DIFFERENCES IN THE EXPERIENCE OF GUILT AMONG INCARCERATED INDIVIDUALS, ACCORDING TO GENDER, EDUCATION LEVEL, AND CHARACTERISTICS OF IMPRISONMENT

Bardha IZAIRI[1], Sara SADIKI[2], Sheruze OSMANI BALLAZHI[2]

1* Therapeutic Center, Logomedicus
2* Department of Psychology, Faculty of Philosophy,University of Tetovo
*Corresponding author e-mail: sara.sadiki@unite.edu.mk

Abstract

Feelings of guilt represent a moral emotion of particular importance in the development of personal responsibility and the rehabilitation process for incarcerated individuals (Tangney et al., 2011). Studying this emotion in relation to demographic and incarceration-related characteristics contributes to a deeper understanding of individual differences in how it is experienced within the context of serving a prison sentence. The purpose of this study is to examine differences in the experience of guilt among incarcerated individuals, based on gender, educational level, and incarceration characteristics specifically, prior imprisonment experience and the duration of the current incarceration. The sample consists of 273 individuals incarcerated in the prisons of Tetovo, Skopje, and Veles, of whom 75.8% are male and 24.2% are female. To measure the experience of guilt, the Guilt and Shame Proneness Scale (GASP)—developed by Cohen et al. (2011)—was used. The results revealed no statistically significant differences in the experience of guilt based on gender ($U = 6215.50$, $p = 0.269$) or education level ($H(3) = 0.407$, $p = 0.939$). However, the results indicated statistically significant differences between individuals imprisoned for the first time and those with prior incarceration experience ($U = 5800.00$, $p = 0.013$). Furthermore, statistically significant differences were found between individuals serving prison sentences of 4–7 years and those serving sentences longer than 7 years ($df = 42.823$, $p_{adj} = 0.019$), with the group serving 4–7 years reporting higher mean ranks. In conclusion, the findings of this study indicate that prior incarceration experience and the duration of the sentence are associated with differences in the experience of guilt, whereas the gender and education level of the incarcerated individuals do not serve as differentiating factors.

Keywords: guilt, incarcerated individuals, gender, education level, prior incarceration experience, sentence duration

1.Introduction

Within the framework of cognitive and emotional psychology, guilt is classified as a self-evaluative emotion because it involves processes of self-reflection and the assessment of one's own behavior in relation to internalized standards and norms (Tangney et al., 2007). The feeling of guilt is one of the most complex emotions in the development of moral responsibility, the regulation of behavior, and interpersonal relationships. Constructively, guilt can serve as a useful psychological mechanism by fostering reflection on one's behavior, the acceptance of responsibility, and the motivation to correct wrongful actions; conversely, it can also function as a burden when an individual perceives that their actions have violated moral or social norms, leading them to experience a sense of responsibility for the resulting consequences.

For incarcerated individuals, the sense of guilt takes on a distinct psychological and social dimension. It is linked not only to the individual's perception of having violated legal and moral norms but also to how they experience personal responsibility and the consequences of their criminal act. In this sense, it can serve as an internal process of reflection on past behavior, the harm caused, and one's responsibility toward victims and society (Tangney and Stuewig 2010). However, the experience of guilt is not uniform across individuals; it varies based on personal, psychological, and situational characteristics. Consequently, some individuals may exhibit higher levels of self-criticism and remorse, while others may struggle to accept personal responsibility or recognize the consequences of their actions. It is also worth noting that this

emotion does not necessarily emerge immediately after the commission of a criminal offense; rather, it may develop and evolve over time, influenced by processes of individual reflection, confrontation with the consequences of the offense, and the experience of life within a correctional institution (Hosser et al. 2008).

In this context, the study of guilt among incarcerated individuals is of particular importance for understanding the emotional and moral processes that accompany the experience of imprisonment. Specifically, examining differences in how this emotion is experienced based on demographic characteristics and factors related to incarceration can provide significant insights into the factors associated with the experience of personal responsibility. Gender, educational level, prior incarceration history, and the length of the sentence are among the characteristics that warrant examination in this study. The findings may offer empirical data useful for understanding the psychological profiles of incarcerated individuals and for developing more appropriate approaches to rehabilitation processes.

2.Study Methodology

The purpose of this study is to examine whether there are differences in the experience of guilt among incarcerated individuals, based on their demographic characteristics and aspects of their imprisonment experience. More specifically, the study focuses on examining differences according to gender, level of education, prior incarceration experience, and the duration of time spent in prison.

Study Hypothesis

The general hypothesis of the study posits that there are differences in the experience of guilt among incarcerated individuals, depending on their gender, level of education, prior history of imprisonment, and the duration of their current incarceration.

Study Instrument

To measure feelings of guilt, the Guilt and Shame Proneness Scale (GASP)—developed by Cohen, Wolf, Panter, and Insko (2011)—was used. Although this instrument consists of 16 items, only the 8 items designed specifically to measure guilt were used in this study; the other 8 items, which were intended to measure shame, were excluded. Responses were coded on a Likert scale ranging from 0 to 7 points.

Sample Selection and Data Collection

Initially, official authorization was obtained from the Ministry of Justice (Administration for the Execution of Sanctions) and the directors of the prisons in Tetovo, Skopje, and Veles, granting access to these institutions for the purpose of conducting the research (reference number 03-1102/4, dated July 24, 2024). Before the data collection process began, a brief presentation was delivered to the inmates, explaining the purpose of the research, providing instructions on how to complete the questionnaires, and highlighting the importance of their contribution.

Participants were informed that participation was entirely voluntary and anonymous, and that all data would be used solely for research purposes. Questionnaires were distributed to the prisoners in small groups to ensure a quiet and focused environment. A non-random (selective) sampling method was used, whereby individuals incarcerated in the aforementioned prisons were selected based on their willingness to participate in the study and complete the questionnaire. Of the 273 total participants, 207 (75.8%) were male, while 66 (24.2%) were female. Regarding educational attainment, the data indicate that 103 participants (37.7%) had not completed primary education, 78 (28.6%) had completed primary education, 45 (16.5%) had completed secondary education, and 47 (17.2%) had attained higher education. As for prior incarceration experience, 174 participants (63.7%) stated that they were in prison for the first time, while 99 participants (36.3%) reported having been incarcerated previously.

Regarding the duration of imprisonment up to the time the instrument was administered, 79 participants (28.9%) had been in prison for less than one year, 74 (27.1%) for one to three years, 71 (26.0%) for four to seven years, while 49 participants (17.9%) had been in prison for more than seven years. The demographic structure of the participants and their distribution according to characteristics of their imprisonment experience are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Structure of participants by gender, educational level, and prison characteristics

Gender	N	%	Educational level	N	%	Prison experience	N	%	Duration of the sentence	N	%
Male	207	75.8	No primary education	103	37.7	The first time	174	63.7	Less than 1 year	79	28.9
Female	66	24.2	Primary education	78	28.6	I have been to prison before as well	99	36.3	1–3 years	74	27.1
			Secondary education	45	16.5				4–7 years	71	26
			Higher	47	17.2				More than 7 years	49	17.9
Total				273			273			273	

Study Results

Descriptive Data

Table 2 presents descriptive data regarding feelings of guilt among the participants included in the study. The results show that the minimum value recorded is 31 points, while the maximum value is 55 points out of a possible 56. The arithmetic mean of the scores is 45.91 (SD = 5.28), which indicates a high tendency to experience feelings of guilt.

Tabela 2. Descriptive data for the guilt sensitivity variable.

	N	Minimum	Maxium	Mean	Std. Deviation
Guilt	273	31.00	55.00	45.91	5.2754

Gender Differences in the experience of guilt

To analyze whether there are gender-based differences in the experience of guilt, the non-parametric Mann–Whitney U test was applied. The results showed no statistically significant differences between the two groups (U = 6215.50, Z = −1.104, p = 0.269, N = 273).
Although the mean ranks indicated a higher value for females (MR = 146.33) compared to males (MR = 134.03), this difference did not reach the threshold of statistical significance (p > 0.05). Consequently, our initial hypothesis is not supported.

Table 3. Differences in feelings of guilt by gender

Guilt	Gender	N	Mean Rank
	Male	207	134,03
	Female	66	146.33

Mann Whitney U	6215.500
Z	-1.104
(Asymp. Sig., 2-tailed)	.269

Differences in the experience of guilt according to education level

To analyze whether there are differences in the experience of guilt based on education level, the non-parametric Kruskal–Wallis test was used. The test results revealed no statistically significant differences between the groups of participants based on their level of education, H(3) = 0.407, p = 0.939, N = 273. On the other hand, an analysis of the mean ranks reveals that prisoners without a primary education show a higher mean rank (MR = 140.69), while the lowest mean rank was recorded among prisoners with a secondary education (MR = 132.77).
In this instance, too, our initial assumption that prisoners with different levels of education differ in their experience of guilt did not prove to be true.

Table 4. Differences in the experience of guilt according to level of education

Group	N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
No primary education	103	140.69	14491.00
Primary education	78	135.44	10564.00
Secondary education	45	132.77	5974.50
Higher education	47	135.56	6371.50
Total	273		

Table 5. Kruskal–Wallis test results

Chi-Square	0.407
Df	3
Asymp. Sig.	.939

Differences in the experience of guilt based on prior incarceration

The results of the non-parametric Mann–Whitney U test revealed statistically significant differences between participants who were incarcerated for the first time and those with a history of prior incarceration (U = 5800.00, Z = −2.482, p = 0.013, N = 273). The mean ranks indicated that first-time incarcerated individuals had a higher mean rank (MR = 133.52) compared to participants with prior incarceration experience (MR = 109.94). These findings suggest that the group of first-time incarcerated participants reported higher levels of guilt compared to the group with a history of prior incarceration. This finding is supported by the statistical significance ($p < 0.05$) presented in Table 7.

Table 6. Differences in the experience of guilt according to prior imprisonment experience.

Group	N	Mean rank	Sum of ranks
First time (P1=1)	174	133.52	21230.00
Have been here before (P1=2)	99	109.94	9895.00
Total	273		

Table 7. Mann-Whitney test results

Statistics	Sum
MANN-WHITNEY u	5800.000
Z	−2.482
Asymp . sig. (2-tailed)	.013

Differences in the experience of guilt based on the duration of imprisonment

To analyze differences in the experience of guilt in relation to the duration of imprisonment up to the time of the study, the non-parametric Kruskal–Wallis test was applied, supplemented by a more detailed post-hoc analysis for multiple comparisons. Table 8 shows the mean ranks; the highest mean rank was found among prisoners who had served between 4 and 7 years (MR = 153.49). This group was followed by prisoners who had served less than 1 year (MR = 139.06). This result was confirmed as statistically significant (p = .033), as shown in Table 9.
As mentioned above, further post-hoc comparisons were conducted to identify the groups between which statistically significant differences existed. The results revealed a statistically significant difference between participants who had spent 4 to 7 years in prison and those who had spent more than 7 years (rank difference = 42.823, p_adj = 0.019). Specifically, the group with a duration of 4–7 years in prison showed higher mean ranks compared to the group with a duration of over 7 years. These findings indicate that the length of time spent in prison is associated with differences in the experience of guilt, although, in the post-hoc analyses, statistically significant differences were observed only between the group with 4–7 years in prison and the group with over 7 years in prison.

Table 8. Differences in the experience of guilt according to the duration of imprisonment.

How many years have you served in prison so far?	N	Mean rank	Sum of ranks
Less than one year	79	139.06	10986.00
1–3 years	74	136.42	10095.00
4–7 years	71	153.49	10897.50
More than 7 years	49	110.66	5422.50
Total	273		

Table 9. Kruskal–Wallis test results

Statistics	Value
Chi-Square	8.749
Df	3
Asymp. Sig.	.033

Table 10. Post-hoc comparisons between groups according to the duration of imprisonment.

Sample 1	Std. Test Statistic	Sig.	Adj. Sig.
Less than 1 year	0.209	.835	1.000
Less than 1 year	−1.126	.260	1.000
Less than 1 year	1.995	.046	.277
1–3 years	−1.312	.190	1.000
1–3 years	1.786	.074	.445
4–7 years	2.945	.003	.019

Discussions and conclusions

This study aimed to conduct a comparative analysis of feelings of guilt in relation to gender, educational level, and characteristics of incarceration. The findings regarding our first hypothesis concerning gender challenge gender stereotypes that portray women as more fragile and more prone to feelings of guilt (Ferguson & Eyre, 2000), as the results of this study did not support this view. It remains unclear whether the act of committing a criminal offense, coupled with social isolation, might serve as a universal factor that equalizes individuals. In support of this, Puhrmann (2015) argues that when faced with severe institutional stressors and isolation, the emotional responses of both genders may follow a similar trajectory; this suggests that feelings of guilt are determined more by the situation than by gender (Kanyangaras et al., 2014).
We also expected that an individual's level of education would influence the extent to which they experience feelings of guilt while incarcerated, based on the premise that education can shape how people perceive their own behavior, the consequences of irresponsible actions, and the failure to adhere to social norms.
However, our findings did not support this hypothesis. One possible explanation is that the emotional weight of the criminal offense committed combined with the trauma inherent in the imprisonment process itself may render the experience of guilt a uniform response, affecting individuals regardless of their educational background (Yıldırım et al., 2023).
Tangney et al. (2007) and Tangney et al. (2011) researchers who have long studied this subject—point out that the level of education is not necessarily a factor that increases feelings of guilt. Instead, guilt is more closely linked to the emotional experiences arising from the interplay between moral standards, the evaluation of one's own behavior, and emotional reactions. Thus, individuals with the same level of education may differ significantly in how they perceive the consequences of their actions and how they emotionally react to them.
Individuals incarcerated for the first time exhibited higher levels of guilt compared to those with prior incarceration experience. The initial experience of imprisonment can be a period characterized by deeper personal reflection concerning the loss of freedom, the gravity of the offense committed, and the consequences for both the individual’s family and the individual themselves while behind prison walls. This interpretation aligns with psychological perspectives that define guilt as an emotion linked to the negative evaluation of a specific behavior (Hosser et al., 2008). These findings provide a theoretical framework for understanding why first-time incarcerated individuals, in the current study, might display higher levels of guilt. This contrasts with the findings of Kovács et al. (2019), who found no

evidence that individuals incarcerated for the first time consistently experience a greater sense of guilt than those with a history of prior incarceration.

Regarding differences in the experience of guilt based on the duration of imprisonment up to the time the tests were administered, the results indicated lower levels of reported guilt among those who had served more than seven years in prison. A possible explanation for this is that long periods of incarceration may lead to a reduction in emotional intensity or a shift in psychological aspects (Dettbarn, 2012). Consistent with this finding, Walker et al. (2014) also suggested that certain psychological symptoms may improve following the initial period of imprisonment, although this study cannot be considered direct confirmation of changes in the experience of guilt.

Naturally, the results of this study must be interpreted with its limitations in mind—specifically the composition of the sample and the fact that the data reflect group differences at a single point in time. Nevertheless, the study contributes to expanding knowledge regarding the experience of moral emotions within prison settings and underscores the importance of considering individual characteristics when examining psychological processes related to personal responsibility and rehabilitation. Furthermore, every study leaves room for future research to incorporate larger samples, explore additional psychological factors—such as empathy, remorse, personality traits, and moral responsibility—and employ a longitudinal approach to gain a better understanding of how moral emotions are experienced throughout the period of incarceration.

In conclusion, a better understanding of individual differences in the experience of guilt can contribute to the development of psychological and rehabilitative approaches aimed at fostering self-reflection, the acceptance of personal responsibility, and the successful reintegration of incarcerated individuals into society.

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