Guilt: One Story Behind Psychological and Sexual Health
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Introduction

- Freud described guilt as the result of a humanity that lives in a civilization that does not allow us to act impulsively toward our desires and fantasies (Kahn, 2002).
- Guilt has been examined over the years for its role in psychological and sexual health from many perspectives (Faiver, O'Brien, & Ingersoll, 2000).
- Kahn (2000) argued that guilt is instrumental in motivating people to act freely, pursuing pleasures without negative emotions.
- Such unfettered pleasure seeking behaviors could result in legal action, isolation, or disease.
- Not all researchers agree on guilt's role in psychological and sexual health (Ellis, 1960; Mower, 1960).
- It is important to examine guilt complexly, the role of guilt in psychological and sexual health as well as the role of guilt in behaviors that could result in negative or harmful consequences.
- Our study examines the specific relationship three types of guilt have with markers of psychological and sexual health to provide an empirical basis to help understand the complex role guilt plays in college students' lives.

Hypotheses

H1: Sex-related guilt, guilty conscious and hostile guilt will be negatively related to psychological health.

H2: Sex-related guilt will be positively associated with markers of sexual health.

H3: Hostile guilt and guilty conscious will be negatively related to measures of sexual health.

Method

- Participants completed a computerized battery of self-report measures including demographic, sexual and psychological information.
- A diverse non-clinical sample (N = 662, 70% female, 60% European American, 20% African American, 9% Latino(a), 11% “Other”) was drawn from a college student population at a large Southern University.
- Criteria for inclusion required that all participants were enrolled as undergraduate students and 18 years of age or older.
- The average age was 21 years (SD = 3.66, Range 18-54).
- This study is predominantly self-reported as heterosexual (94%).
- Sixty-nine percent of the sample reported that they were single/dating.
- Sexual health consisted of yes/no questions, with the exception of number of partners and condom embarrassment.

Results

- Since our measures of psychological health and sexual health included both categorical and continuous data as outcome measures, we conducted both multiple linear regressions and binary logistic regressions to test our models.
- Each model controlled for gender and ethnicity.

Discussion

- In conclusion, it appears that higher sex-related guilt and lower guilty conscience have the strongest relationship with psychological well-being.
- Our findings that the relationship between guilty conscious and psychological health are consistent with previous research (Faiver et al., 2004; Abramson et al., 1977).
- Sex-related guilt has a less clear relationship with sexual health, with positive relationships with both risky and less risky behaviors and attitudes.
- Hostile guilt did not appear to play a significant role in either psychological or sexual health.
- Low sex-guilt has been linked to higher contraceptive and safe sex practices in women (Mosher & Vonderheide, 1985), but few studies have examined the constructs of hostile and sex guilt in relation to health, therefore it is difficult to compare our findings.
- Given the limited research available, it is important for researchers to continue to address the complex relationship between various forms of guilt and health.
- Our study is limited by retrospective, self-report data and consists of primarily female students, limiting generalization. We used a cross-sectional, correlational design, which does not allow us to infer causality.
- Given the consequences of risky sexual behaviors and psychological illness, it is crucial that we understand which types of guilt are useful and which puts individuals at risk, in order to design the best educational and psychotherapeutic interventions.
- Future studies need to examine the influence of such interventions on college student's sexual and psychological health.

Please see handout for references and acknowledgment.