

Shame & White Allyship for Racial Justice

(many thanks to Staci Haines for her Generative Somatics wisdom)

What is shame?

First, shame is not guilt. Guilt is about doing--what we did or didn't do, and what we can do to make amends. In contrast, shame is about being--what we are or are not. There is nothing we can do to about shame, except not exist. Shame says, "I am bad. I am unlovable." or, "My people are bad people."

Characteristics of shame:

Shame is unbearable, intolerable. It wants to hide

- * wants to hide
- * fear of being exposed as unlovable

What is it for? (some theories)

- * shame is a social emotion--connected to our relationship to others and fear of losing community (Thandeka)
- * shame is a protective mechanism that helps us avoid experiencing exposure and rejection (Robert Karen)
- * shame is a "trampoline" that bounces us safely away from feeling underlying, debilitating feelings of abandonment, despair, hopelessness, helplessness, and imminent death connected with trauma (Staci Haines)

So, shame is a big threat!

When shame comes up, our reptilian and limbic brains that govern our survival go swiftly into action, kicking up automatic fight, flight, freeze, appease, or dissociate responses.

Where does white people's shame about racism come from? (some theories)

- * racism is a form of social trauma; social trauma also traumatizes perpetrators
- * socialization into whiteness (fear of losing community)
- * hypocrisy/dehumanization legacy → racism is a big contrast to "love thy neighbor"
- * knowing about the legacy of white supremacy "my people are cruel"

How does white racial shame impact white people's racial justice awareness and allyship?

- * increases denial; reduces racial justice awareness
- * reduces empathy for people of color
- * increases paralysis; reduces action
- * increases isolation between white people and people of color; between white people

White racial justice allies cannot afford to shame each other!

Since feeling shame is such a big threat, it triggers automatic fight, flight, freeze, appease or dissociate responses.

Collective White Shame Coping Strategies

Over five centuries, white people have developed and practiced collective coping strategies to avoid feeling our shame about participating in and benefiting from genocide, slavery, internment camps, economic exploitation of prison inmates, and other historical and current forms of white supremacy and racism. These shame coping strategies take the form of automatic individual and collective practices that are based on fight, flight, freeze, appease or dissociate survival mechanisms. As white people have resorted to these practices over and over again, they have become default practices in the dominant white culture. Examples of these default practices:

* **Denial:** mental or emotional dissociation from the realities of racism and white privilege)
Example: “Racism is in the past, we have a black president now.” Emotional denial can look like talking about racism in an abstract, heady or detached way. Or silence. Fuzzy brain (dissociation)

* **Isolation:** isolating ourselves, emotionally or physically from other white people; lacking and devaluing white anti-racist support. This can take the form of **judgment** (competition; comparison; shunning) and/or **detachment** (disconnecting from white and/or white ethnic community and white identity; having an individuality-based identity; failing to reach out to white people). A study of 1,200 white people by D’Andrea & Daniels in 1999 found only 1% of their subjects were self-motivated enough to sustain consistent anti-racist action by themselves. Even white people with high levels of awareness and concern about racism did not engage in anti-racist action without community or institutional support.

* **Anger/defensiveness**

Examples: getting angry at people of color when they point out racism; getting defensive; not listening

* **Over-responsibility**

Examples: feeling responsible to correct everyone’s racism; harsh responses to white people’s racism; over-work/burnout; accepting mistreatment from people of color

* **Under-responsibility**--similar to denial: not being accountable for racism; Example: “I didn’t cause this, it’s not my problem”

* **Self absorption**

Example: when in conversations about racism, changing the focus to themselves and their feelings

* **Absolution-seeking**

Examples: engaging in anti racist action so people will forgive us; “confessing” wrongdoings to people of color and expecting empathy and understanding

* **Paralysis: freezing up**

Examples: getting frozen or stuck when it is time to respond; unable to speak up or respond to racism

* **Image management:**

Working hard to present/prove self as “enlightened” white person; Examples: not being authentic around people of color; being silent around people of color; terrified to make mistakes