

Examining negative and positive consequences of acknowledging White privilege

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Introduction

Acknowledging racial privilege can be a psychologically distressing experience for White individuals, potentially eliciting feelings of guilt that threaten one's positive self-image.

This study shows that these emerging adults have either a positive or negative connotation with the guilt they feel about white privilege. This often was reflected in whether they believed white privilege applied to them or not.

Method

- Data collected from 36 semi-structured interviews with White emerging adults in the Southeastern US.
- Interviews contained questions such as "how does it make you feel when someone points out that you have White privilege".
- Qualitative content analysis with thematic categories identified through open coding and collection/keywording functions.

Conclusion

This study found that some participants believe guilt about White privilege hinders their ability to view themselves positively, especially when it came to individual merit. Others believed that the guilt they felt played a constructive role in addressing and changing their own biases or engaging in social justice.

Being able to acknowledge guilt may be an important factor in acknowledging white privilege. This study implicates future research in understanding the outcomes of acknowledging white privilege.

Results

Those who viewed guilt as a **positive** aspect often still expressed feelings of guilt but framed it a motivator to engage in social justice or attempt to reduce their own biases.

"Yeah we do technically have it but we can also use it for other people and other races like having the resources and freedom to say whatever, we can be used to **help other people** to take up a stance."

"It's almost like sometimes people want to apologize for the fact, like I should feel bad that I have White privilege, which I can't say I agree with because it's **not my fault** that I'm White you know obviously. And the fact that I have had all of those things like my parents have worked really hard to provide all that stuff for me so why should I feel bad about having a good childhood and a good life?"

Participants who viewed guilt as a **negative** aspect of addressing White privilege show signs of defensiveness or avoidance of the topic. Many expressed that it's not their fault or that they did not have privilege because they still had to work hard.

"No and yes because personally I **shouldn't feel guilty** about something I know I'm not contributing to, but at the same time it's knowing what reality is, I guess and what others view it as. I don't know since I am grouped into that."

"I think that in a way the guilt was **good** because it made me more cognizant of what issues were already there as opposed to some people they just are like "oh well that was in the past like that's not how it is today." But I was more cognizant of 'what if it is still today?' like 'what can I do to make up for that?' So it really gave me a passion for **social justice** for all people."

"I mean firsthand I have seen like people will just **feel guilty** and instead of I guess trying to make up for it or even realizing that it's not necessarily like their place to feel guilty cause they didn't do anything. They just get **defensive** and just pretend that it never existed."

"I would think I treat people as people and not as a race so to have the finger pointed at you and say hey you're white and you are privileged that just makes me feel kind of **defensive** like no I wouldn't do that but I'm sure there are times where I just did it unconsciously, I treated someone differently or I don't even know exactly but I know it's there it's **negative emotion**."