

Is Prescribing White Shame Possible?  
A Pragmatist-Phenomenological Examination

**Abstract:** Some philosophy of race scholars argue that promoting shame and guilt in white people would help end racism. In disagreement, feminist pragmatist Shannon Sullivan argues that “white shame” and “white guilt” are useless, since they lead to self-hate and inaction on the part of white people. In my paper, I apply a pragmatist-phenomenological lens to white shame and agree with Sullivan, but for different reasons. I argue that assuming that white people can feel ashamed simply about being white within our current society is unfounded, and show the significance of this for conversations about white people's role in ending racism.

In *Good White People: The Problem with Middle-class White Anti-racism*, Shannon Sullivan considers: “what can white people do to help end racial injustice?” (2014, 1). As one response to this question, Sullivan argues that prescribing “white shame” and “white guilt” is useless, since promoting these ideas leads to self-hate and inaction on the part of white people. In this paper, I apply a pragmatist-phenomenological lens to white shame and agree with Sullivan, but for different reasons. I argue that assuming that white people *can* feel ashamed simply about being white within our current society is unfounded. I will maintain that the project of “promoting white shame” is fraught to begin with, and show the significance of this finding for conversations about white people's role in ending racial injustice.

**Arguments For and Against White Shame**

This section considers some recent scholarship that argues for and against prescribing white shame for anti-racist efforts. Although white shame and white guilt are often coupled together within philosophy of race scholarship, I believe that these emotions are distinct enough to warrant their own separate analysis. For this reason, I will not provide a substantial or meaningful look at the idea of white guilt in this paper. With that said, a number of scholars, including almost all of the scholars that I cite in this section, reject the usefulness of white guilt (Katz 1978; Alcoff 1998; Zack 1998; Edgington 1999; Macmullan 2009).

Yet, the criticisms of white guilt have not led to its disappearance, rather they have led to its metamorphosis into the idea of white shame. In fact, some of the same scholars that argue against white guilt, argue for the rehabilitative potential of white shame as an effective anti-racist tool. As Sullivan describes,

the supposed importance of white people's negative emotions hasn't been eliminated with the demotion of white guilt...white guilt has been replaced by white shame. This is because of shame's alleged ability to promote greater responsibility for racism on the part of white people (2014, 131).

White shame is not simply a more extreme version of white guilt. Whereas shame concerns one's relationship to themselves, guilt concerns what one has done. "Guilt is about acting; shame is about being" (131). As Michael Morgan puts it, "shame is a feeling we have about how we see ourselves *in terms of how others see us.*" According to Morgan, since shame is about selves and not acts, it seems that shame is a useful motivator for self-transformation (Morgan 47, 35). Alexis Shotwell agrees and argues that, "a certain kind of feeling bad can be important for producing meaningful solidarity across difference, particularly for individuals who benefit from racist social/political structures" (Shotwell 73). Per Shotwell, the bad feelings in question can include, "guilt, anger, sadness, panic, shame, embarrassment, and other emotions not easy to name" (74). Although against prescribing white guilt, MacMullan agrees that there is transformative potential in notions of white shame: "If the habit of guilt is to wallow in self-disgust....the habit of shame is to see this disgusting past and then 'live so as never to do such a thing again'" (MacMullan 199). Echoing across all of these works is the following overarching argument:

- 1) it is possible to prescribe white shame as an anti-racist tool.
- 2) Doing so would lead to white self-transformation in some form.
- 3) Eventually this will lead to positive anti-racist efforts.

In my third section, I will argue against premise "1)."

In disagreement with the advocates of white shame, Sullivan argues that “encouraging white people to feel ashamed of their whiteness as a response to racial injustice implicitly caters to the hegemonic and narcissistic interests of middle-class white people” (138). She notes that white shame is self-indulgent, in that it can too easily lead to a pattern of claimed remorse or apology on the part of white people, but nonetheless inaction when it comes to making true anti-racist strides.

Other scholars have also argued against discussions of white shame, but for different reasons. Marzia Milazzo argues that discussions of white shame do nothing to address the bigger problem of institutional racism. Milazzo defines institutional racism as “the normalisation of white supremacy in institutions, laws, policies, and practices that produce racially differential access to jobs, organisations, services, spaces, wealth, and so forth.” Per Milazzo, white shame does nothing to reconcile the fact that

every major institution in the United States is under white control...Not only is institutional racism primary, but individual and institutional racism also operate independently from one another. This means that improving police training does not challenge structural racism in the police force, just as diversity workshops for teachers do not prevent the US school system from structurally reproducing racial inequality. The politics of individualised training act as a smokescreen that leaves institutional racism unchallenged. Purging police departments of racist cops directs our attention to individual bad actors, while it silences the fact that the police was created precisely to control the racialised working class and protect white property (564).

For the most part, I agree with Milazzo’s position. Yet, I want to address white shame here in order to argue that a phenomenological analysis of shame reveals that we cannot assume white people *can* feel ashamed in the way that supporters of white shame seem to believe.

### **A Phenomenological, Non-Abstracted, Look at Shame**

The phenomenological analysis of shame that I will evoke here was set forth by feminist phenomenologist Bonnie Mann. Feminist phenomenology is notably different from classical

phenomenology in that it actively rejects the masculine, universalizing position. Eva-Maria Simms and Beata Stawarska describe the tasks of feminist phenomenology as follows:

Phenomenology is feminist as long as it includes questions related to gendered experience and sexual difference within its field of study. Contrary to the conservative and narrow view of phenomenology as being confined to the stance of a (presumably) sexless, individualistic ego, gendered embodiment and sexual hierarchy do not fall out of the pure transcendental domain into the contingent and the empirical; they belong to the aspirations of phenomenology to describe concrete, lived human experience in its richness and complexity (Simms and Stawarska 2013, p. 6)

I have chosen to include Mann's feminist phenomenological account of shame here, because I believe feminist phenomenology, more so than classical phenomenology, aligns well with the goals of pragmatism. I believe these two traditions have much to offer each other, and that a joint application of their resources can lead to fruitful philosophical investigations.

Mann's "The Difference of Feminist Phenomenology: The Case of Shame" considers two accounts of shame stemming from the classical phenomenological tradition before offering her own feminist phenomenological account of shame. She considers the work of Antony Steinbock, who argues that shame is "a positive self-givenness grounded in self-love" (qtd. in Mann 59). Per Steinbock, shame is essentially a positive emotion because shame reveals our self to ourselves. Shame "exposes me as vulnerable to the other, and undoes pride, the mistaken belief in my own self-groundedness" (Mann 59). Ultimately, Steinbock's account of shame is ameliorative. Dan Zahavi agrees with Steinbock but goes further to argue that shame "might also...play a constructive role in moral development" (qtd. in Mann 59). According to Zahavi, shame allows us to "reorient" ourselves and the way we live.

Both Steinbock's and Zahavi's accounts of shame carry resonances with the arguments offered by the aforementioned proponents of prescribing white shame, such as the idea that shame can transform the self in positive ways. Mann's account of shame does not outright reject

Steinbock's and Zahavi's, but instead sheds light on what is lost when we assume that shame always exists outside of our socially constructed discourses of gender. In Mann's words, both authors:

(1) completely ignore the overwhelmingly gendered nature of so many shame experiences and ignore the fact that gender is a primary site of shame, (2) give us a wildly rosy picture of shame in comparison to how shame actually plays itself out in lived lives by suggesting that shame is in some primary sense ameliorative, (3) miss the complexity of the lived temporality of shame, and (4) do not seem to see the work that shame is doing to secure social stratification and to reinforce and reproduce specific relations of domination and subordination (Mann 64).

Mann argues that gendered shame "is a central mechanism of the apparatus that secures the continued subordination of women across a number of class and race contexts in the mediated, late-capitalist west" (64). In her feminist phenomenological account of shame, Mann draws on the story of Amanda Todd - a Canadian teenager who was blackmailed into sending a picture of her exposed chest to a 36 year old man in the Netherlands. After Todd complied with her aggressor, the man threatened to release the photo to all of her Facebook friends, if she did not put on private sex-shows for him. Todd refused, and the man did release the photo. Todd's life afterwards was a living hell. Her schoolmates relentlessly bullied, harassed, and shamed her. Even when she transferred to another school, she could not escape the abuse. In 2012, "Todd posted a silent YouTube video of herself with note cards in which she told what she called her 'never ending story...' A month later, she killed herself" (66).

In an attempt to make more sense of Todd's tragic story, Mann distinguishes between "ubiquitous shame" and "unbounded shame." According to Mann, "ubiquitous shame" is "that shame-*status* that attaches to the very fact of exiting as a girl or woman, or of having a female body, captured so powerfully in such common phrases as 'like a girl' and 'such a pussy'" (65). Ironically, "ubiquitous shame" carries a promise of redemption. The world we live in tells young

women that they must subject themselves to rituals of beautification: “shaving, plucking, styling her hair, applying layers of makeup.” This process can further include, with our growing social media use, spending hours attempting to take and upload the perfect selfie for peer-approval in the form of Facebook “likes.” Implicitly and explicitly, the young woman is told that “she will, through the force of her beauty, have power over men...she is promised that her present abjection will be converted into admiration, desire, adulation” (68-69). In other words, for the young heterosexual woman, adolescence includes a “ubiquitous shame” of which she is promised redemption at the moment of the marriage proposal.

“Unbounded shame,” accompanies a shame-*event*. It is a “thick, relentless, engulfing shame...that *combusts* in certain contexts, until it snuffs out any hope for redemption. This shame has suicide as its logical endpoint” (65). Unbounded shame is the kind of shame that Todd was subjected to by her sexual harasser and high school peers. According to Mann, both ubiquitous and unbounded shame are interconnected: “one sets the stage for the other: ubiquitous shame with its promissory temporality is the “set up” for the decisions that catalyze the events that issue in unbounded shame for some girls and women” (65).

Mann’s account of gendered shame, reveals the problems with assuming shame is always abstracted from the real world. More importantly, she shows how shame operates as a tool of domination for the subjectification of women. Put differently, “ubiquitous shame” is a kind of shame experienced by a subjectated, non-dominant group (in the case of gendered shame: women) in order to keep existing structures of power in place.

### **The Current Impossibility of White “Ubiquitous Shame”**

In this section, I consider: what does non-abstracted shame reveal about the idea of promoting white shame? What does the answer to this question contribute to Sullivan’s question:

“how should white people concerned about racial justice comport themselves towards their whiteness?”

In attempting to answer the first question, it seems that what the advocates of white shame are after is a kind of racialized “ubiquitous shame” for white people. These scholars seem to be seeking a way to garner a sense of shame in white people grounded on the fact of having been born white, in the hopes that this will lead to a kind of self-transformation that will aid anti-racist efforts. The self-transformation might be the sought after “redemption” of white people’s “ubiquitous shame.” If I am correct about this, then I argue that this is not possible in our current society.

The problem with this approach is that, unlike gendered “ubiquitous shame,” institutional racism and our present racialized power structures do not maintain an environment that encourages white people to feel ashamed. One cannot simply be told to feel “ubiquitous shame.” What is required to harbor within someone a sense of “ubiquitous shame” are pervasive social messages and discourses that tell the subjected group that they should be ashamed and that there is a passageway for redemption. The problem is, however, that institutional racism protects white people from feeling a sense of shame in simply being white. Within our present society, there is no need for redemption from being white. For this approach to work we would need a complete re-working of our current society. At most, prescribing white shame only results in their temporary discomfort. For this reason, I maintain, that the project of prescribing white shame is a fraught from the start.

In fact, it is more accurate to say that non-white people are often unjustly forced to experience a form of racialized “ubiquitous shame” in being non-white. The “redemption,” in this case, is a rejection of one’s culture in the hopes of being perceived as white or “American.”

For example, here are a series of Twitter tweet's authored by Kimberly Yamm. Although Yamm not a philosopher by training, I take Yamm to be an insightful *thinker* whose words are pragmatically and phenomenologically useful. She ask us to imagine:

You're 8 years old. Your 3rd grade class orders chinese food & your father delivers it. You are so excited to see your pops in school. He's your hero. But apparently other kids don't think he's so cool. They laugh at him and mimic his accent. You don't want to be Chinese anymore.

You're 9 years old. You attend ballet camp. Someone tells you that another girl \*hates\* you. She thinks your eyes are an "ugly shape." You don't have the vocabulary to describe why that's hurtful. But now, you hate your distinctly Asian face. You don't want to be Chinese anymore.

You're 16 years old. It's Halloween & 2 students come to class dressed as "Asian tourists." They've taped their eyes back, strapped cameras around their necks and chucked up peace signs. You feel uncomfortable. When a teacher asks if you find the costumes offensive, you say no (UGC & Social News)

I believe that Yamm's depictions capture something significant about the way in which power structures operate in relation to racialized "ubiquitous shame." The memories she cites are instances of having to internalize "ubiquitous shame" and the false promise of "redemption" lies in a rejection of her chinese heritage. Typically, being-in-the-world as white means safety and exemption from ridicule on the bases of race. If the lives of white people are not filled with marked moments of self-hate on the basis of being white, then they do not need "redemption;" they are already "saved."

For the defenders of white shame, the primary goal is to promote a strategy that will modify white people's behavior in ways that favor anti-racist efforts. Prescribing shame, in their eyes, just seems to be a good way to do it. In search of an alternative, we can consider is the common emotion that some white people seem to experience in relation to race, namely: the fear of being called a racist. While making a guest appearance on *Fox News*, New York State Assemblyman Kieran Michael Lalor said, that for white people, "there is nothing worse than

being called a racist. There is nothing worse for your career, there's nothing worse for you as a person" (Starr 1). Lalor's claim makes sense. In our current society, "racist" is the worst thing a white person can be called, which I believe further bolsters my point that white people are not being shamed by our current society for being white, at most they experience the possibility of racialized shame if they appear to be a racist. Further promoting this already existent kind of fear, in order to modify white people's behavior, might seem like a valuable anti-racist effort. Yet, I would not readily endorse this project either, since this fear does not guarantee a genuine concern for the struggles of people of color on the part of white people. If all someone fears is being called a racist, then are they really willing to take productive strides towards the dismantling of institutional racism?

I believe that the phenomenological account provided here, reveals that prescribing white shame does not work because it is not possible for white people to internalize a racialized "ubiquitous shame" for being white in our current society. Instead, agreeing with Milazzo, what would be significantly more beneficial than attempting to prescribe white shame, would be for white people to work towards dismantling institutional racism, including more conversations about how white people can participate in those efforts. In short, we need less conversations about how white should, or currently, *feel* and more conversations about what white people *can do*.

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