# BEREAVEMENT G U L T

IN CHINESE ADULT CHILDREN

The Preliminary Exploration

中国丧亲者的内疚感:当父母去世



## Bereavement Guilt in Chinese Adult Children: The Preliminary Exploration

Li Jie



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# Bereavement Guilt in Chinese Adult Children: The Preliminary Exploration

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#### **Abstract**

Bereavement is one of the most painful experiences in one's life, and guilt is one of the various emotions associated with it. Guilt is widely reported by bereaved people, but it is not yet sufficiently understood by researchers. There is a lack of convergence in conceptualizing guilt, and no valid measurement exists to assess this important construct in grief. Meanwhile, this emotion is particularly significant in Chinese adult given the cultural value of filial piety. Therefore, efforts are needed to fill this gap and enhance understanding of the nature and consequences of bereavement guilt in Chinese adult children.

Several studies are included in this book. This sequential mixed method research comprises three parts. To better define and conceptualize bereavement guilt,16 bereaved adult children were interviewed in the first study about their subjective experience of guilt. Their narratives illustrated the content and feelings of bereavement guilt. It suggested that guilt was based on various evaluations of their behaviors, which failed to meet their inner standards or expectations. It also revealed that they felt guilty for contributing to the death, for hurting the deceased, and for not paying enough back to the parents. Those thoughts were evidently accompanied by distressful feelings.

In the second study, the Bereavement Guilt Scale (BGS) was developed based on findings in study one. It was then validated with survey data collected from 873 bereaved adult children. The scale comprises five factors: (1) responsibility towards the death; (2) hurting the deceased; (3) survivor guilt; (4) indebtedness



guilt; and (5) guilt feelings. It was proved to have good dimensionality and construct validity, satisfactory internal consistency and test - retest reliability.

In the third study, more explorations on bereavement guilt have been conducted, including its prevalence, predictors and relationship with complicated grief. The same data set in study two was analyzed and the results revealed various occurrence rates for different subtypes of bereavement guilt. The most common type is indebtedness guilt (81%), followed by guilt feelings (70%), responsibility for the death (37%), survivor guilt (27%) and guilt about hurting the deceased (23%). It was also revealed that guilt is more commonly experienced by people bereaved from unnatural death than natural death. Investigating a group of demographic and death - related variables simultaneously, this study found that different types of guilt have distinct predictors, but that three risk factors predicted most of them. These are the adult children being of a younger age, losing a mother, and low psychological preparation for the death. Finally, a strong association between guilt and complicated grief was established by the data. The relationship between complicated grief and guilt was stronger than with demographic variables, death related variables, depression and anxiety. Such association remains significant even when controlling for these variables.

In summary, the author proposed a multidimensional conceptualization of bereavement guilt and developed a valid measurement tool. It built a preliminary model of risk factors, bereavement guilt and health outcomes in bereavement. The implications and limitations are also discussed.

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Chapter 1

# Introduction



"Guilt is the hilt of the knife that we use on ourselves, and love is often the blade"

G. D. Roberts (2003): Shantaram (p. 426)

#### Bereaved adult children: The gap in literature

Losing a loved one through death is one of the most distressful events that can occur in life, and one which most people will unfortunately experience during their own lifetime. In China, nearly 10 million people die each year, leaving an enormous number of people in bereavement. With the improvement of medical and health conditions, people are enjoying a longer life today than they did decades ago. The life expectancy of Chinese people is now more than 70 years. Since most people die at the old age, most people lose their parents when they are adults. Therefore, bereaved adult children may make up a large proportion of the grieving population.

However, bereaved adult children have not attracted enough attention from researchers and clinical professionals. There are relatively fewer studies focusing on this group of bereaved people, compared with other subgroups. For example, in the latest handbook of bereavement research (M. S. Stroebe, Hansson, Schut & Stroebe, 2008), there are specific chapters about bereaved spouses, young bereaved children, bereaved parents, even the bereavement of grandparents, but not about bereaved adult children. A similar situation is evident in other recent

Bereavement refers to the objective situation of having lost someone significant.



influential publications in the area of bereavement (Robert, Neimeyer, Harris, Winokuer & Thornton, 2011).

This situation is probably due to the impression that losing a parents in one's adulthood is a natural process, thus bereaved adult children are supposed to manage well. However, given the significance of the parents – children relationship and the challenging nature of bereavement, losing a parents even in one's adulthood can also become an extremely stressful and challenging event and impose considerable influence on one's well – being (Umberson & Chen, 1994). In order to fulfill this important gap, the present thesis will focus on the experiences of bereaved adult children.

#### Guilt: An important emotion in grief

Grief refers to the diverse reactions contained within the process of bereavement. There are different emotional manifestations in grief, including depression, despair, dejection, anxiety, fear, guilt, anger, hostility, loneliness, yearning, longing, shock, numbness and so on (M. S. Stroebe, Hansson, Stroebe & Schut, 2001). The occurrence, and intensity of those emotions will differ across individuals, bereavement time and even different cultures. In the recent two decades, the scientific research on bereavement has rapidly developed, and more detailed understandings regarding grief reactions and consequences have been accumulated. Researchers are beginning to explore understanding related to different emotions contained in grief; such as loneliness (J. Costello, 1999; Stewart, Craig, MacPherson & Alexander, 2001; W. Stroebe, Stroebe, Abakoumkin & Schut, 1996) and anger (Drenovsky, 1994; Exline, Park, Smyth & Carey, 2011; S. H. Kim, 2009). Moreover, based on a series of empirical findings, some emotions occurring in

separation distress, such as yearning and loneliness; and in traumatic distress, such as anger and bitterness, are supposed to be manifestations of complicated grief(Prigerson et al., 1999). Even though so far some emotions in grief have been investigated more often than others, the developing trend of this field will eventually bring a sophisticated understanding and knowledge of each significant emotion in grief. Among the various types of emotion in grief, guilt is a significant and special one which deserves a more systematic understanding.

Guilt is a long recognized emotion in bereavement. Even in the famous article *Mourning and Melancholia* by Freud(1917/1963), guilt was mentioned as a reaction for those who have lost loved ones. It has been acknowledged by bereavement researchers as early as the 1940's (Lindemann, 1944), and also in a clinical case report on professional helpers who worked with bereaved clients (Tooley, 1975). It is a familiar emotion within grief, with a long history of documentation.

The significance of guilt is also demonstrated from its correlation with psychopathology. Excessive and exaggerated guilt is one of the diagnostic criteria of Major Depression Disorder (APA, 1994). As will be seen in the literature review, a considerable number of studies have established a close relationship between guilt and psychological disorders; such as depression, anxiety disorder, or traumatic reactions, such as PTSD.

Unlike other emotions (e.g. sadness) in grief, guilt is a self – conscious emotion (Tangney & Fischer, 1995). It is based on the self reflection and self – evaluation of oneself and one's own behavior (Leary, 2007). The feeling of guilt is generated from the perceived gap between inner standards and actual behaviors, perceiving that one has done something wrong or has failed in something one was supposed to do. Therefore, guilt bears with it a judgemental nature, and is usually accompanied by self

Complicated grief is a pathological syndrome of grief reactions, which will be introduced in latter section.



reproach and self blame. This self attack is a threat to one's self - esteem, and may also add extra stress and risk to a bereaved person's well - being.

In the context of losing a significant loved one through death, guilt is a relevant emotion because it also has an interpersonal nature (Barrett, 1995). It is an emotion that is not only connected to intrapersonal processes, such as self – evaluation, but also portrays interpersonal functions. Psychologists have argued that the function of guilt is to preserve and enhance a relationship. Guilt prompts people to avoid transgressions against the relationship. It also motivates people to make amends to the other person in the relationship, and to redistribute the distresses that arise in the relationship, minimizing inequality (Baumeister, Stillwell & Heatherton, 1994). It is postulated then that guilt may play an important role in adjustment within bereavement, which implies the loss of both a significant other and the relationship itself.

# The present studies: Guilt in bereaved Chinese adult children

Apart from the above evidences and considerations, studying guilt in bereaved Chinese adult children is particular meaningful, given the importance of the emotion guilt and parents – child relationship in Chinese culture.

In a study which investigates the organization of emotion across western and eastern countries, guilt and shame are placed as basic emotions only among Chinese participants, not among participants from other countries (Shaver, Wu & Schwartz, 1992). This indicates that guilt is a more familiar and significant emotion in Chinese culture than in western culture. Meanwhile, guilt is described in a more sophisticated way in Chinese than in English, as the different Chinese words

describing guilt do not have direct corresponding translations in English (Bedford & Hwang ,2003).

In collectivist societies, such as China, interrelatedness is emphasized. The identity of an individual is defined by relationships and embedded in roles (U. Kim, 1994). The relationships within the family and the roles of each family member form the foundation of the social order. Among those relationships, the parents – child relationship is one of the most important. For example, the three cardinal guides (ruler guides subject, father guides son and husband guides wife) in traditional Chinese culture, exemplify the close bond in the parents – child system. Filial piety, another important cultural value, prescribes a series of strict and concrete role obligations of children to their parents. There is no direct translation of grief in Chinese, but there is a close term; shou xiao, which literately means expressing filial piety (Klass & Chow, 2011). According to traditional customs, a bereaved adult child should shou xiao for 27 months, symbolizing paying his/her parents back for their care and nurture during the first 27 months of the person's life. During that period of time, bereaved adult children should live in a self – restricted way. They are prohibited from dancing, singing, marrying and even eating meat.

In conclusion, the relationship between parents and child is highly emphasized in Chinese society. In Chinese culture, values and rules exist to regulate the obligations and duties of adult children to their parents, either before or after the parents' death.

Given the great number of bereaved adult children, the significance of guilt and the parents – child relationship in Chinese culture, and the limited understanding demonstrated in existing literature, investigating guilt in bereaved adult children is a particular meaningful attempt to understand the bereavement and grief experience for Chinese people.