Research into gender differences in relation to guilt suggests that, in general, this emotion tends to be felt more intensely by women (Bybee, 1998; Harvey, Gore, Frank, & Baltres, 1997; Hoffman, 1975; Luwak, & Ferrari, 1996; Luwak, Ferrari, & Cheek, 1998; Tangey, 1990). Previous studies with Spanish sample groups support the same conclusion (Etxebarria, 1992, 1994). Nevertheless, in an earlier study, we found this gender difference in the adolescent group but not in the adult one, in which the men’s scores were very close to those of the women (Etxebarria, Isasi, & Pérez, 2002).

This study was designed with two basic objectives in mind:

1. To see if the results of our previous study were replicated, or, on the contrary, if we found a higher intensity of guilt in women also in the adult group.

2. To try to explain the differences in intensity of guilt by testing several hypotheses.

The parallelism found in our previous study between the intensity of guilt and the proportion of interpersonal events reported as antecedents of this emotion in the different age and gender subgroups suggests that the differences in intensity are related to different levels of interpersonal sensitivity. In a previous study (Etxebarria, & Apodaca, 2005), we confirmed that subjective experiences of guilt include two basic emotional components, one empathic and the other anxious-aggressive. Differences in the intensity of habitual guilt may also be related to a different tendency to experience types of guilt with a high anxious-aggressive component.

We hypothesized that women would show higher levels of interpersonal sensitivity and that the experiences of guilt would contain a greater anxious-aggressive component in women than in men. Based on this, we formulated the hypothesis that the intensity of habitual guilt would be greater in women than in men also in adulthood.

Method

The study 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).

Participants were asked to describe one of the situations which most frequently caused them to experience guilt and to specify its intensity on a 7-point scale (1 = not guilty at all, 7 = very guilty). As well as the intensity of 9 other emotions they may have experienced in addition to guilt in the situation described. Participants’ scores for the anxious-aggressive and empathic factors in this study were obtained on the basis of their scores in these last scales (Etxebarria, & Apodaca, 2005).

Two measures were used to assess interpersonal sensitivity: the Empathic Concern Scale from the IRI by Davis (1983) and an expressly designed Interpersonal Guilt measure (Cronbach’s alpha = .77). This measure consisted of 6 situations in which, by action or omission, the main character harms another person. Participants were asked to 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). Furthermore, some measures were included in order to control the effect of gender stereotypes.

Results and Discussion

The analyses revealed that habitual guilt was more intense in women than in men in all three age groups studied (see Figure 1). These results do not correspond with those found in our previous study. They do, on the other hand, 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; Luwak, & Ferrari, 1996; Luwak et al., 1998; Tangey, 1990). Therefore, we can conclude that habitual guilt tends to be more intense in women than in men not only in adolescence, but also in adulthood.

In relation to the second objective, the results obtained suggested 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. Women generally scored higher in both interpersonal sensitivity indexes, in empathy (see Figure 2) and in interpersonal guilt (see Figure 3), although in the latter, men aged between 40 and 50 and 50 showed scores that were similar to those of women in the same age groups. Furthermore, women also showed a greater tendency to experience types of guilt with a high anxious-aggressive component, with women aged between 40 and 50 scoring highest of all subgroups (see Figure 4).

Although the correlations obtained in the study between the intensity of habitual guilt and the two interpersonal sensitivity indexes were low, as a whole, our results are consistent with those found in other previous studies analyzing the said association (Thompson, & Hoffman, 1980; Tangey, 1991; Tangey, Marschal, Rosenberg, Barlow, & Wagner, 1994). The association between the intensity of habitual guilt and the tendency to experience guilt with a high anxious-aggressive component was much stronger. This result cannot be compared to those of other studies, since this association has never been analyzed before. For this reason, the results obtained here are of special interest.

The analysis of the responses to the questions asked in order to assess the possible effect of gender stereotypes on the measures suggests that the differences found are not merely an artefact of gender stereotypes. In fact, the results help increase the reliability of the differences found between the genders in the study, although we cannot totally dismiss the possibility that these differences are in fact somewhat less pronounced than they appear.