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Thinking about justice and dealing with one's own privileges: A study on
existential guilt.

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The Concept of Existential Guilt

Resources are distributed unequally. Differences in wealth, prestige, education, freedom, or power are common, within and between families, organizations, social classes, countries, etc. Historians, social philosophers, sociologists, and psychologists have often been concerned how people deal with being disadvantaged: When do they consider their lot unjust and possibly suffer from it? When do they tend to act against perceived injustice? When do they put their lot into perspective and justify it? Theories of social conflict or revolution, and of envy have analyzed inequalities from the viewpoint of the disadvantaged.

By contrast, relatively little is known about the perspective of the privileged. Do they enjoy their privileges; do they fear losing their advantages; do they deny or justify their favorable lot? Certainly, various doctrines of justice offer ample arguments that can be used by the advantaged to justify their privileges. But what happens if someone fails to justify his favorable lot without having to renounce his preferred principles of justice or the facts? In such cases, a person should experience conflict and feel uneasy about his advantages.

We have begun research on this phenomenon of uneasiness caused by one's own privileges as well as on coping with it. Our first study, from which the data presented in this chapter stem, was focused on existential guilt. We conceive existential guilt as an intra- and interindividually varying disposition to react with feelings of guilt to perceived differences between one's own favorable lot or position (i.e., own privileges) and the unfavorable lot of others.

We believe existential guilt to be a likely reaction whenever the following four conditions are met: First, one's own advantages must be seen to result from controllable distributions that need to be justified. Second, one must assume a causal relationship between one's own privileges and the unfavorable situation of others, i.e., the lot of the disadvantaged must either be regarded as a direct or indirect consequence of one's own

privileges, or it must be open to improvement by means of redistribution. Third, there must be some doubt concerning the justice of the discrepancies between one's own and others' situation. Different principles of distributive or procedural justice may cast doubts on the legitimacy of a distribution. Finally, the privileged person must feel solidarity with, and responsibility or even sympathy for the disadvantaged. This points to the question of where the boundaries of a community are seen, within which solidarity and justice may be claimed. These boundaries may be narrow (e.g., the nuclear family), they may be as broad as to incorporate the entire human race, including subsequent generations.

In the past, psychology has not been interested much in the concept of existential guilt. Theoretical elaborations are lacking as are operationalizations of the concepts and sound empirical research. Nevertheless, analogies can be found in psychiatric case descriptions, i.e., in analyses of guilt feelings experienced by survivors of catastrophes (Lifton, 1967) or concentration camps (von Bayer, Haefner & Kisker, 1964; Chodoff, 1976; Ostwald & Bittner, 1976). Survivors sometimes feel guilty toward the dead. Why? Perhaps because surviving is seen as violating solidarity or equality in bad fate.

Hoffman (1976) was the first theorist to use the concept of existential guilt in a broader sense: not only may survival promote feelings of guilt, certain favorable circumstances in life may cause them as well. Not only might those who lose their lives in a catastrophe be considered victims but potentially all individuals who are undeservedly underprivileged. In this conceptual framework Hoffman interpreted the political activities of America's (radical) white youth during the sixties, when members of the white middle class fought for the civil rights of the black and against the continuation of the Vietnam War (Haan, Smith & Block, 1968; Keniston, 1968).

The above conceptualization of existential guilt raises a number of

empirical questions. First, by means of what cognitive-defensive strategies can someone protect himself against feelings of existential guilt when confronted with his own privileges vis a vis the unfortunate lot of others? In particular, how effective are denial of the existence of inequality or of differences in privileges, justification of one's own advantages by attributing them to internal causes such as effort or aptitude, and justification of inequality by attributing the disadvantages of others to themselves, e.g. to their laziness or lack of ability? Second, how important is adherence to a particular distributive justice in understanding whether one's own privileges require justification and lead to existential guilt if justification fails? Third, what role does perceived control over the distributive process play in existential guilt? Does perceived control enhance feelings of existential guilt if justice is seen to be violated? Fourth, what role does generalized denial of responsibility for the fate of the disadvantaged play? Does it, as we assume, moderate the effects of perceived injustice on existential guilt? Fifth, does existential guilt vary with attitudes toward the disadvantaged? Sixth, does belief in a just world (Lerner, 1980) immunize someone against existential guilt? Does this effect vary depending on how important or central issues of justice are seen to be? Finally, is it possible to demonstrate construct validity of existential guilt evidenced (1) by distinguishing it from empathic distress and (2) by relating existential guilt to social and political attitudes and behavior?

Coping with One's Own Privileges: An Empirical Study

Our empirical study on these questions is focused on three groups of disadvantaged people: (a) people living in developing countries, (b) the handicapped, and (c) Turkish guest workers in West Germany². These three groups were chosen because most West Germans live under much better conditions than those people do.³ No assessment was made of the living

conditions of our subjects to ensure their privileged situation compared to the living conditions of the three groups of underprivileged selected.

Sample

Three hundred and forty subjects with a mean age of 36.1--ranging from 16 to 70 years--took part in the study. Sixty-two percent were male. Higher levels of formal education were somewhat overrepresented. Most subjects (88%) described their income as sufficient or better.

About half of the sample were randomly drawn residents of an urban area; the remaining subjects were selected from organizations which, on the basis of their programs or activities, were likely to have either a low or a high tendency to experience existential guilt.

Research Instruments

Since we were unaware of any research on existential guilt and its relationship to the variables specified above, all research instruments had to be constructed (cf. Dalbert et al., 1984; Montada et al., 1983). Since we were interested primarily in interindividual differences in dispositional existential guilt and their relation to other constructs mainly derived from theories of justice and prosocial behavior, our approach fits well into a personological framework. As is common in this framework, all variables were assessed by questionnaires.

The target variable, existential guilt, and six other variables were measured with an "existential guilt inventory". This instrument consists of nine short stories or scenarios describing the disadvantages of (a) people in developing countries, (b) handicapped people, and (c) Turkish guest workers in West Germany. The stories clearly emphasize the large discrepancy in desirability of living conditions between the disadvantaged, i.e., the characters of the story, and the reader. Each story is followed by a list of seven different thoughts representing cognitive/emotional reactions to it, only five of these are mentioned here. They are conceived

as indicators of the following constructs: (a) Existential guilt (EG): bad conscience, feelings of guilt, feelings of injustice resulting from the comparison of own privileges with the fate of underprivileged people; (b) Denial of discrepancies (DD): denial of or attempts to play down the discrepancies between own privileges and the situation of the disadvantaged; (c) Justifying own privileges as deserved (PD): causal attribution of one's own favorable lot to internal factors such as aptitude or effort or inherited rights; (d) Justifying the disadvantaged's fate as self-inflicted (SI): causal attribution of the underprivileged's unfavorable lot to themselves, e.g., to their incompetence; (e) Empathic distress (ED): compassion toward the underprivileged. The first of the nine scenarios of the existential guilt inventory appears in the Appendix as an example.

Subjects were asked to rate on a six-point scale ranging from "very likely" to "very unlikely" the probability that they would have each particular thought as a reaction to the content of the story.

All statistical analyses reported below are based on individual average scores across the short stories. Intra- and interindividual differences concerning the three groups of disadvantaged will not be reported in this chapter since the primary concern here is to address general relationships between existential guilt and other variables. Internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha) of these five scales, each comprising nine items, is as follows: EG (.89), DD (.76), PD (.86), SI (.79), ED (.84).

The descriptions and statistical properties of the questionnaires developed to measure all other variables will be presented in the sections that deal with their relationship to existential guilt.

Cognitive Analysis of Inequality and Existential Guilt

We expected existential guilt to be most likely for those subjects who do not use any of the three defensive strategies mentioned: denial of

discrepancy (DD), justifying own privileges (PD), and justifying the disadvantaged's lot (SI).

Our data support this hypothesis. The three predictor variables (DD, PD, SI) and the criterion variable (EG) were dichotomized at their medians. The contingency table analysis results in a significant chi-square for the entire table and for the predictor combination DD-PD-SI- (cf., Table 1). Existential guilt is most likely for subjects who do not deny the discrepancies, do not justify their own privileges, do not hold the disadvantaged responsible for their fate.

insert Table 1 about here

Distributive Justice and Existential Guilt

Differences in privileges may be judged differently depending on the principle of distributive justice underlying the evaluation.

Based on results of a previous study (Schmitt & Montada, 1982) we constructed short scales to measure generalized preference for the equity and the need principle. Those preferring the equity principle were expected to have few difficulties justifying existing inequalities in contrast to people considering the need principle just.

The equity scale (EY) consists of nine items meant to represent preference for input-output-proportionality as a just distribution rule, e.g., "I consider an employer to act justly if during times of slow business he dismisses the least productive employees first." Subjects had to indicate how much they agreed with the statements on six-point Likert scales. Considering the small number of items, internal consistency of the scale is acceptable (Cronbach's alpha = .76).

The need scale (NE) consists of six items meant to represent a preference for distributions on recipient's needs, e.g.: "If two friends own a sailboat together, I feel it would be fair if they paid for all expenses according to their income." Internal consistency of the scale is acceptable (alpha = .79).

The relationships of these two justice variables to existential guilt and to the defensive cognitions are consistent with our expectations. Although the contents of the two justice scales have no commonalities with the contents of the nine scenarios of the "existential guilt inventory", the correlations are significant and substantial. For example, the correlation between equity (EY) and justification of one's own privileges as deserved (PD) amounts to .46 ($p < .001$), whereas the correlation between the need principle (NE) and PD equals .06 ($p = .16$); existential guilt (EG) is correlated positively with NE ($r = .46$, $p < .001$) and negatively with EY ($r = -.12$, $p = .019$).

The Role of Perceived Control

Our conceptual analysis of existential guilt suggests that perceived control over redistribution may be a crucial factor in addition to the evaluation of inequality in terms of justice. Subjectively perceived control (PC) was assessed with a scale of nine items referring to the same groups of disadvantaged people and to the same privileges as the nine stories of the existential guilt inventory. Each item consists of a question asking the subject whether he/she sees options or means for him/herself to improve the unfavorable lot of the disadvantaged mentioned. Subjects answer these questions by indicating on a six-point Likert scale the amount of influence they believe they would have if they wanted to change the situation. For example: "(Even) if I wanted to, I could exert no (... a lot of) influence on the bad housing situation of Turkish guest workers in West Germany." To be sure, subjects were not asked if they were motivated or willing to exert influence but only if they could exert influence if they wanted to. The internal consistency of the scale is high ($\alpha = .89$).

In addition to a positive correlation between perceived control (PC) and existential guilt ($r = .27$, $p < .001$), we expected PC to act as a moderator of the (positive) effect of need (NE), and the (negative) effect of equity (EY), on existential guilt (EG). Perception of high control should enhance

these two effects, whereas perception of little control should lower them. Concerning equity, perceived control should corroborate the view that everyone is the master of his own fate. On the other hand, the perception of control over redistribution should increase the sense of being responsible for reestablishing justice which according to the need principle is considered violated.

This hypothesis was tested via multiple regression analysis with NE, EY, and PC as predictors and EG as the criterion variable. In addition to NE, EY, and PC, their products (NE*EY, NE*PC, EY*PC, NE*EY*PC) were included as predictor terms to test the interaction hypothesis (see Cohen, 1978). As can be seen in Table 2, PC indeed acts as a moderator variable but only with respect to EY. Additionally, NE serves as a moderator of EY.

insert Table 2 about here

The model equation at the bottom of Table 2 allows for the computation of conditionally expected values of EG for all values of NE, EY, and PC (cf., e.g., Steyer, 1985) . Existential guilt is highest for those who simultaneously consider the need principle as very just, reject the equity principle as very unjust, and believe to have high control over redistribution themselves. On the other hand, those who have a very favorable attitude toward the equity principle, score high on perceived control, and reject the need principle as unjust, are least likely to experience existential guilt.

Felt Responsibility for and Attitude toward the Disadvantaged

We have argued that existential guilt presupposes solidarity with, responsibility and even sympathy for the disadvantaged. Theory and research on the context-specific preference for justice principles (e.g., Deutsch, 1975; Schmitt & Montada, 1982) make it clear that the need principle is considered particularly appropriate whenever the social context of the conflict is characterized by interpersonal responsibility.

Responsibility denial (RD) as conceptualized by Schwartz (e.g., 1977) may serve as an indirect indicator of how narrowly someone sets the boundaries for solidarity and responsibility. Consequently, responsibility denial should determine whether need (NE) is considered appropriate to evaluate the justice of a situation. While NE was assessed only in a generalized form, the assessment of RD was specific to groups of the disadvantaged. Therefore, we expected a curvilinear moderator effect of RD on the dependency of existential guilt on NE, and for the following reasons. A moderate degree of responsibility denial may well indicate an ambivalent opinion with respect to solidarity. In such cases of indecision (i.e., whether or not to exclude the disadvantaged from one's solidarity), more generalized beliefs like NE should be relied on to evaluate the situation, and NE should therefore become a more influential source of variance of existential guilt. By contrast, low or high degrees of RD indicate clear decisions. In such cases, reference to more general opinions or beliefs such as NE should be less important for the generation of existential guilt.

Similar to Schwartz (e.g., 1977), responsibility denial (RD) was conceptualized as a tendency to play down others' needs or misery, explain them as self-inflicted, point to the responsibility of others, claim that help is not possible, or apply any other similarly defensive perception or evaluation. Each of the three parts of the scale to measure RD focuses on one of the three groups of the disadvantaged considered. Each part consists of twelve items such as the following concerning the handicapped: "Many handicapped exaggerate their problems". "I can't see why individual citizens should care about the problems of the handicapped; that's the business of the Federal Government." Again, subjects had to indicate on a six-point Likert scale how much they agreed with the statements. Internal consistency of the three parts of the scale is high, ranging from .85 to .93. As they are highly intercorrelated, average scores were computed for further data analysis. In a formal sense, the hypothesis concerning the moderating effect of RD on the relationship between NE and EG corresponds

to a quadratic moderator function (cf., e.g., Bartussek, 1970). Again, multiple regression analysis served to test the hypothesis. As can be seen from Table 3, the partialled product of NE and RD (NE*RD) accounts for a significant proportion of the variance of existential guilt (EG).

insert Table 3 about here

The conditional regression effects of NE (given RD) are consistent with our hypothesis. Attitude toward the need principle is most important as a predictor of existential guilt for those subjects who deny responsibility to a moderate degree and least important for those who either deny responsibility a great deal or very little.⁵

Besides responsibility denial, attitudes toward the disadvantaged (AU) were considered as indirect indicators of a disposition to experience solidarity and responsibility. Among other instruments, (e.g., social distance scales), we used adjective lists to assess AU. This measure is, as expected, significantly and substantially correlated with existential guilt ($r=.50$, $p < .001$). There are no interaction effects of AU with any other justice variable predicting existential guilt.

Belief in a Just World and Existential Guilt

According to Lerner (e.g., 1977), many people seem motivated to hold the view that the world is a just one where everyone gets what he or she deserves. When these people encounter injustice, they experience a conflict between reality and their belief. This conflict may be solved either by intervention, e.g., by trying to reestablish justice or, if that seems impossible, too costly, or aversive, by cognitive reevaluation or reorganization. Many puzzling phenomena begin to make sense when analyzed in this framework (see also Lerner, 1980).

Belief in a just world would seem to provoke denial of the injustice of obvious inequalities of the type depicted in the scenarios of our existential guilt inventory.

Therefore, belief in a just world should be correlated positively with the three defensive strategies denial of discrepancies (DD), justification of own privileges (PD), justification of the disadvantaged's fate as being self-inflicted (SI) and negatively with existential guilt.

Because a German translation of Rubin & Peplau's (1975) just world scale achieved poor reliability and consistency scores (Dalbert, 1982), two new scales were developed, one assessing a general belief in a just world (GJW) (e.g., "I believe that in general people get what they deserve.") and a second assessing specific belief in a just world (SJW) which relates to the three groups of underprivileged people at issue (e.g., "I believe that in West Germany Turkish employees are not disadvantaged."). GJW consists of six items ($\alpha = .88$), SJW of eight ($\alpha = .82$). Subjects responded by indicating the extent of their agreement with the statement on a six-point Likert scale.

We expected the specific belief in a just world (SJW) to be more strongly related to the defensive strategies (DD, PD, SI) than the general belief in a just world (GJW) because of content similarities. The data confirm the expectation as well as the hypothesis stated above: The correlation between general belief in a just world (GJW) and existential guilt is negative. Though significant, it is not impressive ($r = -.10$, $p < .05$). The correlations between GJW and the defensive strategies are much higher: DD ($r = .47$, $p < .001$), PD ($r = .52$, $p < .001$), SI ($r = .45$, $p < .001$). As expected, all correlations were higher when belief in a just world was assessed specifically (SJW): EG ($r = -.37$, $p < .001$), DD ($r = .62$, $p < .001$), PD ($r = .64$, $p < .001$), SI ($r = .57$, $p < .001$).

The Moderating Role of Centrality of Justice

It seems reasonable to assume that the relation between belief in a just world and existential guilt is not constant across all groups of people but depends itself on moderator variables as e.g. centrality of justice as part of one's self-concept. It seems unlikely that people to whom justice issues are very important could easily claim the world to be just when confronted

with obvious inequalities. On the other hand, those for whom justice is less central should have fewer difficulties in warding off feelings of existential guilt by means of conceiving the world as a just place. In addition to this interaction effect, we expected a main effect of centrality of justice (CJ) on existential guilt because we assume people for whom issues of justice are important to be more sensitive to inequalities. A five items scale (e.g., "There is almost nothing that infuriates me as much as injustice.") was devised to test these hypotheses. Subjects had to indicate on a six-point Likert scale how much they felt these statements described them.

Internal consistency of the scale is low, though acceptable if the shortness of the scale is considered ($\alpha = .73$).

As before, the interaction hypothesis stated above was tested via multiple regression analysis. Only specific belief in a just world (SJW) was included. The results of this analysis are reported in Table 4.

insert Table 4 about here

As hypothesized, the partialled product (SJW*CJ) is significant and substantial in size. The direction of the interaction effect is consistent with our expectations; that is, the more central justice is, the weaker is the effect of belief in a just world on existential guilt. On the other hand, if justice is of little importance to someone (CJ = 6), existential guilt will strongly depend on specific belief in a just world ($b_{SJW} = -1.75$; see the model equation at the bottom of Table 4). Even though "main effects" may not be interpreted if significant interaction effects exist, the correlation between centrality of justice and existential guilt ($r = .31$ $p < .001$) supports the second part of our hypothesis.

A Predictive Model for Existential Guilt

To this point, we have identified several variables on which existential guilt seems to depend. However, we have not taken all the interrelations among these variables into account. Indeed, our interpretation would be more sound if we could demonstrate these reported effects to be independent of each other. Therefore, a multiple regression analysis was performed with all the predictor variables discussed so far, including the significant products (DD, PD SI, NE, EY, PC, RD, AU, GJW, SJW, CJ, EY*PC, NE*EY, NE*RD, SJW*CJ). In addition, the German version of the Crowne & Marlowe (1960) social desirability scale developed (Lück & Timaeus, 1969) was included as a predictor variable. Existential guilt (EG) served as the criterion variable.

The results of this stepwise analysis (forward selection) are presented in Table 5. Remarkably many predictors "survive"

insert Table 5 about here

this analysis: attitudes toward the underprivileged (AU), need principle (NE), responsibility denial (RD), centrality of justice (CJ), specific belief in a just world (SJW), and justification of one's own privileges as being deserved (PD). Three of the five variables dealing with justice exert an independent effect on existential guilt (NE, SJW, CJ); equity and general belief in a just world do not account for a significantly independent portion of the variance of existential guilt in addition to the other predictors. Two of these three justice scales have no commonalities in content with existential guilt (recipients and resources to be distributed). This strengthens the theoretical interpretation of these correlations as they cannot be accounted for by shared content variance.

Even though none of the interaction effects "survived" this rigorous test of their significance, we still believe in their value for conceptual clarification.

Discriminating Existential Guilt from Empathic Distress

The proportion of variance of existential guilt (EG) accounted for by the six significant predictor variables is remarkable. However, there is one single variable, empathic distress (ED), that accounts for more variance in EG than these six predictors taken together. ED was assessed by the existential guilt inventory. The correlation between EG and ED is as large as .73. Does this mean that empathic distress and existential guilt are not distinguishable, or that they are caused by one single underlying latent variable? We believe the answer is no.

First, there is a clear conceptual difference between the two. Empathic distress may be caused solely by the misery of others, whereas existential guilt requires in addition perceived injustice of one's own privileged situation. However, a high correlation between EG and ED is hardly surprising. We think that existential guilt requires solidarity and sympathy with the underprivileged as a prerequisite. Empathic distress might be a good indicator of such solidarity and sympathy.

In addition to these conceptual arguments, there is relevant evidence in our data on the discriminant validity of existential guilt: (a) As expected, more variance in EG (26%) than in ED (15%) can be accounted for by the linear combination of need principle, equity principle, and personal control. Justice considerations and perceived control over redistribution are much less predictive of empathic distress than of existential guilt. (b) The correlation between specific belief in a just world and existential guilt is higher ($r = -.36, p < .001$) than the correlation between SJW and ED ($r = -.12, p = .019$). Again, justice considerations seem to be more important for the development of existential guilt than for the rise of empathic distress. (c) Whereas the defensive strategies (DD, PD, SI) and their interaction are significant predictors of existential guilt ($R = .29, p < .001$), none of them correlates significantly with empathic distress. Empathic distress may arise independently of whether the inequality seems justified or not; this is not true for existential guilt that depends, among other things, on defensive strategies. (d) If perceived control (PC)

is added as a predictor to DD, PD, and SI, their multiple correlation with EG increases to $R = .40$ ($p < .001$), whereas the multiple correlation of DD, PD, SI, and PC with ED still remains insignificant. Again, perceived control affects existential guilt but not empathic distress, a result which corresponds to Hoffman's conceptual analyses (Hoffman, 1982). (e) Some items of the scale measuring responsibility denial (RD) state that the state and professional welfare organizations, rather than individual citizens, are responsible for improvements in the situation of the underprivileged. The combination of these items to a reduced scale did not correlate with empathic distress ($r = .01$) but with existential guilt ($r = -.23$, $p < .001$). This result is totally in line with our theoretical considerations: Whereas existential guilt depends on perceived own responsibility for the unfavorable lot of others, empathic distress does not. Taken together, this evidence supports the claim that empathic distress and existential guilt are more than just two sides of the same coin.

Criterion Group Validity of Existential Guilt

So far, the argument for the construct validity of existential guilt has relied on its specific relations to other constructs focused on the discrepancy between one's own privileges and the unfavorable lot of others. There are also data demonstrating the construct validity of existential guilt based on its relation to both membership in criterion groups and criterion behavior.

Research has repeatedly found that liberals more frequently evaluate social inequalities as unjust than conservatives who, as the concept "conservative" implies, tend to justify or play down inequalities (e.g., Sandberger, 1982). Included in our sample were several groups that can be ordered according to their political liberalism/conservatism (L/C). The presumably most conservative group encompasses members of "Burschenschaften" which are student fraternities with distinctively conservative opinions on the justice of existing differences ($L/C = 1$), followed by members of the CDU (Christian Democratic Union), the more

conservative of the four main political parties in West Germany (L/C = 2). Members of the SPD (Democratic Socialists), the "Grüne" (Environmentalists), and members of various "Bürgerinitiativen" (formal action groups committed to the peace movement or to environmentalist organizations) were considered the politically least conservative subjects (L/C = 4). All remaining subjects, probably very heterogenous in political thinking, were assigned a L/C value of three (L/C = 3). Statistical significance of the differences in existential guilt between these groups was tested via one-way analysis of variance. The results of this analysis are given in Table 6.

insert Table 6 about here

Differences in existential guilt between groups are consistent with expectations. However, only the most conservative group (student fraternity) differs significantly from the other groups who do not differ in EG from each other significantly.

Another criterion behavior to which existential guilt should be related is commitment to and active support of underprivileged people. We assume that existential guilt is not only a reaction to perceived injustice (to one's own advantage) but also a motivation to relieve one's bad conscience. As an indicator of such motivation we have considered endeavors to reestablish justice. Our sample included members of several nonprofessional organizations committed to helping disadvantaged people. Some of these organizations focus their activities on the three groups of disadvantaged people we considered in our study (i.e., people from developing countries, the handicapped, Turkish guest workers in West Germany); other organizations have a more general social commitment. As expected, the difference in existential guilt between subjects belonging to one of these groups and "uncommitted" subjects is very significant ($t_{327} = 4.1, p < .01$). The difference between these two groups is not very large (approximately

one half of a standard deviation). This might be explained by the "guilt-reducing", effect of adequate social commitment.

Concluding Remarks

In most societies, people strive for privileges, advantages, and status. Often, they are not only proud of successes but pleased over social and economic luck. Upward mobility is a strong and widespread motive. However, in addition to the motive to maximize personal gains, there must be a fundamental motive for justice (Lerner, 1980). Without assuming such a motive, feelings of existential guilt would be difficult to explain. Perceived injustice of one's own privileges is not uncommon. Hochschild (1981) has compiled results of polls conducted in the USA between 1937 and 1976 on people's opinions on the redistribution of income and wealth. A substantial number, though a minority, of people from the highest economic class plead for some redistribution to their own disadvantage. This result may indicate that even in the USA where "making it" seems to be a rather strong social norm and motive (Lewis, 1978), not all of the rich justify any given differences in wealth.

Certainly, a plea for some redistribution does not imply that objective equality is the favored norm of justice. All other principles of justice allow for and justify differences- the need principle, the principle of proportionality between investments or achievements and outcomes, and certainly the principle of ascribed status. Hochschild (1981) proposed a ranking order of these norms of justice on the dimension equality-differentiation with need principle near the pole of equality and the ascription principle near the pole of differentiation. Beyond such a gross ranking of justice principles, different justifications of the same principle may be oriented either toward more equality or toward more differentiation. For example, liberals tend to justify the norm of proportionality between achievement and outcome by claiming that individual freedom to pursue one's goals implicates social differentiation because of inequality of given talents or property. In justifying the same norm, Rawls

(1975) points to the equality of the options of all people regardless of their status: unequal distribution is acceptable only if it is to everybody's advantage.

Of course, the more equality is taken into consideration in thinking on justice the more troubling large inequalities in the distribution of social goods may become. The questions addressed in our research are: How do people cope with their own obvious and substantial advantages? When do they "plead guilty" to have taken advantage undeservedly, and when do they apply various defensive strategies to justify the status quo?

A primary goal of this chapter was to clarify the concept of existential guilt and its theoretical network, especially the prerequisites or conditions of existential guilt as e.g., preferences of the need principle, lack of justifications of discrepancies, lack of responsibility denial, lack of belief in a just world.⁶ The overall meaning of empirical relationships between existential guilt and its correlates (including the interaction effects) seem to support the validity of the construct and the hypothesized theoretical network.

A second aspect of validity was addressed by the question, how well existential guilt can be differentiated from empathic distress. Though highly correlated, these two variables are clearly distinguishable. They have different and theoretically meaningful relationships. As expected, existential guilt covaries to a higher degree than empathic distress with attitudes toward justice principles, "defensive" justifications of discrepancies, belief in personal control and belief in a just world. It is argued that empathic distress itself is a contributing (if not a necessary) condition for existential guilt. A person who is indifferent or derogative or hateful toward the disadvantaged hardly will feel existential guilt. But there are further conditions to transform empathic distress into existential guilt.

This evidence for the validity of the concept and its measurement encourage further research. As we have only indirect evidence that existential guilt may instigate actions in favor of the disadvantaged (actually differences

between criterion groups), we will have to learn more on the consequences of and the coping with existential guilt. Evidence from experimental research leads to the expectation that guilt feelings dispose to prosocial actions (e.g., Tobey-Klass, 1978) which might have the form of giving away some of the own goods or a plea for some redistribution. Certainly, there are social conflicts, the solution of which requires some amount of redistribution of duties, wealth, power, freedom, income, etc. Therefore, future research on existential guilt should include further target groups, e.g., the unemployed, female employees, members of future generations as potential victims of today's exploitation of natural resources.

Prosocial action is not the only way to cope with one's own advantages. E.g., a critique on society's value system may be another and sometimes relatively unexpensive strategy to free oneself of guilt feelings without a concrete personal commitment.

Although we have identified some strategies to avoid or free ourselves from guilt feelings we have to study those processes and their outcomes in more detail. Moreover, we have to look at what happens when prosocial commitment is very costly and guilt defensive strategies are not successful. Certainly, existential guilt may become a virulent or even a dangerous feeling. As justice of differences always may be questioned, own advantages hardly can be justified beyond any doubt. Those who fail to convince themselves that their advantages are justified (e.g., earned or socially functional) should experience a permanent conflict: Either they give up their advantage or they violate their personal norms of justice. That is the type of conflict out of which neuroses might develop.

Footnotes

- ¹ This research was supported by a grant from the Stiftung Volkswagenwerk (VW-Foundation).
- ² There are many Turkish guest workers living in Germany with their families, mainly blue collar workers with permission to stay and jobs for a restricted period of time. Although they earn the same as Germans in the same jobs, they are considered relatively poor because they send a lot of money home to their relatives in Turkey, because they usually have large families, because they are living in overcrowded dwellings, etc. Since they remain in Germany for a limited period of time only, they have not accumulated property in the way most Germans do. Moreover, they have no rights in political participation, which is considered a problem more and more. Of course, these Turkish people may compare themselves to other Turkish people in Germany or to reference groups in Turkey. Therefore, they may not consider themselves disadvantaged. However, our study is not focused on the self-perception of the Turkish but on the perceptions and evaluations of Germans.
- ³ The present study was focused on existential guilt toward anonymous groups. We assume that feelings of existential guilt may arise toward individual persons as well. E.g., a German blue collar worker may have a bad conscience when he observes that his Turkish colleague has to perform the most difficult jobs, or a husband may feel guilty when he becomes aware of his wife being frustrated because she had to give up her professional career for the sake of the family and the children; or the son of a rich family may feel guilty when entering a famous college while his friend cannot enroll because of financial reasons.
- ⁴ All coefficients in this chapter are based on scale scores that were computed as individual item means. Scores can range from 1 to 6. Coding of all variables in this chapter is such that a low numerical value represents a high substantive value. For example, EG = 1 represents the highest amount of existential guilt possible, PC = 6

means the lowest amount of perceived control possible. This coding is important for the understanding of both conditional effects and conditionally expected values.

⁵ Given RD = 2.5, 3, 4, 5, 5.5, the respective effects of NE on EG amount to .11, .36, .53, .25, -.06. These values of RD were chosen to take into account the skewed distribution of RD (most of our subjects tended not to deny responsibility, RD = 4.38).

⁶ Because the description of populations was not the main purpose of this chapter, means and other descriptive statistics of existential guilt and its correlates have not been mentioned and discussed.

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Appendix

Imagine you see a film on TV showing the life in the slums of an Indian metropolitan area like Bombay: People live in extremely narrow quarters crowded together; many of them suffer from starvation and illness; medical care is poor; sanitary conditions are inhumane, drinking-water is contaminated and the shabby dwellings hardly offer enough shelter. How probable is it for you to have the following thoughts in this situation:

- (1) "Realizing all this, I feel unable to enjoy many things in my life with a safe conscience." (EG)
- (2) "I really cannot see that they are so badly off. This is another culture with different values and different entitlements. It's typical of TV to dramatize the situation in such a completely unnecessary way." (DD)
- (3) "I gladly admit that compared to these people, I am definitely well off; but after all, nobody has given anything to me. I had to work hard for what I have." (PD)
- (4) "I cannot help but blame these people themselves as long as they do not fight harder against their fate." (SI)
- (5) "It is a pity that these people have to bear such a miserable lot."
(ED)

Table 1: Contingency table analysis of the predictor variables DD, PD, SI, and the criterion variable EG (all variables dichotomized at their median)

DD	PD	SI	EG+			EG-			Σ
			f_o	f_e	χ^2	f_o	f_e	χ^2	
+	+	+	45	51.2	.75	56	49.8	.77	101
+	+	-	3	7.6	2.78	12	7.4	2.86	15
+	-	+	6	9.6	1.35	13	9.4	1.38	19
+	-	-	8	6.6	.30	5	6.4	.31	13
-	+	+	12	12.2	.06	10	10.9	.07	22
-	+	-	6	7.6	.34	9	7.4	.35	15
-	-	+	5	8.1	1.19	11	7.9	1.22	16
-	-	-	69	52.2	5.41*	34	50.8	5.56*	103
Σ			154			150			304 ^a

* $p < .05$

^a in this and all subsequent tables, N is reduced due to missing data

Table 2: Multiple regression from EG on NE, EY, PC, and their products
(accepted model; all variables ranging from 1 to 6; N = 268)

Predictor term	R	R ²	r	b	σ_b	F	df	p
NE	.46	.21	.46	.92	.21			
PC	.48	.23	.25	-.50	.28			
EY	.49	.24	-.11	-.35	.31			
NE*EY	.50	.25	.29	-.14	.05	6.72	1/262	< .05
EY*PC	.51	.26	.14	.18	.07	5.97	1/262	< .05
intercept				2.46				

Total F = 18.79; df = 5/262; p < .01

Model equation:

$$E(EG|NE, EY, PC) = 2.46 + .92NE - .50PC + (-.35 - .14NE + .18PC)EY$$

Table 3: Multiple regression from EG on NE, RD, RD² and their products
(full model; all variables ranging from 1 to 6; N = 299)

Predictor term	R	R ²	r	b	σ_b	F	df	p
NE	.41	.17	.41	-2.84	1.25			
RD	.51	.26	-.38	-5.23	2.02			
NE*RD	.53	.28	.18	1.74	.59			
RD ²	.53	.29	-.39	.63	.24			
NE*RD ²	.56	.31	-.02	-.22	.07	10.55	1/293	<.01
intercept				12.47				

Total F = 26.39; df = 5/293; p < .01

Model equation:

$$E(\text{ENGINE}, \text{RD}) = 12.47 - 5.23\text{RD} + .63\text{RD}^2 + (-2.84 + 1.74\text{RD} - .22\text{RD}^2)\text{NE}$$

Table 4: Multiple regression from EG on SJW, CJ, and their product
(full model; all variables ranging from 1 to 6; N = 253)

Predictor term	R	R ²	r	b	σ_b	F	df	p
SJW	.37	.14	-.37	.26	.21			
CJ	.49	.24	.31	1.95	.44			
SJW*CJ	.52	.27	.07	-.33	.09	12.48	1/249	<.01
intercept				1.00				

Total F = 31.02; df = 3/249; p <.01

Model equation:

$$E(EG|SJW,CJ) = 1.00 + 1.95CJ + (.26 - .33CJ)SJW$$

Table 5: Multiple regression from EG on all potential predictors measured and some of their products (see text)
(accepted model; all variables ranging from 1 to 6; N = 273)

Predictor term	R	R ²	r	b	σ_b	F	df	p	beta
AU	.50	.25	.50	.62	.10	39.74	1/266	<.01	.32
NE	.61	.37	.44	.28	.05	34.53	1/266	<.01	.29
RD	.64	.40	-.41	-.31	.08	17.68	1/266	<.01	-.21
CJ	.66	.43	.32	.24	.07	12.68	1/266	<.01	.17
SJW	.66	.44	-.36	-.20	.08	5.77	1/266	<.05	-.17
PD	.67	.45	-.15	.13	.06	3.99	1/266	<.05	.13
intercept				1.23					

Total F = 35.52; df = 6/266; p <.01

Table 6: One-way analysis of variance on EG between four groups differing in political conservatism/liberalism

Group (L/C =)	n	\bar{EG}	s_{EG}	$\hat{\sigma}_{EG}$	significant difference (LSD, $p < .01$, two- tailed) to group			
					1	2	3	4
1	50	4.01	1.16	.16				
2	41	3.13	.97	.15	*			
3	213	3.07	.99	.07	*			
4	23	2.89	1.12	.23	*			

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