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Beyond Guilt: How to Deal with Societal Racism


Lauren N. Nile

Jack C. Straton

Portland State University, straton@pdx.edu

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Beyond Guilt:

Lauren N. Nile & Jack C Straton

Racism manifests in a number of ways, including internalized, personal, institutional, and societal. This article addresses the specific form of racism that we refer to as “societal,” and provides a method of responding to the guilt-based reactions of many European Americans to the subject of racism. We examine the “daily indignities” to which people of color are subjected and the additional hurt they feel when those indignities are either denied or blamed on them. Finally, we provide practical methods for European Americans to engage in micro-revolutionary change, using their invisible privilege to interrupt the small-scale, insidious incidents of injustice that pass before their eyes.

Coping with the Guilt of History

One of the things that often happens to many European Americans when we begin to recall the catalog of horrors committed by both Europeans and European Americans against people of color, is that we start to feel guilty. We also often feel resentful of people of color for “making” us feel guilty (Tatum, 1992).

The most common reaction to our recognition of those historical wrongs is to feel so bad about what “we did” that we withdraw into an attitude of helplessness. Tess Wiseheart (1995), a Portland, Oregon, advocate for abused women, characterizes this reaction with the mnemonic:

Going
Under
Into a
Lifetime of
Timidty

The second most common reaction of European Americans is to simply deny the information that makes us feel guilty, ignore the lessons history teaches us about oppression, and charge ahead into the rest of our lives, oblivious to

the consequences that our denial has on people of color. This reaction may also be characterized by the “GUILT” mnemonic by changing the last word from “Timidity” to “Tyranny.”

In reality, open displays of guilt and its accompanying behavior shifts our attention from the oppressed back to ourselves, and in so doing (Wiseheart, 1995), actually reinforces for European Americans a very basic privilege—the privilege of not having to think about racism if we so choose.

At a minimum, this means that we expect people of color to not only view their experiences through our lenses, but to then also make the extra effort of describing their experiences (and feelings) in a form that is palatable to us—i.e., to present them in a “comfortable,” non-threatening manner.² Sadly, many of us become so absorbed in attending to our feelings of guilt that we are unable to truly and empathetically hear the experiences of people of color, no matter how sanitized.

At all levels, guilt is an emotional trap that keeps many European Americans stuck in a lack of both understanding of and compassion for people of color. What follows is a list of things to do that, if adhered to, will provide a way out of this trap.

The first step is to “set aside” the guilt by realizing that guilt is a normal human feeling for those of us with a heart. This is not a suggestion to disassociate yourself from responsibility. Rather, it is a suggestion to “walk around” this emotional blockage to your ability to be of service. Doing so allows us to: (1) acknowledge the realities of what has historically happened to people of color; (2) recognize the current manifestations of historical racism; and (3) become effective allies to people of color by intervening in racist events.

An important aspect of setting aside the guilt is being clear about what *you* did not do, e.g., “I didn’t kidnap Afri-

cans, stuff them into the bellies of ships, and keep the survivors in bondage for the rest of their lives.” “I didn’t put Japanese Americans into internment camps in World War II.” “I didn’t round up six million Jews in Poland, Germany, France, and Czechoslovakia and send them to horrible deaths.” You would be correct in saying all of those things. Be very clear about what is *not* your part in racism.

This does not mean, however, that you have no responsibility to help ameliorate the present-day consequences of those historical events. The point, rather, is that when you know clearly what you did *not* do, you will be able to much more clearly see what *you can* do to help eradicate some of the present-day effects of those historical horrors.

Acknowledging what is not your responsibility, and thus letting go of the guilt of history, will enable you to move on to the second step—identifying what is your responsibility. That responsibility includes understanding and acknowledging: (1) the ways in which many European Americans have benefited from the historical oppression of people of color, even though we did not personally participate in it, (e.g., inheriting wealth from a family whose money was initially made through confiscating the land of Native Americans, land on which the unpaid labor of African Americans was exploited to amass wealth); (2) that while those of us alive today did not *individually* participate in the historical atrocities that often make us feel guilty, we are a member of a *group* that did commit those atrocities (Seashore, 1991); (3) that we *have* sometimes personally participated in the oppression of people of color,

Lauren N. Nile is chief executive of Nile Speaking & Training in Redlands, California;
Jack C. Straton is Assistant Professor, University Studies, Portland State University, Portland Oregon

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(e.g., in laughing at racist jokes); and (4) that for all of those reasons, it is our collective responsibility to be effective allies to people of color in not colluding in present-day racism.

The Daily Indignities

Let us now focus on one of the presentday manifestations of historical racism, what Lauren refers to (1993) as “the daily indignities.” Many of our friends of color have told us, for example, about clerks who wait on European American customers before them, even if they are at the checkout counter first. If an African American and a European American of the same gender are dining out, it is often the case that the waiter will give attention to, address, and ask for the order of the European American first.

It is very common for shopkeepers to follow around African Americans, in particular, in retail establishments in an attempt to catch them at shoplifting. Second- and third-generation Asian Americans are often spoken to in simplified English by European Americans and others. Women of other ethnicities often reflexively clutch their purses when sharing an elevator with an African American or Hispanic man. In a line to board the first-class cabin of an airplane (pre-9/11), Lauren noticed the gate agent quickly allowing entry to everyone else, but carefully scrutinizing her face, boarding pass, and ID before passing her through to the aircraft.

Those are only a few of the numerous daily incidents that many people of color experience here in the United States. Imagine, if you will, living with the *continual* experience of having *your* honesty, your integrity, indeed, your very character, constantly in question, constantly doubted. Then, try to imagine, if you can, the severe emotional pain that accompanies that reality. Imagine seeing the neutral countenance

of European American face after face fall away upon looking at you, only to be replaced by stony appraisal.

Lauren summarizes this particular phenomenon by saying that, as an African American, she often literally takes the smile off people’s faces, the faces of passersby, simply by being who she is. She summarizes the experiences of living this way, of living with the daily indignities, in saying that to live as a person of color is to live with a broken heart.

Typical Responses

The relevant question, of course, is: “Why do you think clerks, waiters, shopkeepers, airline gate agents, and so many others respond to people of color in the ways described above?” The typical responses to that question are: “Maybe the clerk was just having a bad day;” “Well, that happens to me too, you know, so it couldn’t have happened to them because of their race;” “Well, if I go to the black part of town to shop, the same thing will happen to me;” “People of color are just too sensitive;” “I saw that happen once, but it was because the Chinese woman just wasn’t assertive enough;” “Well, how was the person dressed? Maybe if they’d been dressed better....”

When teaching this material, we have often recorded student/participant responses onto newsprint. After the students/ participants have run out of reasons, we then show them an overhead of the typical responses. They often find the overlap between their actual responses and the predicted responses quite unnerving, which is usually a very powerful learning experience for them.

Those kinds of responses are symptoms of a lack of conceptual clarity about some of the most basic realities of the lives of people of color. They all devalue the individual’s experiences. They devalue their pain. We

will, however focus on two of those responses in particular, as they are the most common.

First, the response: “Well, it happens to me too, you know, so it couldn’t happen to you because of your color.” The fallacy in that response is the simple fact that just because a European American experienced the same indignity doesn’t mean that an African American could not have experienced it because of race. The same perpetrator may harbor a bias against, for example, a European American man because he is dressed in leather and has long hair, and against a person of color because of race. His exhibiting bias against a long-haired, leather-wearing European American man, therefore, does not mean that his bias against a person of color is not racially based.

Also, that response seems to imply that the indignity is the same for the European American as it is for the person of color. While it is true that a discriminatory act can be frustrating and painful to both individuals, and is equally wrong regardless of the targeted person’s race, the experience of it by the person of color and by the European American is often extremely different. That difference is—and this is critically important—the frequency with which such experiences happen to people of color.

For European Americans, indignities in the form of subtle or overt slights from others are usually random, occasional events in their lives. For many people of color, however, they are a common, persistent theme. That difference in frequency makes a tremendous difference in the quality of one’s life.

Let us consider, secondly, the response: “Well, if I go to the black part of town to shop, the same thing will happen to me.” The logical fallacy of that response is that it totally denies the relative ease of avoiding such experiences for European Americans, which African Americans and other people of

color simply do not enjoy.

If a European American does not like the treatment s/he receives when shopping in “the black part of town,” their choice is simply to not shop there. For African Americans, however, avoiding racially-based daily indignities would require that one shop *only* in the black part of town; in other words, to restrict their shopping and other activities severely. For African Americans and other people of color, avoiding that kind of treatment by European Americans would require avoiding mainstream society at large, a significantly more difficult task than avoiding “the black part of town.”

Those are only a few examples of the lack of conceptual clarity that many European Americans have about the reality of racism and how it impacts the daily lives of people of color in the U.S.³ Interestingly, that conceptual confusion is often verbally expressed with a jarring intensity: “Well this stuff happens to everybody. If you people would just stop playing the race card, we wouldn’t have any conflict in America.” That intensity implies a self-perception of deep understanding that stands in sharp contrast to reality.

This conceptual confusion has several significant consequences: (1) it prevents European Americans from being able to truly understand how racism severely limits their own lives in terms of both self-awareness (and thus personal growth) and in lost relationships with people of color; (2) it makes it extremely difficult for European Americans to understand how racism impacts society at large (in other words, they do not see that they are members of a damaged culture and thus are unable to envision how the world *could* be, absent racism); and (3) it often prevents European Americans from being able to have compassion for the excruciating pain that people of color experience as a result of daily indignities.⁵

The most important questions to ask yourself at this juncture are the following:

1. How is it that we are able to predict our students/participants’ responses? What is going on? (When we ask our students or participants such questions, they usually begin to feel defensive and guilty even though that isn’t our intention.)

2. How do you think people of color feel when they hear such responses to their reality? (Responses typically are variants of “they feel blamed for their oppression.”) It is important to acknowledge at this point that *our denial of their reality is a second indignity*.

3. How do you suppose such re-

sponses might affect your relationship with a person of color? (Trust is undermined and thus the ability to have a deep, meaningful friendship is severely minimized.)

Unfortunately, a third indignity often accompanies the other two—first experiencing the indignity and then having it denied: it is the practice of blaming people of color for causing racial strife by “talking, about racism too much.” Lauren has heard this referred to by a workshop participant as “being called *crazy* for pointing out craziness.”⁶

In sum, many European Americans “get” people of color once by committing racist acts, twice by denying and minimizing their behavior and engaging in fallacious universalizations, and then a third time by trying to place blame on people of color for bringing attention to the issue. Although many European Americans of good will will condemn indignities of the first kind and shun those who commit them, they nevertheless will often commit the second and third indignities. They will deny and minimize racist behaviors, engage in fallacious universalizations of the experiences of people of color, and be resistant to engage in meaningful dialogue about the daily indignities, believing and often articulating that the person of color is too sensitive and/or is “once again playing the race card.” We believe that denying and minimizing the painful experiences of people of color is just as hurtful as causing them.

A parallel may help to understand why. Consider the plight of many women who have experienced the following: The woman goes to her friends, parents, or clergy with a story of abuse at the hands of her husband. Their reaction is to deny the abuse by telling her that her husband is a perfect gentleman around them. They minimize the harm by commenting on her lack of bruises. They universalize her plight by saying that “everyone has to deal with difficulties in marriage.” Finally, they blame her for her own abuse, saying that “if only she would be a better wife, he wouldn’t be mean to her.”⁷

Perhaps, consequently, she returns to her husband, who eventually kills her. Society would certainly condemn the abuser for murder, but would very likely not hold the friends or others responsible for their complicity in her death. In truth, however, without their denial and minimization of the abuser’s behavior, their universalizing of her experience and their blaming her for her dangerous predicament, the woman might have fled.

Our point is that even though, in general, we do not condemn any but “the hand that holds the knife,” as a society it is imperative that we begin

to understand that denial and minimization of objectionable behavior, false universalizations of the victim’s experience and reversal of blame, all contribute to the deadly outcome. We must learn that all of those acts have serious consequences.

White Privilege

Both denial and blaming the victim are overt manifestations of an underlying sense of entitlement that is usually invisible to many European Americans. Victor Lewis (1994), an African American, says in the video *The Color of Fear*: “I don’t need the help of white folks as much as I need a sense of fairness, and an awareness about the invisible protection and invisible privilege that you have.”

That invisible privilege and protection manifests in various ways, but in essence is the unearned privilege of living one’s life totally free of racially-based daily indignities. Before asking students in his class to brainstorm a list of white privileges,⁹ Jack set himself the same task prior to reviewing Peggy McIntosh’s (1988) list that he had read many years earlier. It is a significantly different and complimentary list:

- People assume that “normal people” (i.e., European Americans) are generally intelligent. It is therefore not remarkable for them to succeed, with sufficient training, at biology, engineering or any other field of endeavor of their choosing. As a European American, therefore, if I were not chosen to play quarterback on my high-school football team, I did not have to wonder about whether this decision was based on the assumption that whites are not intelligent enough to call plays. (Most European Americans have no idea how painful the badge of intellectual inferiority is for many people of color, and for African Americans specifically.)

- If I am a public figure, I will not have to think about whether I will be labeled a “militant” because my speaking style is too strident.

- As a European American, my *perceived* sense of safety is not undermined by an ongoing series of newspaper headlines detailing horrific crimes against people who look like me (1994), such as a white man being dragged to death behind a

pickup truck driven by people of color. Most importantly, my *actual* safety is usually not compromised by a person of color.⁹

- I have the tremendous privilege of seeing police officers as my friends. I don't have to wonder whether the officer who stops me is a member of one of the many brotherhoods devoted to Black Supremacy.
- If my children act out in a public place, I can safely assume that neither their behavior nor my response to it will be attributed to our skin color.
- If I am occasionally in a bad mood, I don't have to worry that if I let it show at work I will thereby undermine the public image of whites.
- I have the privilege of sharing group membership with those who occupy the White House, most of the Supreme Court¹⁰ (Shepard, 1998), both houses of Congress, state legislatures, and CEOs and boards of directors of major corporations. In other words, the people who run the country look like me. Most European Americans are totally oblivious to the unconscious feeling of power this reality gives them.
- I don't have to tell my teenage son that he cannot hang out in public with his friends because if a European American commits a robbery within ten miles of his location, a passing police officer may stop, search, harass and possibly beat and arrest him for that crime. Likewise, adult white men have the privilege of not being stopped, searched and harassed by police simply because a "white man" was seen committing a robbery in the neighborhood (African American Blasts, 1998).
- I may have to care for my daughter's skinned knee and her rejection from the in-group, but I don't have to talk with her about why strangers look at her sternly and coldly and may be rude to her.
- If I have heart problems, my doctor is far more likely to recommend sophisticated cardiac tests for me than if I were a man of color (Goldstein, 1999).
- If I return clothes without a receipt, the clerk will unhesitatingly give me, an in-store credit and will certainly not feel through the clothes looking for anti-theft devices

(Anderson, 1998). On a daily basis, European Americans have the privilege of walking through all types of retail establishments without having clerks follow us around because of a stereotype that "whites steal."

- I can choose to not be sensitive to the racially offensive behavior of people around me in public places when I am with my European American friends, unlike when I'm with, for example, my Latin American friends. (Having people of color as close friends is often a very powerful experience for European Americans that opens their eyes to the harsh, persistent reality of the daily indignities of people of color.)

This list could have gone on and on, but the point is abundantly clear: white privilege is a reality. Yet so many European Americans feel powerless and unprivileged in our lives. For instance, at work we may feel like drones toiling for the boss. It is important, however, that we remember that it is not as *whites* that we are oppressed by our bosses; rather, it is through the hierarchy of *class*. Imagine experiencing that classism *in addition to* racism."

So, now that white privilege has become more visible to you, should you feel guilty about it? Of course not. It is not something you created. Besides, remember that we are learning to "set guilt aside" as a paralyzing response.

Should you throw your privilege away? That, unfortunately, is impossible. You receive it simply because you are white, even though you may not want it. It often just results from whites being more comfortable around you.

Tess Wiseheart suggests that the best we can do is appropriately utilize our unearned privilege (Wiseheart, 1995). Since European Americans often have the privilege of having their viewpoints on race really heard as opposed to dismissed as oversensitivity, it is our responsibility to use that voice for change. It is also sometimes helpful to teach other European Americans to recognize their privilege by explicitly pointing out our own privilege in a given situation.

Keep in mind that this entire discussion of the nature of privilege was not designed to make you feel badly. Instead, it was designed to provide contrast to help you see (1) how racism dramatically and painfully affects the lives of people of color, and (2) what you can do about it.

Micro-revolutionary Work

You will find, as you begin to actively work for justice, that *you have power to change society for the good*. In Zen circles it is said that upon realizing our enlightenment, we discover that we have always been enlightened. In the same way, as we find the power to do good, we find that we have always had the power to do good. If we want to be free of feeling guilty and defensive, the best medicine is to act. The flip side of guilt is outrage at what others did and continue to do in our name.

One European American student came back to class the day after Jack began teaching a racism module, boiling over with excitement that she was able to instantly interrupt an act of racism the preceding evening. Debbie¹² was selling tickets at a movie house the night before. A European American man in line behind a Chinese American woman reached across the woman's shoulder with a \$20 bill and asked for a ticket. Debbie said she felt so empowered as she calmly told the man: "She was here first." That awareness, combined with that simple act of courtesy and honesty, is an important element at the core of anti-racist activism.

Jack has created a repository on the Web where ordinary people share their stories of how they have intervened across racial lines, The Racial Intervention Story Exchange (RISE): <http://rise.pdx.edu/index.html>. You are invited to read these stories and pass them on to your students, workshop participants, and colleagues, and you (and they) are very much invited to contribute your (their) own stories.

When a waiter looks first at you to take your order, instead of at your Latina friend, gently but firmly redirect the waiter's attention to your friend by shifting your eyes in her direction. The next time you see a shop clerk following an African American around a store in an attempt to catch her shoplifting, follow that clerk around until *he* becomes selfconscious. These are only two of the many, many simple but yet very powerful ways that it is possible for us in our daily lives, to be effective allies to people of color. Our experience is that once people realize how simple interventions can be, they become anxious to find opportunities to try out their new-found skills.

Not colluding through silence in the mistreatment of people of color is half of what it means to be an effective ally. The other half is standing up to friends who exhibit racist behavior, which, when it does happen, usually occurs in all-white groups. When one of them

starts to tell a racist joke, calmly tell him that you don't want to hear it. One of the simplest strategies to use among your peers in this situation, is to either withhold laughter or to walk out of the room, or both. Those who tell racist jokes depend on your support to feel that it is acceptable for them to continue that behavior. Simply withholding your support sends them a powerful message that you will not collude. After gaining confidence at this, try telling them that you feel uncomfortable when you hear a racist joke, because you associate it with the people of color you care about.

Finally, you will find that as you begin to consistently live your life as an ally, as it becomes a habit to take these little actions to stand up for what is morally right, doing so will become a matter of conscience for you. Once it does, you will find yourself letting go of some friendships and simultaneously gaining others—others that are often far richer and far deeper than those with the friends you outgrow.

If you look at the above list of antiracist activities, you may well think that standing up against the daily indignities is simple; and you would be quite right.¹³ It takes so little action on your part to interrupt the daily indignities. As more people do so, enormous change will begin to take place for those for whom those little bits of injustice become a daily, living hell. So many of us have wanted to help, but have wondered how one person could really make a difference in ending racism. The good news is that in simply interrupting the daily indignities, you are contributing significantly to that goal.

Interrupting the racism you witness is no big deal, if you are willing to start, and starting is no big deal if you are willing to forgive yourself for not having started yet. Cherie Brown, Executive Director of the National Coalition Building Institute, says that “guilt is the glue that holds prejudice in place” (Personal communication, 1999). If you just let your guilt drift away, you will be displaying self-love as well as displaying love for others as you become free to work on ending the misery they suffer.

It is one of the great truths that among the biggest impediments to the process of transforming our world into a world of justice, are guilt and fear (Finn, 1999). A corresponding truth is that we often fail to do that transformative work because we get stuck in our need for a certain self-image—the need to avoid seeing ourselves as bad so that we do not feel badly about ourselves. That “self-im-

age need” often prevents us from becoming the shining examples of love that we want to and can be. It is time, very simply, to *get out of ourselves and get into the world.*

Notes

¹ Since understanding and transforming the feelings of European Americans on the subject of race is the objective of this paper, we have in many instances shifted the paper's voice into the ethnic identity of one of its authors, Jack C. Straton, a European American. Since doing so, however, will tend to invisibilize the other author, Lauren N. Nile, an African American, we wish the reader to note that the order of their names above reflects the authors' relative contributions to the ideas expressed herein.

² The next level attention-shift plays itself out more often in the arena of sexism than in racism: men who feel guilty nonverbally seeking emotional reassurance from women about how guilty they feel about sexism.

³ Our belief is that this total lack of awareness by most European Americans of the daily indignities experienced by people of color accounts for the dramatic differences of opinion on racial issues between people of color and European Americans reported in most national opinion polls.

⁴ Imagine, if you will, a world in which Adolph Hitler had succeeded in imposing his Third Reich on the globe for some two hundred years, and a culture in existence a hundred and thirty-six years after a revolution had finally toppled Nazi rule. Could inhabitants of that world even imagine what it would be like to live in a world in which Hitler had instead been defeated? They would be members of a horrifically damaged culture, most of whom would probably not even be able to see that the substructure on which their entire culture is supported, is based upon a twisted, horrid system of abject oppression.

It is in like manner that just one-hundred and thirty-eight years after the end of slavery in the United States, many European Americans are unable to see, and, indeed, adamantly and angrily deny, that much of American society was built on a foundation of the unmitigated persecution of African Americans, Native Americans and other people of color.

⁵ We acknowledge that many people of color also have a certain level of conceptual confusion about the issues of race and racism.

⁶ This is akin to what often happens in workshops on male violence; labeling as “male bashing” the act of bringing attention to male violence.

⁷ The reversal of blame can also occur on a larger scale, when women's advocates in the community, who might have offered the woman a realistic assessment of her danger, have their funding cut as a result of lobbying by Father Rightists who accuse women's advocates of “male bashing.”

⁸ If your students/participants have difficulty with this at first, you can have them brainstorm male privilege, Christian privilege, or privilege associated with sexual orientation, physical ability, or age, as a warm-up exercise.

⁹ Most crimes to one's person are committed *within* racial groups, not across them.

¹⁰ In fact, only seven of the 397 law clerks who have worked for Supreme Court justices are of African ancestry, and no Native American has ever served in such a position.

¹¹ Just as many women-of-color experience the reality of racism in addition to living with sexism.

¹² Debbie Jayne, Freshman Inquiry, PSU, Fall Term 1995.

¹³ We acknowledge, however, that while the action itself is simple, mustering up the courage to make that first intervention can be more difficult. However, because of the tremendous difference that doing so can have in the lives of people of color, it is a moral imperative that we do.

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