

# Guilt

*A Force of Cultural Transformation*

*Edited by*

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# White Guilt in the Summer of Black Lives Matter

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In the wake of the brutal killings of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and so many other Black individuals by police officers and white vigilantes, the United States and the world at large have witnessed a marked shift in racial attitudes among white people. Whereas white support for the Black Lives Matter movement stood at 40% after a police officer killed Michael Brown in 2014, white support increased to 61% in June 2020 (Pew Research Center 2016, 2020). During the months following Mr. Floyd's death in 2020, white Americans protested in support of Black Lives Matter en masse with their Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC)<sup>1</sup> counterparts. Already in September 2020, however, even after the widely publicized example of police officers shooting Jacob Blake in the back in Kenosha, Wisconsin, white support for Black Lives Matter began decreasing toward levels prior to Mr. Floyd's death (Marquette University Law School Poll 2020). At the same time, white journalists and elected officials (e.g., Mayor Ted Wheeler of Portland, Oregon) continue to use the language of Black Lives Matter to address anti-Black and systemic racism in their public comments. What drove this striking shift in whites' acknowledgement of systemic racism and their willingness to go into the streets to protest on behalf of racial justice? Was it merely performative?<sup>2</sup> Why did it diminish so rapidly? Will subsequent racist incidents elicit another increase in white support? While answers to these questions are surely multifaceted, I focus in this chapter on the role of white guilt. I explore whether white guilt—considered a self-reflexive emotion in the discipline of psychology<sup>3</sup>—is a factor in such support for racial justice.

White guilt is a controversial and complex topic in the United States that has been criticized by both the conservative right and the progressive left. On all sides of the political spectrum, white guilt feelings have not been understood as productive, but rather as manipulative, futile, impotent, and performative. Conservatives allege that BIPOC and their white allies use guilt as a malevolent tool to maneuver white people and institutions to behave in ways that benefit BIPOC without merit.<sup>4</sup> Critics on the left charge that white people themselves

use guilt as a defensive device to avoid being called racist and to escape personal and collective responsibility for challenging racial injustice.

### **Conservative Critique: White Guilt as a Manipulative Tool**

The conservative critique of white guilt focuses on how BIPOC and their white allies use guilt as a tool to manipulate white people and institutions. In an article in *The American Conservative*, for instance, the political scientist George Hawley (2017)<sup>5</sup> offered the following to understand the conservative argument:

One of the most persistent tropes on the racial right is that the major cultural institutions in the United States aggressively push a story of white guilt [ . . . ]. According to this narrative, white Americans face a constant barrage of derision, persistently hearing about the evils of their white-supremacist ancestors and the unfairness of their current unearned privilege. They are told that their racial sins can never be truly washed away, but they can achieve partial atonement by signing onto various progressive causes, especially generous immigration policies and policies designed to uplift African-Americans.

Also exemplifying this position, the American conservative author and public intellectual Shelby Steele (2006) described white guilt as an unintended consequence of the civil rights era, wherein white Americans were coerced into acknowledging the wrongdoing of slavery and the subsequent oppression of African American people. In Steele's telling, this acknowledgment of racism stigmatized all whites as racist and transferred moral authority from whites to BIPOC. The U.S. government was obliged to enact policies and laws (e.g., affirmative action and the Voting Rights Act of 1965) to dissociate from a racist past and to reclaim moral authority.

Central to the conservative understanding of white guilt is the notion that racism no longer exists except among a fringe element of U.S. society. Conservative critics of white guilt ignore color-blind racism—the dominant racial ideology of the post-civil rights era (Bonilla-Silva 2003; Neville et al. 2013, 455)—and deny structural racism. These critics disregard policies and practices that sustain racial inequities, such as redlining (i.e., racial discrimination in financial lending practices) and the use of IQ tests as a measure of innate intelligence (despite evidence that environmental factors influence IQ scores, the test has been used to designate certain racial groups as biologically inferior; Smith 1995). Conservative critics of white guilt contend that BIPOC need to stop playing the race card as an excuse for their lack of success and should instead pull themselves up by their bootstraps.

Right-wing media frequently features conservative criticism of white guilt that likens the concept to a misguided and controlling religion. For instance, *City Journal* columnist and contributing editor Coleman Hughes (2018) argued that liberal whites have to go to “church” to learn the history of racial oppression in the United States ad nauseam as a mechanism to keep them as guilty as possible. Kyle Smith (2020) in the *National Review* described a “new woke religion” or “white-guilt cult” in which white “wokesters”<sup>6</sup> must chant an antiracist liturgy to seek absolution and get closer to the divine. And on the television show *Tucker Carlson Tonight* in June 2020, the conservative commentator Matt Walsh discussed the “legitimacy of white guilt.” He claimed that “America’s new religion” is “group humiliation,” and avowed education indoctrinates white children to hate themselves because they are racists. Facebook commenters resonated with the Walsh video clip and responded vehemently that they do not feel guilty:

No guilt here [ . . . ] I can’t help that I was born white [ . . . ] and, I did nothing wrong! We must stop these liberal professors from indoctrinating our children. (June 12, 2020)

No guilt no apology. Looking for sympathy, check the dictionary you’ll find it between shit and syphilis. (June 12, 2020)

I dont [*sic*] feel guilty about a damn thing. It wasn’t me and I’ll never feel personal guilt about anything that happened before I was even born. (June 12, 2020)

These and hundreds of Facebook commenters denied experiencing guilt feelings on the basis that they personally had nothing to do with the enslavement of Africans or any subsequent racial oppression. They are unable to see how they benefit from more than 400 years of structural racism in the United States, and therefore do not *feel* guilt and do not see a need to *engage* in any reparative or restorative behaviors.

### **Liberal and Progressive Critiques: White Guilt as Paralysis and Performance**

Left-wing criticisms of white guilt—liberal and progressive—hinge on the idea that guilt serves no productive function for racial justice. Critics argue that white guilt is too paralyzing to be productive (Kuttner 2018; Wolf 2020). Instead, guilt is viewed as self-flagellation for one’s racism and unearned privilege. Thus, the liberal understanding of white guilt involves at least some realization of the horrors of racism and that one benefits unfairly from a system that masquerades as

a meritocracy. When white people gain awareness of the enormity of structural racism and white privilege, they may become self-absorbed and focus obsessively on their feelings of white guilt. The person experiencing white guilt may become overly concerned with whether or not they appear racist and thereby inadvertently subvert efforts to understand how structural racism is maintained and reproduced (Leonardo 2004, 140). In these instances, white guilt interferes with critical reflection about racism because whites get mired in feeling individually blameworthy for racism. Interestingly, both the liberal and conservative critiques implicate the avoidance of appearing racist; in the conservative critique, the impetus is external (i.e., manipulation by BIPOC), whereas in the liberal critique, the impetus is internal (i.e., I want to think of myself, or at least appear, as a good person).<sup>7</sup>

The heightened focus on white people's experience of racial guilt in the liberal frame re-centers whiteness and the white person who is experiencing the guilt rather than combatting racial injustice. White people may become so consumed by their own racial guilt and efforts to alleviate it that they are unable to listen to or empathize with the experiences of BIPOC. Thus, white guilt is conceived as an "emotional trap" that keeps many white Americans stuck in a lack of understanding, empathy, and action (Nile and Straton 2003, 2). Progressive critiques of white guilt assert that white people who experience racial guilt tend to "perform" antiracism to assuage that guilt. Moreover, when white guilt becomes the focus, responsibility often is placed on BIPOC to soothe the white person experiencing guilt. "Taking on the alleviation of white guilt as an antiracist project keeps whiteness at the center of antiracism" and does nothing to tackle the problem of systemic racism or disrupt the racial status quo (Thompson 2003, 24). What we see in practice, referred to as performative (but not transformative) antiracism, might entail, for instance, posting a black square on Instagram on "Blackout Tuesday" or marching in a Black Lives Matter protest with no intention to engage further or commit to a racial justice agenda. These examples of "performative allyship" to assuage white guilt tend to work from a place of white American individualism, rather than emphasizing solidarity with BIPOC (Amponsah and Stephen 2020, 10).

In summary, across the political spectrum, critiques of white guilt explicitly or implicitly suggest that under no circumstances is such guilt helpful. While I dismiss the conservative critique of white guilt as BIPOC's manipulative tool—because such a critique relies on the assumption that systemic racism does not exist—I have witnessed numerous examples of white guilt in myself and others as defensive, paralyzing, narcissistic, and performative. I acknowledge the validity of left-wing critiques and at the same time argue that white guilt is complex and nuanced. To this end, I use psychological science to explore the conditions under which white guilt disrupts the racial status quo and seeks to repair relationships between white people and BIPOC in ways that could in fact lead to social change.

## Relationship-Enhancing Functions of Guilt Feelings

In contrast to the commonplace critiques of white guilt, scholarship in psychology on personal guilt feelings (not specific to race) elucidates how guilt might be a force for good. In their 1994 review of the literature, social psychologist Roy Baumeister and colleagues argued that guilt, an unpleasant emotional state, is both an internal and social phenomenon that functions to maintain and enhance interpersonal relationships. Although most often related to a particular behavior or wrongdoing, some individuals may feel guilty without having done anything wrong—a type of guilt by association. People may also feel guilty about an inequity in their favor or when they are rewarded unfairly (Baumeister, Wotman, and Stillwell 1993, 383). In other words, specific past or present transgressions are not always involved in guilt.

Baumeister, Stillwell, and Heatherton (1994, 1995) identified several ways that guilt feelings strengthen social bonds. Importantly, guilt motivates a wide range of behaviors that preserve and strengthen relationships. For example, experiencing guilt feelings may motivate individuals to reflect on their actions and subsequently make adjustments to future behavior (Baumeister et al. 2007, 173), facilitate an empathic connection with others (Tangney 1991, 605), and increase cooperation in relationships (De Hooge, Zeelenberg, and Breugelmans 2007, 1032). Additionally, evidence suggests that people's reparative efforts are proportional to their guilt feelings and the strength of the relationship in need of repair. That is, stronger guilt feelings and stronger relationships elicit greater reparative efforts (Baumeister, Stillwell, and Heatherton 1995, 192). Another relationship-enhancing function of guilt is that it can be used by someone with lesser power to influence a person with greater power; however, psychological research indicates that guilt as an interpersonal influence technique is problematic, as the conservative commentators on white guilt suggest, because it may cause resentment (187). Largely, though, since 1994, empirical research in psychology has supported Baumeister and colleagues' initial claims about the relationship-enhancing, pro-social functions of guilt feelings (Ent and Baumeister 2016; Tignor and Colvin 2017). This finding has been evidenced among children as young as three years (Vaish, Carpenter, and Tomasello 2016, 1779).

## Collective Guilt: Antecedents and Consequences

Psychological researchers have extended their earlier concern with the individual to focus on the phenomenon of *collective* (or group-based) guilt, defined as “distress that group members experience when they accept that their in-group is responsible for immoral actions that harmed another group” (Branscombe and

Doosje 2004, 3). Similar to individual guilt, collective guilt is a self-focused emotion; in this case however, the “self” pertains to one’s group identity as perpetrator of a wrongdoing.

Collective guilt has been linked to acknowledging collective transgressions in the present, such as present-day discrimination toward a particular group (Branscombe, Doosje, and McGarty 2002), and also to recognizing the collective misdeeds that one’s group committed in the past (Doosje et al. 1998, 882).<sup>8</sup> Because group-based guilt is an unpleasant emotion, similar to individual guilt, one may engage in actions to alleviate collective guilt feelings. Research to date has used experimental laboratory designs and/or employed a self-report measure of collective guilt (e.g., “I feel guilty about the negative things my ancestors did to other groups,” and “I can easily feel guilty for the bad outcomes brought about by members of my group”; Branscombe, Slugoski, and Kappen 2004).

Empirical investigations have focused on antecedents and consequences of collective guilt in a wide array of national contexts. With respect to collective guilt’s antecedents (i.e., the factors that engender collective guilt feelings), evidence suggests that the more one identifies with an in-group (the perpetrator or beneficiary group), the stronger one experiences collective guilt feelings (Klandermans, Werner, and Doorn 2008, 346). Not surprisingly then, the more one can distance oneself from the in-group, the less likely one is to experience collective guilt feelings (Peetz, Gunn, and Wilson 2010, 603). Across several studies, in-group advantage framing, in contrast to out-group disadvantage framing, has been linked to higher levels of collective guilt (Greenaway, Fisk, and Branscombe 2017; Harth, Kessler, and Leach 2008; Powell, Branscombe, and Schmitt 2005). For example, among a group of foreign visitors to Nepal from the United States, Europe, and Australia, collective guilt levels were higher when visitors were primed to think about disparities between their nation and Nepal in terms of their in-group privilege in comparison to the disadvantages that Nepalis face (Greenaway et al. 2017, 680). Moreover, messages about disparities or negative historical information about one’s group are more powerful when delivered by an in-group member (Doosje et al. 2006, 335; Greenaway, Fisk, and Branscombe 2017, 680).

Empirical investigations also have identified political ideology and justification of disparities as antecedents of collective guilt. Research participants with a liberal ideology tend to score higher on collective guilt than those with a politically conservative ideology (ANES 2016; Klandermans, Werner, and Doorn 2008, 343). Furthermore, when one is able to justify or legitimize group disparities with the belief that these disparities are fair, collective guilt is reduced (Mallett and Swim 2007, 65). On the other hand, collective guilt is increased when one appraises their own group to be responsible for the disparity (Imhoff, Bilewicz, and Erb 2012, 739; Krauth-Gruber and Bonnot 2020, 68; Mallett and Swim 2007, 66; Zimmermann et al. 2011, 835). In short, collective guilt increases

when one is unable to justify disparities and instead acknowledges in-group responsibility (Mallett and Swim 2007, 65).

That said, the empirical investigations in which I am most interested here are those that have focused on the *consequences* of collective guilt to understand it as a socially productive force. Across a wide variety of national contexts (e.g., Australia, Canada, Chile, Germany, South Africa, the Netherlands, and the United States), collective guilt shows strong implications for enhancing intergroup relations. In a sample of non-Indigenous Australians for example, researchers found that higher levels of collective guilt predicted support for an official government apology to Aboriginal peoples and Torres Strait Islanders (McGarty et al. 2005, 668). Research across several studies also documented how collective guilt influenced reparation intentions, such as support for material compensation for the target group (Brown et al. 2008; Imhoff, Bilewicz, and Erb 2012; Imhoff, Wohl, and Erb 2013; Klandermans, Werner, and Doorn 2008; Krauth-Gruber and Bonnot 2020; Leach, Iyer, and Pedersen 2006; Zebel et al. 2008). In other studies, researchers have indicated that the type of reparations matter, such that collective guilt tends to predict material compensation but not equal-opportunity policies (Iyer, Leach, and Crosby 2003, 126). Collective guilt also tends to be a stronger predictor of reparation intentions rather than of political action (Iyer, Schmader, and Lickel 2007, 584; Leach, Iyer, and Pedersen 2006, 1243).

Interestingly, collective guilt also serves as a mechanism through which other factors influence reparation intentions. For example, Klandermans and colleagues (2008, 346) observed that the influence of political ideology on support for affirmative action in South Africa was mediated by collective guilt. In other words, a more liberal ideology predicted greater collective guilt, which in turn predicted more supportive attitudes toward affirmative action. In another study, collective guilt mediated the link between empathic perspective-taking and collective action (Mallett et al. 2008, 465). Specifically, when dominant group members (e.g., heterosexual or white) took the perspective of the minority group, they experienced collective guilt and were motivated to take action on behalf of the minority group. Therefore, collective guilt has direct effects on collective action and also helps explain how other variables influence prosocial outcomes.

In what follows, I argue that a particular form of collective guilt—*white guilt*—also has interpersonal, reparative possibilities. Despite staunch criticism from both sides of the political spectrum, white guilt can indeed be a socially productive force.

### **The Socially Productive Dimensions of White Guilt**

Researchers in social and counseling psychology have undertaken the project of investigating white guilt using empirical methods. They define white guilt



as characterized by three interrelated properties: a focus of attention on the in-group (i.e., white people), a sense of group responsibility for a transgression or disparity (e.g., contemporary or historical racial injustice), and an unpleasant feeling that people prefer to allay through restitution or avoidance (Grzanka, Frantell, and Fassinger 2020, 49; Iyer, Leach, and Pedersen 2004, 346).

Psychological scientists have developed and used a variety of instruments to investigate white guilt. Here, I discuss findings from studies that primarily employed two measures of white guilt. First, Swim and Miller's (1999, 503) five-item measure of white guilt assesses participants' remorse about past and current disparities, racial privilege, and association with the white race. Sample items include: "I feel guilty about the past and present social inequality of Black Americans (i.e., slavery, poverty)," "I feel guilty about the benefits and privileges that I receive as a White American," and "When I learn about racism, I feel guilt due to my association with the White race." Second, Spanierman and Heppner's (2004) five-item measure of white guilt involves experiencing remorse, shame, and responsibility about one's privileged position in a racialized social system. Items include, "Sometimes I feel guilty about being White" and "Being White makes me feel personally responsible for racism." Evidence across multiple studies has supported the reliability and validity of these measures.<sup>9</sup> Although beyond the scope of the current discussion, Grzanka and colleagues (2020, 51) developed a promising scenario-based measure to assess white guilt proneness.

Generally similar to the empirical findings using variations of Branscombe and colleagues' collective guilt measure, researchers identified antecedents and consequences of white guilt. For example, awareness of white privilege (i.e., unearned benefits granted on the basis of race) and acknowledgement of individual and structural racism are consistent antecedents of white guilt (Leach, Iyer, and Pedersen 2006, 1238); in order to experience white guilt feelings, one must demonstrate at least some awareness of racial privilege and oppression. Additional cross-sectional investigations have identified cultural sensitivity and openness to diversity as additional desirable correlates of white guilt (Black 2018; Chao et al. 2015; Pinterits, Poteat, and Spanierman 2009; Poteat and Spanierman 2008; Spanierman and Heppner 2004).

Empirical research has documented the impact of educational interventions on white guilt. Findings suggest that multicultural instruction, such as diversity courses and workshops, increase white guilt (Case 2007, 233; Kernahan and Davis 2007, 50; Paone, Malott, and Barr 2015, 212). Relatedly, using randomized experimental designs, two independent research teams found significant increases in white guilt after college students viewed the 19-minute ABC *Primetime Live* special "True Colors" on racial discrimination and privilege (Garriott, Reiter, and Brownfield 2016, 165; Soble, Spanierman, and Liao 2011, 154). In short,

experimental designs generally provide support for the notion that educational interventions increase students' levels of white guilt.

With regard to white guilt's consequences, evidence strongly suggests that higher levels of white guilt are associated with a variety of prosocial outcomes. For example, white guilt has been linked to greater cultural competence among white mental health trainees, such that those with higher levels of white guilt are more likely to incorporate racial and cultural factors into their case conceptualization of a client's concerns rather than attributing symptoms solely to intrapsychic factors (Spanierman et al. 2008, 85). Another example is that those white undergraduate and graduate student participants who scored higher on white guilt showed greater willingness to confront white privilege (Pinterits, Poteat, and Spanierman 2009, 415). White guilt also has been related to greater support for affirmative action (Iyer, Leach, and Crosby 2003, 125; Spanierman, Beard, and Todd 2012, 183). Taken together, these studies suggest that white guilt has the potential to be a socially productive force in challenging white privilege and disrupting the racial status quo in the United States.

My colleagues and I conducted several studies that suggest how concomitant race-related emotions influence prosocial justice outcomes (Spanierman, Beard, and Todd 2012; Spanierman et al. 2006; Spanierman, Todd, and Anderson 2009). We used cluster analysis<sup>10</sup> to examine the simultaneous effects of white guilt, white empathy for BIPOC, and irrational white fear of BIPOC. We identified five categories of white people that ranged from an overt racist type to an antiracist type. High levels of white guilt characterized two of the five types—*fearful guilt* and *antiracist*—which I distinguish next.

White people who score in the *fearful guilt* type are characterized by high white guilt and high white fear. Similar to left-wing critiques of white guilt, these individuals display paralyzing anxiety in response to learning about their complicity in a racist system.<sup>11</sup> Consequently, it is unlikely that white individuals in the *fearful guilt* type engage in productive actions to address racial injustice. In *Sister Outsider*, Audre Lorde (1984) described the intricacies of white guilt in a way that helps differentiate the *fearful guilt* from the *antiracist* type:

Guilt is not a response to anger; it is a response to one's own actions or lack of action. If it leads to change then it can be useful, since it is then no longer guilt but the beginning of knowledge. Yet all too often, guilt is just another name for impotence, for defensiveness destructive of communication; it becomes a device to protect ignorance and the continuation of things the way they are, the ultimate protection for changelessness. (Lorde 1984, 130)

Here, Lorde emphasizes how white guilt is often employed as a defense that protects white ignorance and maintains the racial status quo. That this sort of

guilt is indeed evident among individuals in the *fearful guilt* type lends some credence to the left-wing critique of white guilt as paralyzing or performative.

In contrast, Lorde also describes a sort of guilt that leads to change, which exemplifies the *antiracist* type. Research participants of the *antiracist* type reflect the highest levels of white empathy and white guilt and the lowest levels of white fear among all five types. Individuals whose score places them in the *antiracist* type report the greatest racial diversity among their friendship groups and often report meaningful relationships with BIPOC. Undergraduate focus group participants who scored in the *antiracist* type expressed a critical understanding of racial issues and white privilege (Kordesh, Spanierman, and Neville 2013, 46). They not only acknowledged white privilege; they also discussed how they personally benefit from white privilege and expressed remorse about and willingness to confront that racial privilege. White *antiracist* participants were embarrassed by white friends and family who expressed racist views. They expressed anger and frustration about racism on campus and about students' lack of involvement in social justice. *Antiracist* participants worked in solidarity with groups to fight oppression on campus. Thus, reparative possibilities for white guilt may also rely on high levels of white (racial) empathy.

## Conclusion

White guilt indeed is a complex and nuanced phenomenon that may have contributed to the strong support among white people for the Black Lives Matter movement during the summer of 2020. While left-wing critiques of white guilt as paralyzing, defensive, and performative are accurate in many cases, burgeoning evidence in the field of psychology suggests that white guilt may be a socially productive force with reparative potential. Mirroring Baumeister and colleagues' (1994) interpersonal approach to understanding guilt feelings in the most general sense, white guilt, too, may serve an interpersonal (i.e., intergroup relations) function. Research findings suggest, however, that certain conditions are necessary to realize white guilt's socially productive potential. An incomplete list of such conditions includes concomitant white empathy or other race-related emotions (e.g., moral outrage), whether a sense of in-group responsibility prevails or whether the white individual easily justifies racial disparities, whether a close relationship exists that is worth repairing, whether the message about racial injustice is framed as one of unearned white privilege versus BIPOC disadvantage, who delivers the message (i.e., in-group or out-group member), and so forth.

I suspect that years of former president Donald Trump's inflammatory, racist rhetoric along with anxiety and frustration related to his mishandling of a catastrophic global pandemic also played an important role in the strong support for

Black Lives Matter among white people during the summer of 2020. Watching the brutal killing of George Floyd over and over on the news and social media, seeing police officers collude with their colleague who had his knee on Mr. Floyd's neck for nearly ten minutes, and hearing Mr. Floyd cry out for his mother just before he took his last breath might have stimulated the necessary combination of white guilt and empathy among white people to join their BIPOC brothers and sisters in the streets. Drawing from responses in an unpublished study to open-ended survey questions about their involvement in protests, white participants high in white guilt and white empathy wrote:

As a white person, I have been extremely complacent and I'm realizing more fully about how detrimental the moderate liberal white *person* (or woke) is regarding race and racism. After Michael Brown and Freddie Gray, I thought things got better. But, all that happened was police reform, which just repackaged things so it seemed like something happened. Instead, all the liberal white people who voted for a Black president felt appeased and proud of themselves. And, that was a huge slap in the face for me. I am one of those problematic white liberal (moderates when it comes to race, apparently) queer persons who hasn't done enough. And, I don't know enough. And, I don't know how I've perpetuated racism. And, that makes me sad that I've hurt my friends of color. [31-year-old white lesbian student]

My high school (largely white prep school) posted a list of anonymous anecdotes from Black and Latin@ students on their experiences at my school after the protests. I read them and while I don't remember exact occurrences, I realized I probably committed or perpetrated some of the racist comments these students experienced. I certainly heard and saw a lot and did nothing. I realized how much of a part I play in racism as a white woman. I need to actively change that. I will now be supporting *Black-owned* businesses whenever I can. I intend to vote for politicians who are in support of reparations and antiracist policies. I intend to speak up more about racist comments from my in-laws even though I may damage the relationship (I have offered only weak or pandering responses so far; I realize how important it is to do better now). [29-year-old heterosexual woman school counselor]

Although I have no way of knowing if white guilt was the impetus in their involvement in the protests for racial justice, these participants scored high on white guilt, with a corresponding high score in racial empathy. Their words seem heartfelt and beyond the performative antiracism described earlier. If white guilt (a particular form of collective guilt) does play a role in collective action, then we need not be so quick to dismiss expressions of guilt feelings among white people.

Instead, we need to learn how to work with guilt feelings and cultivate empathy to move from paralysis or performative allyship (i.e., playacting wokeness) to a life-long, meaningful commitment to racial justice.

## Notes

1. Referring to Black, Indigenous, and People of Color, the term BIPOC became popularized in early 2020 on social media and has been adopted in academic literature. BIPOC highlights anti-Black racism and police brutality, draws attention to the genocide of Indigenous Peoples in the United States, and emphasizes differences in experiences with oppression across racial and ethnic groups (see Raypole 2020).
2. My use of the term “performative” here and throughout this chapter refers to “performative allyship”—a superficial sort of activism that tends to serve the ally (e.g., seeking recognition as a progressive white person) more so than the group the action is supposed to support (Amponsah and Stephen 2020).
3. Tangney (1991) described guilt as an uncomfortable emotional state involving negative evaluation of one’s specific behaviors.
4. See O’Keefe (2002) for a review of guilt-based social influence techniques.
5. Drawing from quantitative data from the 2016 American National Election Studies, Hawley also showed that few white Americans actually *felt* white guilt. My interpretation of the data differs slightly. I observed that respondents experienced at least “a little” guilt: 38.5% about their “association with the white race,” 29% about “the privileges and benefits they receive as a white American,” and 40.3% about “social inequality between white and Black Americans.” Notably, “liberal” and “very liberal” respondents reported being aware of white privilege and experiencing white guilt, whereas moderates and conservatives did not.
6. Derived from African American Vernacular English and now widely used in social media, the term “woke” refers to being awake or aware of racial justice issues. “Wokesters” refers to people who exemplify awareness of racial justice.
7. There continues to be debate in the literature regarding the distinction between guilt and shame (both individual and collective; see Grzanka, Frantell, and Fassinger 2020; Miceli and Castelfranchi 2018; Tangney and Dearing 2002). It is possible that white shame, often considered a negative evaluation of oneself (rather than a specific behavior) may more closely align with white individuals’ efforts not to appear racist.
8. One need not have played a role in personally harming an out-group to experience collective guilt; a group’s history of having caused harm is a sufficient trigger (Doosje et al. 1998).
9. Swim and Miller’s (1999) white guilt scale garnered initial psychometric support across four studies among more than 500 white university students and 51 adults at an airport. Spanierman and Heppner’s (2004) white guilt scale garnered initial psychometric support from a large, college-student sample. Subsequent investigations demonstrated adequate reliability and validity primarily among undergraduate and

- graduate students (Case 2007; Chao et al. 2015; Garriott, Reiter, and Brownfield 2016; Mekawi, Bresin, and Hunter 2016; Paone, Malott, and Barr 2015; Sifford, Ng, and Wang 2009; Spanierman et al. 2006, 2008; Todd, Spanierman, and Aber 2010; Turner 2011). Additional validation studies provided psychometric support among sexual minority men (Kleiman, Spanierman, and Smith 2015), and among a geographically dispersed sample of employed adults (Poteat and Spanierman 2008) and Ashkenazi Jews (Berk 2015).
10. Cluster analysis is a statistical approach that classifies data into groups to maximize similarity within a group and dissimilarity across groups.
  11. The white fear scale is limited to irrational fear, anxiety, and avoidance of BIPOC, but it also is likely that white fear encompasses other domains (e.g., fear of saying the wrong thing or fear of discovering that one's achievements were not based on merit alone; see Jensen 2005; Spanierman and Heppner 2004).

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