

# **Guilt Trip: The role of guilt about privilege in motivating White's racial justice allyship**

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# Why do *privileged group* members become allies for marginalized groups?



## Understanding one's privilege



**We propose that there is an optimal amount of guilt for motivating Whites' racial justice allyship**

## Low guilt



Invisibility of privilege (Phillips & Lowery, 2018; Wu & Dunning, 2020)

Guilt predicts action (Schaumberg & Flynn, 2011; Tangney, 1999)

Collective guilt (at ingroup harmdoing) predicts support for remediation (Brown et al., 2008; Goldenberg et al., 2016; Iyer, Schmader, & Lickel, 2007; Leach et al., 2006; van Leeuwen et al., 2013)

Recently, guilt about privilege was linked to acknowledgement of privilege and support for affirmative action (Puryear et al., 2019;)

H1: People who feel low guilt in response to privilege will be less likely to engage in racial justice allyship than people who feel moderate guilt

## High guilt

Too much of a good thing (Grant & Schwartz, 2011; Lam, Spreitzer, & Fritz, 2014)

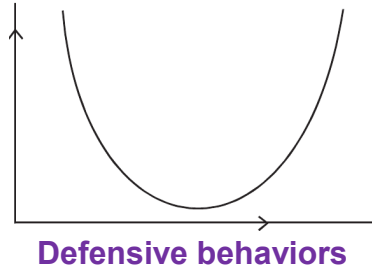
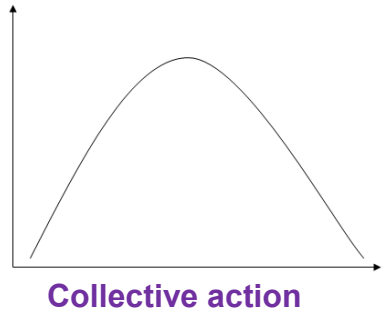
People become accustomed to guilt above a certain point  
(Bagozzi & Moore, 1994; Brennan & Binney, 2010)

May lead to behaviors primarily focused on assuaging  
guilt (Thomas et al., 2009; Young & Sullivan, 2016)

H2: People who feel high guilt in response to  
privilege will be less likely to engage in racial justice  
allyship than people who feel moderate guilt



## Goal: To test a curvilinear model of guilt



**Study 1 – Measure guilt**

**Study 2 – Measure guilt**

**Study 3 – Manipulate guilt**

## Study 1

Time 1: 152 White Americans

Time 2: 79 White Americans returned  
after one week (52%)

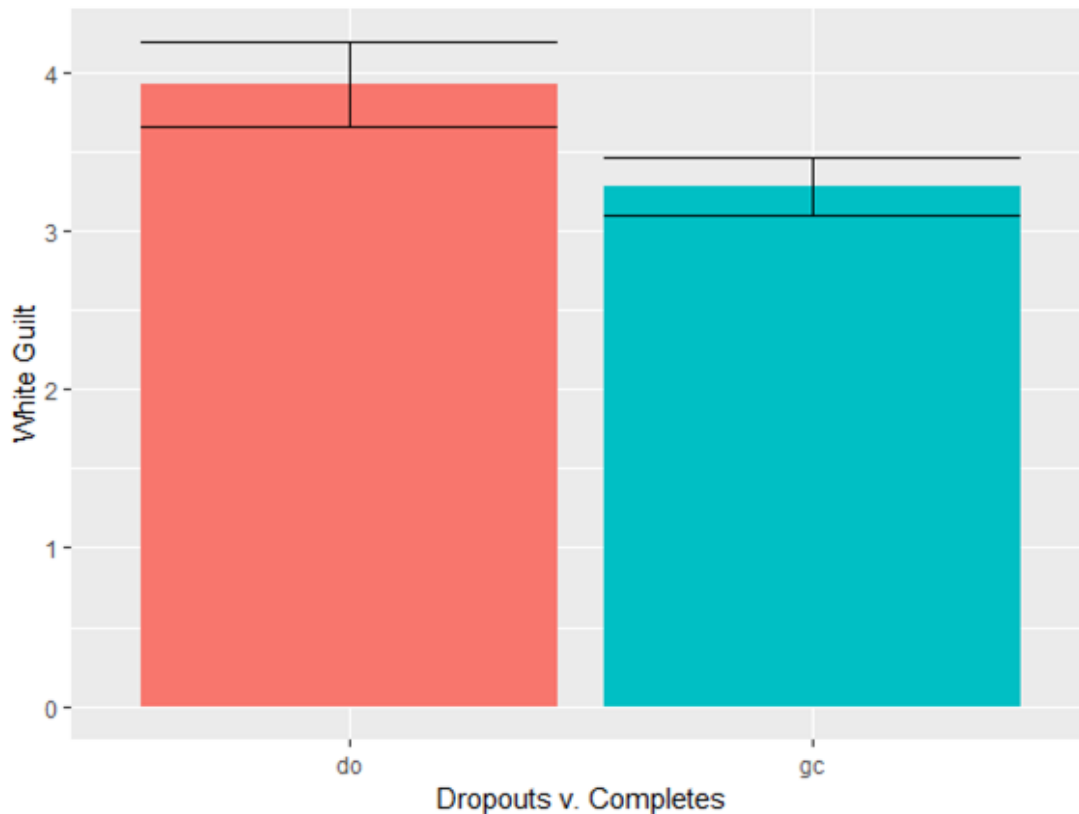
T1: White guilt (Swim & Miller, 1999)

T2: Participate in a follow-up study  
about racial inequality





## People who dropped out of our study after T1 were higher in White guilt



$t(123)=2.01, p=.04$

## Study 2

158 White Americans

IV: White Guilt\*

DVs:

Collective Action Intentions

Competitive Victimhood

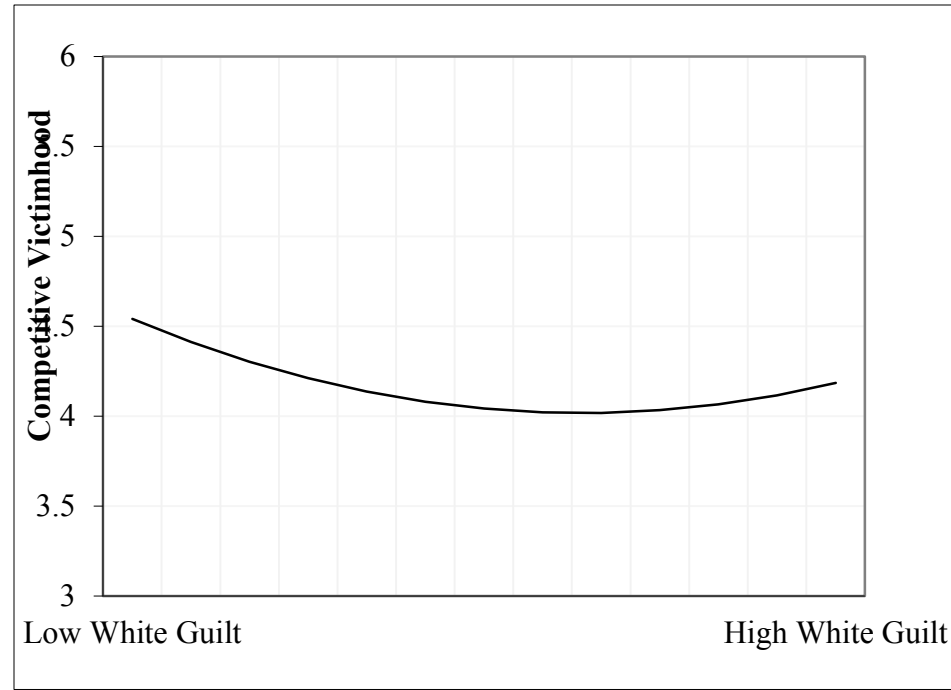
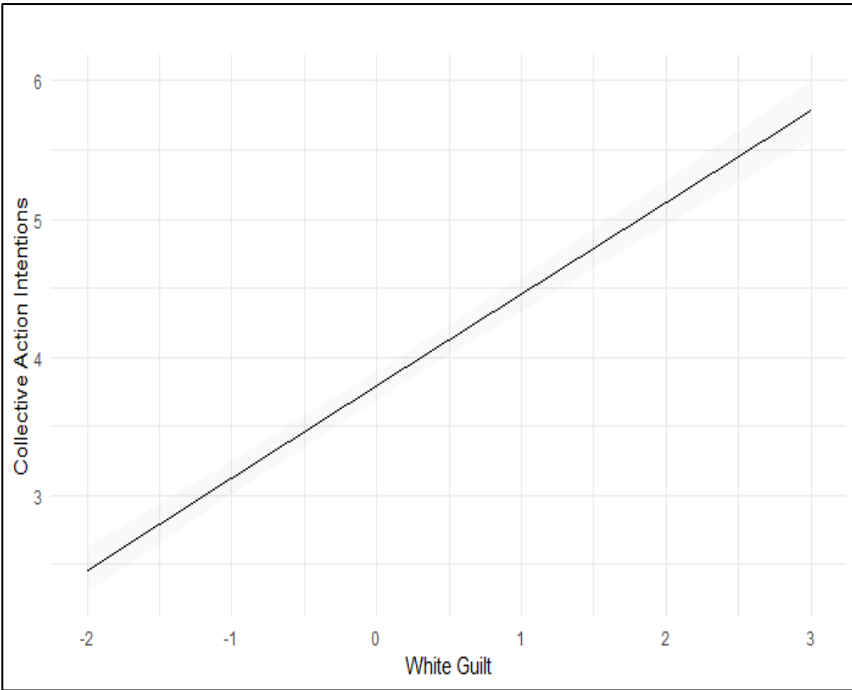
Willingness to volunteer for extra study

Time spent reading about privilege



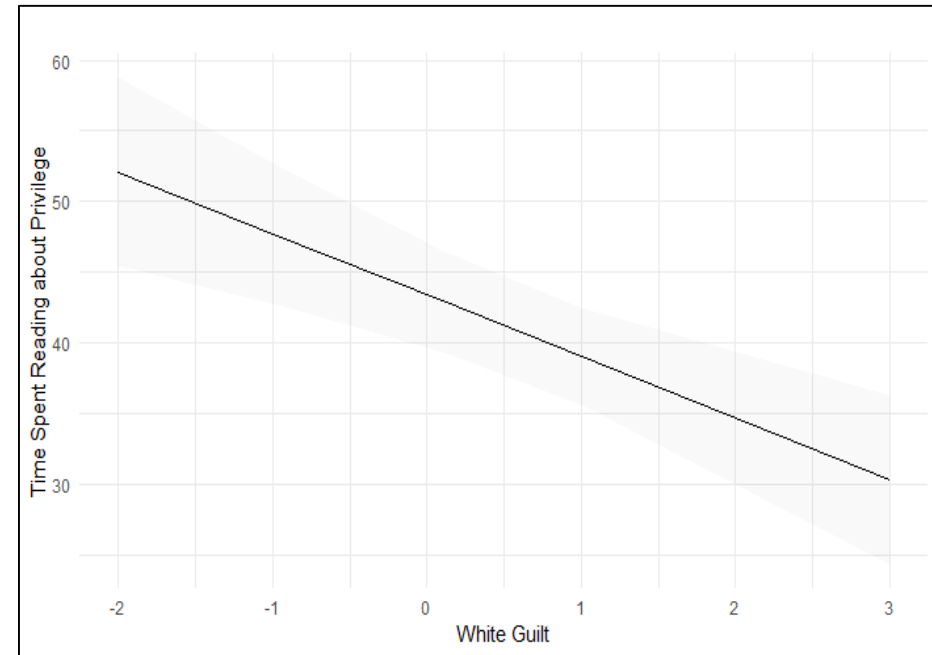
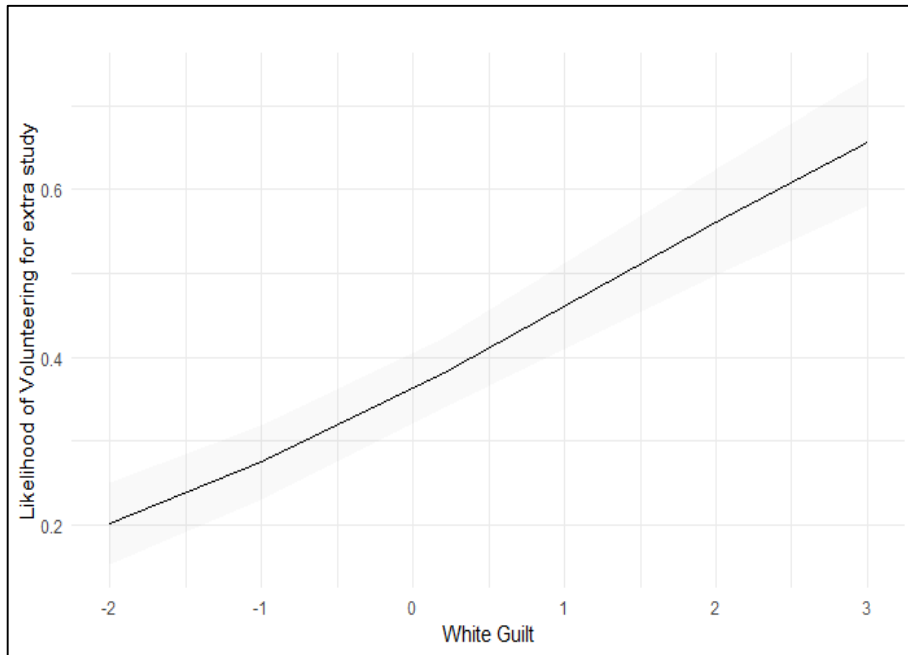
White guilt is associated with greater collective action intentions

High and Low White guilt associated with greater competitive victimhood



Quadratic effect:  $b=0.14$ ,  $SE=0.04$ ,  $t(155)=3.76$ ,  $p<.001$

Guilt is positively associated with likelihood of volunteering for an extra study...  
 ...But is negatively associated with time spent reading an article about racial privilege



$b=0.41$ ,  $SE=0.11$ ,  $t(156)=3.76$ ,  $p<.001$

$b=-4.35$ ,  $SE=2.13$ ,  $t(57)=-2.04$ ,  $p=.04$

### Study 3

232 White Americans read about White Privilege and then write about how it applies to them personally

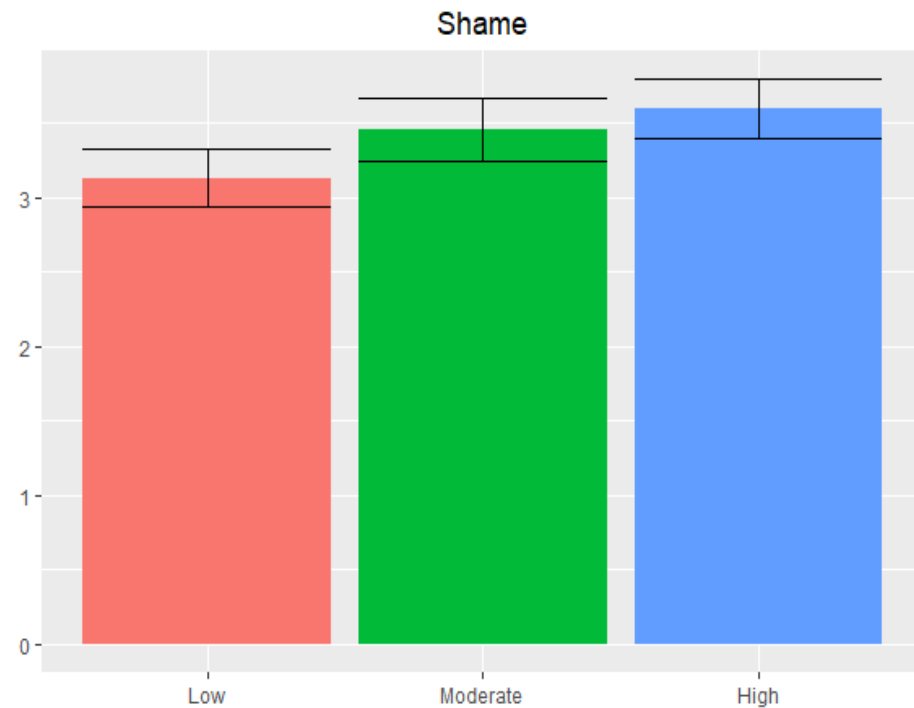
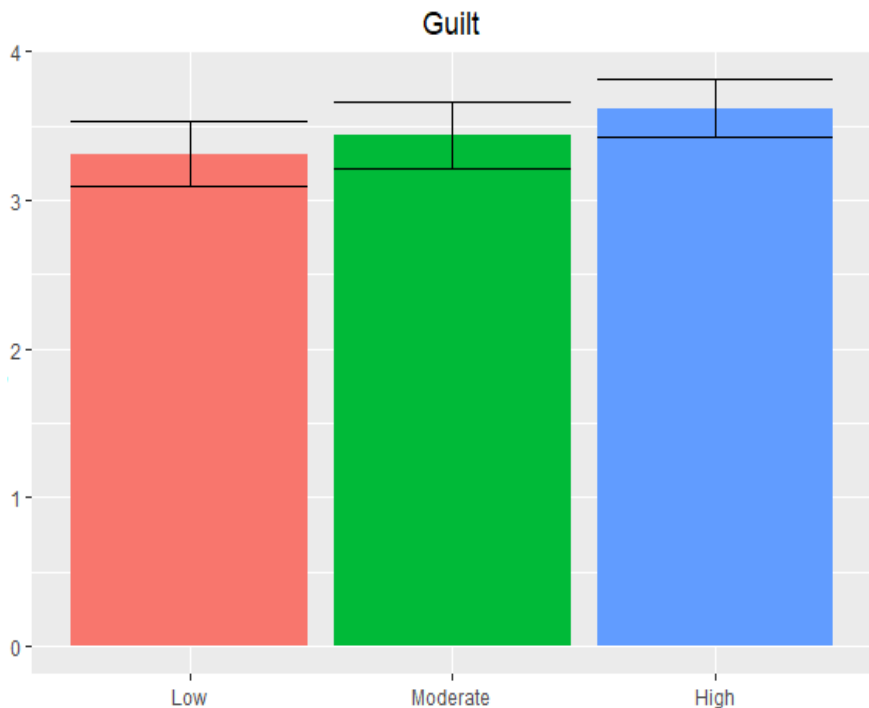
- Low: Told to write for at least 10 seconds
- Moderate: Told to write for at least 45 seconds
- High: Told to write for at least 90 seconds

Measured: State affect, belief in privilege

Coded open-ended responses



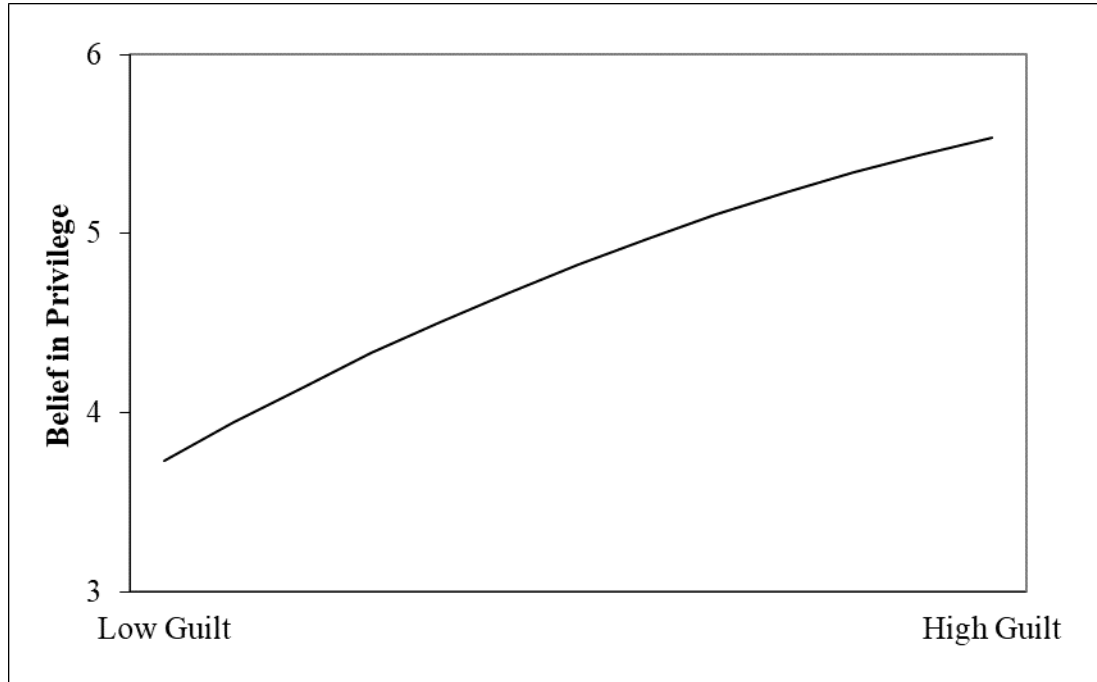
### Manipulation Check: Main effect of condition on state affect



Main effect on guilt:  $t(229)=1.05, p=.29$

Main effect on shame:  $t(228)=1.67, p=.096$

We found a significant negative quadratic effect of State Guilt on Belief in Privilege



Quadratic effect of guilt:  $b=-0.09$ ,  $SE=0.03$ ,  $t(229)=-3.07$ ,  $p=.002$

## Apathetic responses:

“I have never felt like I had any advantages in life because I was white. I have also never been discriminated against. I would like to think that everyone is treated fairly regardless of the color of their skin”

**Greater guilt -> decreased likelihood of providing an apathetic response,  $b=-0.34$ ,  $p<.001$**

## Backlash Responses:

“Let's see, I don't qualify for affirmative action, or most scholarships, and if I joined the White equivalent of La Raza I'd be called a Nazi and doxed, fired, and outright attacked in public, while the police did nothing. Yep, it sure is great to be White. My privileges must be lost in the mail.”

**Greater guilt -> decreased likelihood of providing a backlash response,  $b=-0.93$ ,  $p<.001$**

## Privilege Recognition Responses:

“I am white and experience white privilege even without realizing it. I have had no difficulties getting a job, getting pulled over unnecessarily, being discriminated against in public settings, etc.”

**Greater guilt -> increased likelihood of providing a recognition response,  $b=0.41$ ,  $p<.001$**

**Significant negative quadratic effect,  $b=-0.09$ ,  $p=.03$**



# BECOMING AWARE OF PRIVILEGE

SHOULD NOT BE VIEWED AS A  
BURDEN OR SOURCE OF GUILT,

**BUT RATHER, AN  
OPPORTUNITY**

TO LEARN AND BE RESPONSIBLE  
SO THAT WE MAY WORK TOWARD

**A MORE JUST  
AND INCLUSIVE  
WORLD.**

UNIVERSITY

Guilt can help move people from apathy to action

We also show some potential consequences of too much guilt

1. Diminishing Returns
2. Aversion/Dropout
3. Defensiveness

**For people with privilege, non-allyship is always an option**

**A unique contribution of other White Allies?**

Thank you!

Meritocracy and Inequality Lab (MIL)

NYU Global Research Institute Doctoral Fellowship

NYU Stern Center for Global Economy and Business

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