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?

Brown & Ostrove, 2013; 2018; Case, 2012; Leach et al., 2001
Understanding one’s privilege

Leach et al., 2006; Lowery et al., 2007; Knowles et al., 2014; Montada & Schneider, 1989; Swim & Miller, 1999; Thomas et al., 2009
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 \citep{grant2011, lam2014}

People become accustomed to guilt above a certain point \citep{bagozzi1994, brennan2010}

May lead to behaviors primarily focused on assuaging guilt \citep{thomas2009, young2016}

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
Results

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, $b=-0.09$, $p=.03$
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
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