

# The Prevalence of White Guilt among American High School Students

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## Summary

After the election of the nation's first African-American president, it has been asserted that America is evolving into a post-racial society and the younger generation has fewer reservations about race and ethnicity. To test this hypothesis, a group of students were given a survey that was paired with a slide show that contained a quote, a statistic, a fact, and an image. All elements of the presentation showed information pertaining to racial relations between Caucasians and people from minority groups. The quote and the image presented information on racial relations in the past while the statistic was relevant to modern racial inequalities in society. Students were asked to report whether they experienced emotions of shame, anger, gratefulness, or any combination of the three while looking at the slides. The goal of the survey was to determine if Caucasian adolescents still harbored white guilt, defined as feelings of shame and embarrassment for discrimination applied to peoples of color by their ancestors, and the advantages they still receive in society as a result. From these tests, Caucasian students reported feelings of shame when presented with slides that pertained to past racial relations, but reported feelings of anger when presented with slides that pertained to current racial relations. These results suggest that there are still vestiges of white guilt among adolescents today and that Caucasian students recognize current inequalities in society.

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## Introduction

It is commonly known that the United States has had an internal struggle with race even before its existence. When the British first settled in North America in the seventeenth century, they did not wish to coexist with the various American Indian tribes. They believed that the natives were lesser beings and drove them off the land, drastically reducing their population and land rights over a period of at least two centuries. When the same English colonists realized they could trade goods for the services of native West Africans, they used the Africans as slave labor (1). This initial discrimination led

to two centuries of subordination and racism against African Americans and blacks. As people of Caucasian descent rapidly became the majority, everyone who was not Caucasian was discriminated against, seen as less educated, less cultured, and less deserving of equal rights (1).

In the twentieth century, some minorities responded with the Civil Rights Movement. Soon the media was filled with protests, mass marches, clashes, and sit-ins from underprivileged minorities, forcing Americans of all races to face the truth about racism in the nation. It is believed that this resulted in the genesis of white guilt (2). White guilt is defined as the colloquial shame and remorse felt by people of Caucasian descent who have more opportunities, privileges, and respect in society, unlike their minority counterparts who were oppressed by their ancestors (2, 3, 4). This guilt is usually expressed either by avid denial of any association with racist whites in the past or extreme political correctness towards minorities.

Currently, in the twenty-first century, with the election of the nation's first black president, it can be argued that the nation is finally moving forward in terms of race issues (5). A look at the younger generation prompts us to question whether white guilt still exists. Are the nation's young people more willing to let go of the past and move forward? The authors set forth to investigate the following: first, whether young people (in this case, teenagers) are now freeing themselves from white guilt because the nation is more open and accepting of race. Second, whether these young people are now more willing to discuss race and its implications than to avoid it.

People need to be able to openly debate and discuss race in order to work together. If white guilt is still prevalent in adolescents, it shows that society should begin to encourage more racial discourse between Caucasians and people of color, so that Caucasians will no longer be hyperconscious of being racially sensitive. This will also be beneficial to people of color. If Caucasians can be encouraged to let go of their collective guilt, minorities will be able to discuss racial issues with Caucasians without the fear of the discussion turning into an offensive-defensive battle.

## Results

Out of 31 students of a high school class, 22 submitted written parental consent forms and were able to participate in this study. A questionnaire (**Figure 1**) was administered to a class made up of students aged 14 to 17, with a mean age of 15.6 (**Figure 2**). There were 6 male and 16 female students

**Questionnaire**

1. What grade are you in?  
.....

2. How old are you?  
.....

3. What is your gender?  
Mark only one oval.  
 Male  
 Female  
 Other

4. What is your race/ethnicity?  
Mark only one oval.  
 White/Caucasian  
 Eastern Asian  
 Black/African-American  
 Hispanic/Latino  
 American Indian/Alaskan Native  
 Western Asian/Middle Eastern/North African  
 Southern Asian/Indian  
 Biracial/Multiracial

5. How closely do you associate yourself with your race/ethnicity?  
Mark only one oval.  
 Distanced  
 Neutral  
 Closely

6. Have you ever felt victimized due to your race/ethnicity?  
Mark only one oval.  
 Yes  
 No

7. What emotions do the following quote evoke?  
Check all that apply.  
Check all that apply.  
 Shame  
 Anger  
 Gratefulness

8. What emotions do the following statistic evoke?  
Check all that apply.  
Check all that apply.  
 Shame  
 Anger  
 Gratefulness

9. What emotions do the following fact evoke?  
Check all that apply.  
Check all that apply.  
 Shame  
 Anger  
 Gratefulness

10. What emotions do the following image evoke?  
Check all that apply.  
Check all that apply.  
 Shame  
 Anger  
 Gratefulness

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Figure 1: Survey administered to sample.

(Figure 2). Paired with the survey was a four-slide PowerPoint presentation projected onto a whiteboard, with each slide containing an image, namely a quote from a past president (Figure 3A), a stated fact (Figure 3B), a statistic (Figure 3C) and a cartoon picture (Figure 3D). The quote was intended to evaluate for any feelings of shame and embarrassment from Caucasian students, the statistic and the cartoon image were intended to evaluate for any feelings of guilt, and the fact was presented as a control to detract from appearing to only target Caucasian students. Out of 22 students, 32% identified themselves as Caucasian, 14% as Eastern Asian, 27% as Hispanic, 4% as either Middle Eastern or Western Asian, 9% as of Southern Asian or Indian subcontinent origin, and 14% as multiracial. There were no Native American or African American students (Figure 2). Figure 4A displays how students identified with their race: either distanced, closely, or neutral. 9 students (40.9%) felt victimized due to their race (Figure 4B). Out of the students who felt victimized due to race,

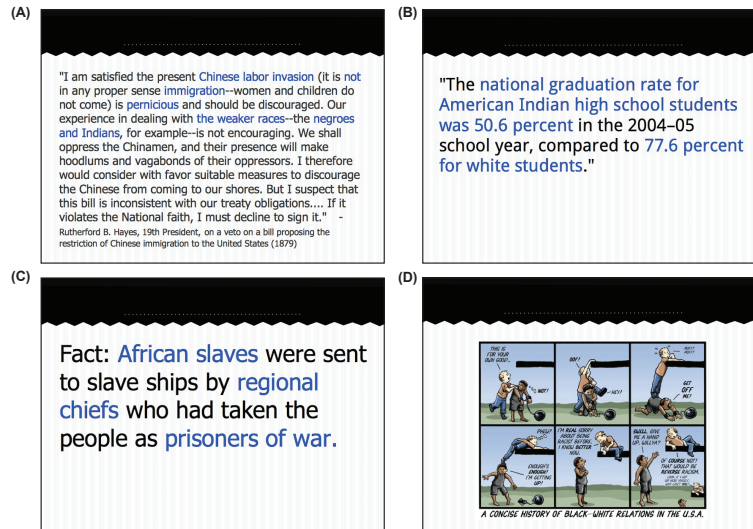
2 (22.2%) were Caucasian, 2 (22.2%) were Eastern Asian, 2 (22.2%) were Hispanic, 1 (11.1%) was Middle Eastern or Western Asian, none were of Southern Asian or Indian subcontinent origin and none were multiracial. Figures 5A-D illustrate the emotional reactions of the entire class to the quote (Figure 5A), statistic (Figure 5B), fact (Figure 5C), and cartoon image (Figure 5D), respectively. Figure 6 shows the separate emotional reactions of Caucasians and minorities to the same slides.

The first slide, Figure 3A, was presented to evaluate for any feeling of shame in Caucasian students. The slide presented a quote by US President Rutherford B. Hayes concerning the influx of Chinese immigrants during the nineteenth century. The language in the quote not only described the Chinese as a separate, lesser class than Caucasian Americans, but also portrayed American Indians and Africans in a negative light. Among Caucasian students, 72% responded to having emotions that included shame or shame paired with another emotion, while 43% responded to having emotions that included anger or anger paired with another emotion. 14% reported no emotional reaction whatsoever, and no one responded with having emotions of gratefulness. It is noteworthy that among non-Caucasian students, 80% responded to having emotions that included shame or shame paired with another emotion, while 60% responded to having emotions that included anger or anger paired with another emotion. However, 13% of non-Caucasian students responded as having a combination of emotions that included gratefulness. To summarize, the prevalent emotion felt by both groups was shame, with anger as the next strongest emotion.

The second slide, Figure 3B, was a statistic stating the relatively low high school graduation rate of Native Americans Indian students compared to Caucasian students. This slide was intended to evaluate for awareness (and possibly guilt) among the Caucasian students related to benefits they receive from society as compared to non-Caucasians. Only 14% of Caucasian students responded to having emotions that included shame paired with another emotion, while 71% responded

Age	Gender	Race/Ethnicity	Gender Division	Age Division	Racial Distribution
14	Female	White/Caucasian	Female: 73%	14-year-olds: 9%	White/Caucasian: 32%
15	Female	Southern Asian/Indian	Male: 27%	15-year-olds: 23%	Eastern Asian: 14%
14	Male	Western Asian/Middle Eastern/North African		15.5-year-olds: 9%	Hispanic/Latino: 27%
16	Male	White/Caucasian		16-year-olds: 50%	Southern Asian/Indian: 9%
16	Male	Hispanic/Latino		17-year-olds: 9%	Western Asian/Middle Eastern/North African: 4%
15.5	Male	White/Caucasian			Black/African-American: 0%
17	Female	Hispanic/Latino			American Indian/Alaskan Native: 0%
15	Female	Hispanic/Latino			Biracial/Multiracial: 14%
16	Female	White/Caucasian			
16	Female	Eastern Asian			
17	Female	Eastern Asian			
16	Female	Southern Asian/Indian			
16	Female	Biracial/Multiracial			
16	Female	Hispanic/Latino			
16	Female	White/Caucasian			
15	Female	Biracial/Multiracial			
15	Female	Eastern Asian			
16	Male	Biracial/Multiracial			
15.5	Female	White/Caucasian			
15	Female	Hispanic/Latino			
16	Female	Hispanic/Latino			
16	Male	White/Caucasian			

Figure 2: The distribution of age, the division of gender, and the distribution of races within the studied students. This information was obtained from the students' answers on the survey. The ages were obtained through a free answer question, while gender and races were recorded through single-choice multiple-choice questions.



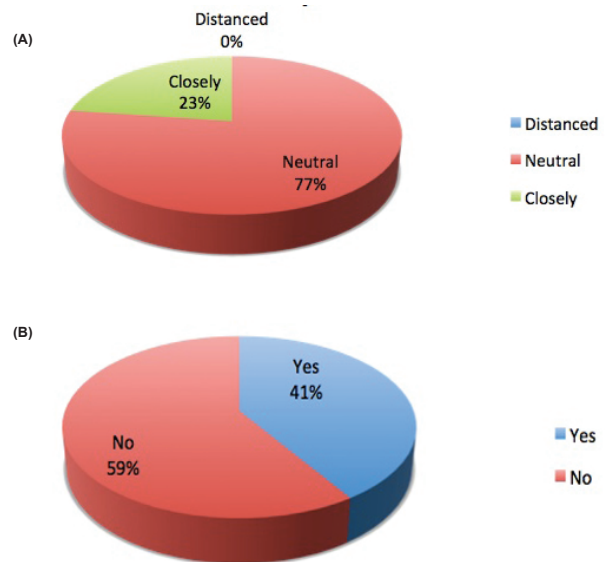
**Figure 3: Slides paired with survey.** (A) is a quote concerning racial inequality in the early history of the United States, (B) is a statistic concerning racial inequality in modern times, (C) is a fact about African slave trade that was placed in the slide shown to blind respondents, and (D) is a picture that depicts racial inequality during modern times.

to having emotions that included anger or anger paired with another emotion. 29% reported no emotional reaction, and none reported feelings of gratefulness. Among the non-Caucasian students, again a majority (66%) of students responded to having emotions that included anger or anger paired with another emotion, but 54% also responded to having emotions that included shame or shame paired with another emotion, and 7% reported feelings of gratefulness. No non-Caucasian student reported having no emotional reaction. Here, the most prevalent emotion for both groups was anger, with shame as the second most prevalent emotion. However, for Caucasians, the difference between those who felt anger as opposed to those who felt shame was much larger than the difference between the emotions among the non-Caucasians.

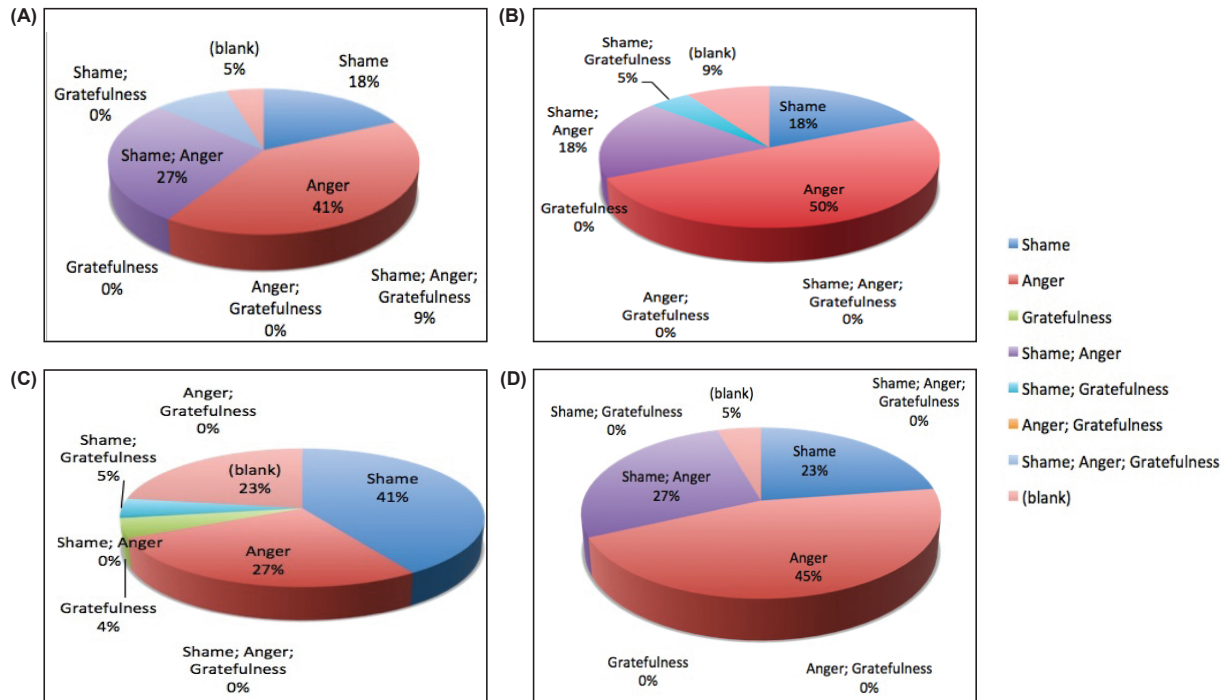
The fact presented in the third slide Figure 3C was presented to remove bias among Caucasian respondents. The slide did not include any information pertaining directly to Caucasians. Instead, the slide described how African chiefs who had taken people in as prisoners of war provided slaves for the African slave trade. This third slide holds no other importance to the study.

The final slide, Figure 3D, was a cartoon illustrating the artist's opinion of the relationship between African Americans and Caucasians throughout American history. In the first few panels, a Caucasian man is shown stepping on an African American man dressed in rags with chains on his wrists in order to reach a ledge. In later panels, the Caucasian apologizes to the African American for stepping on him. However, when the African American man asks for help standing up, the Caucasian states that helping him up would be 'reverse racism' pointing out that he got up there by his own efforts. This cartoon was presented to evaluate

for emotions of guilt among Caucasian students for the struggles placed on African Americans by Caucasian people throughout history. 57% of Caucasian students responded to having emotions that included shame or shame paired with another emotion, and 43% responded to having emotions that included anger or anger paired with another emotion. 14% however, responded with no



**Figure 4: The distribution of racial association and racial victimization of students in the sample.** This information was obtained from answers on the survey. (A) Students were asked if they associated closely with their racial identity, distanced themselves, or felt neutral about their racial identity. Students could only choose one option. (B) Students were asked if they had ever felt victimized because of their racial identity. This was presented as a 'yes' or 'no' question.



**Figure 5: Emotional reactions of students.** The emotional reactions of the studied students to the presented quote (A), statistic (B), fact (C), and image (D) in the slide show. This information was obtained from the students' answers on the survey. Students were asked to record if they felt anger, gratefulness, shame, or any combination of the three when presented with the four slides. If they felt no emotion, they could leave the answers blank.

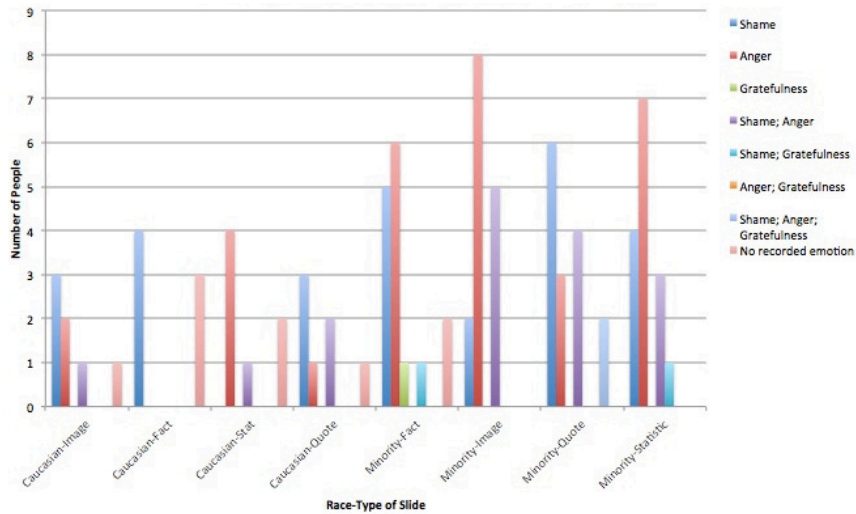
emotional reaction. No Caucasian students responded as having emotions of gratefulness. In comparison, only 46% of Non-Caucasian students responded to having emotions that included shame or shame paired with another emotion, while 87% responded to having emotions that included anger or anger paired with another emotion. No students of color responded to having emotions of gratefulness or no emotions. This was the only slide in which some Caucasian students responded by recording no emotion. Also, the most prevalent emotion among the Caucasian students was the emotion of shame, while among the non-Caucasian students, the most prevalent emotion recorded was anger.

### Discussion

The slides in which a majority of Caucasians responded with having an emotion of shame both had to do with past relations of Caucasians and minorities (the quote and the cartoon). However, a fair amount (~40% for both slides) of Caucasian students also responded to having feelings of anger, indicating that there is sense of awareness along with these feeling of guilt. Of note, the slide that presented information on racial relations in the present resulted in more Caucasian students responding with feelings of anger than of shame. There were no Caucasians that responded with feelings of gratefulness. This may be another effect of white guilt. It could be possible that there were some Caucasian students that had feelings of gratefulness, but they

probably restricted themselves, because it appears to be a display of ignorance and insensitivity when a person simply recognizes and is grateful for advantages they have over others, instead of fighting for the rights of the underprivileged (8)

In the survey, participants were asked to list their responses to the slides as shame, anger, gratefulness, any combination of the three, or none. It was assumed that students had an understanding of what these emotions were, but the meanings of these emotions were clarified if a student asked about them. If a Caucasian person responded with 'shame', it signals that the emotion that they feel is closer to the effects of white guilt, a non-constructive emotion. That is to say, this emotion does not inspire the person to act, but to remain paralyzed in the emotion (7, 8). This is considered one of the hazardous effects of white guilt: it is only effective in making people of Caucasian descent feel ashamed for the privileges they have access to (7, 8, 9, 10). If a Caucasian person responded to a slide with 'anger', it indicates that the person is aware and willing to oppose the social inequalities that the slide portrays. If we are truly living in a post-racial society, people should be more aware of racial injustices in our society. If a Caucasian person responded to a slide with 'gratefulness', it also indicates that the person is aware of racial inequalities in society, but it also indicates that the person has the capacity to separate the emotions of guilt from this recognition of his or her place in society. If a person did not respond, it can indicate that either he



**Figure 6: Emotional reactions of Caucasian and minority students to a quote, statistic, fact, and image.** This information was obtained from the students' answers on the survey. Students were asked to record if they felt anger, gratefulness, shame, or any combination of the three when presented with the four slides. If they felt no emotion, they could leave the answers blank.

or she is willing to mentally set aside racial issues, he or she was simply apathetic to the issues presented, the emotion that the person was feeling was not available on the survey to be recorded, or the student did not have a clear understanding of the meanings of the emotions.

There were a number of limitations of this study. First, the sample size of twenty-two students increases the confidence interval of our results. Second, the survey requested reports of the subjective (emotions) in an objective fashion. The small number of options presented to student participants could mean that there was limited expression of the true emotions of the students. That is to say, some students could be feeling emotions that could not be properly expressed with the options that the survey presented. Third, this study was performed in a single high school in a single state (Arizona), and the results may have been influenced by geographic location; racial attitudes in the Southwest are different from racial attitudes in other regions of the United States because the most prevalent racial minority are Hispanics instead of African-Americans (11)

Also, it should be noted that this survey was given to an elective Advanced Placement class. The answers recorded in this study may not be representative of the answers of an average high school student. Of importance, the majority of the sample size was also female. Females, in general, tend to be more emotional than males, so the responses that were obtained may also be deviant from the general adolescent population. (11)

From results obtained, the authors conclude the following. Firstly, we are not yet living in the "ideal" post-racial society. The ideal post racial society is a society in which people do not assume that race has a factor in a person's personality, intelligence, or abilities, instead that every person is equally competent. Young Caucasians

are still reminded of the past deeds of their ancestors and still suffer from embarrassment as a result. The fact that there is anger about what happened in the past, however, indicates that young Caucasians are aware of past injustices and hints that they may be willing to stand up against it.

Second, recent events and current factors may contribute to continuation of this phenomenon. For example, movies such as *Roots*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and *Lincoln* (6) have been beneficial to society, but may contribute to white guilt. United States History classes that discuss slave history and racial movements like the 'Red Power', 'Brown Power', and 'Black Power' movements are educational, but may have the side effects of inducing these feelings. College financial aid programs that favor minority students over Caucasians are a benefit to society, but may also contribute to white guilt. Thirdly, younger people who have not personally experienced racism have less difficulty discussing issues pertaining to race and discrimination as compared to adults.

### Materials and Methods

The survey was administered to 10th and 11th grade students of an elective high school Advanced Placement Psychology class. Students were required to have a permission slip signed by either a parent or adult guardian in order to participate in the study. On the day the study was performed, students who had submitted written permission stayed in the classroom, while the students who had not waited outside the classroom in the school's cafeteria. A ten-question paper questionnaire (**Figure 1**) was distributed to student participants. The students in the classroom were then given a period of two minutes to answer the first six questions. Subsequently the students were instructed to look at a projected Power Point

show of four slides, and to record their initial emotional reactions. Students were required to supply an answer for each question if the emotions were applicable. If the student felt no emotion, the question could be left blank. Students were given a period of about two minutes to look at each slide. Then, the paper questionnaires were collected. This all occurred within the span of twenty minutes.

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