree of confidence in this study's conclusions.

Furthermore, the results of these analyses reveal an interesting phenomenon: when they do not say what they really feel, women - like men - also tend to express feelings that are less intense than their true ones. This contradicts the commonly-held view that men tend to hide their feelings, while women tend, if anything, to magnify them (LaFrance & Banaji, 1992). According to our results, the tendency to present one's own feelings as less intense than they really are can be interpreted not so much, or not only, as a reflection of the stereotypes and display rules that pressure men to appear less emotional than women, but rather as an expression of some people's (of both genders) need not to see themselves as particularly emotional. This indicates that many women, like men, also see emotions as something somehow unsuitable. Could it be that they see emotions as a sign of vulnerability in a society that is becoming increasingly harsh, competitive and individualistic? Could it be that they intuitively feel what Shields (2002) defends, i.e. that the expression of emotions is a key element that differentiates the sexes in favor of men? These are questions that deserve to be explored in more depth in the future.

Conclusion

In sum, we can conclude that, in our cultural context, habitual guilt is more intense in women than in men in all the ages analyzed. Furthermore, our results suggest that this difference is linked to differences in interpersonal sensitivity and the tendency to experience types of guilt with a high anxious-aggressive component. Finally, this study highlights the need for educational practices and socializing agents to reduce the tendency towards anxious-aggressive guilt in women, and to promote interpersonal sensitivity in men.

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Received February 12, 2008

Revision received November 19, 2008

Accepted December 2, 2008

APPENDIX

Next, read the following situations and imagine that you are the main character. Please state what you would feel. For your contribution to be of use, it is important for you to be sincere and say what you think you 'would feel', not what you think you 'should feel'.

1. You have forgotten that today is one of your friends' or relations' birthday and you know that this type of thing is very important to him/her, and that he/she likes people to remember.
2. A friend has come to you for help and although you promised to help him/her, you have not made enough effort and he/she has therefore failed to achieve something that was important to him/her.
3. You had a bad day today and when you met a friend you ended up taking it out on him/her, snapping at him/her when he/she did not deserve it.
4. One of your friends often takes advantage of vulnerable people and although you do not agree with what he/she does, you do nothing to stop it.
5. Someone has made you justifiably angry, but then you went too far and said some things you should not have. Some of them were very cruel.
6. Someone in your family is being forced to endure a long, boring stay in hospital and, although they have asked after you a number of times and you have promised to visit them, you have not yet gone.