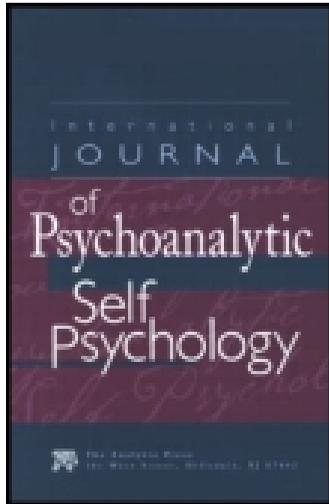


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### Learning to Love White Shame and Guilt: Skills for Working as a White Therapist in a Racially Divided Country

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# LEARNING TO LOVE WHITE SHAME AND GUILT: SKILLS FOR WORKING AS A WHITE THERAPIST IN A RACIALLY DIVIDED COUNTRY

LYNNE M. JACOBS, PH.D., PSY.D.

This article addresses the issues of white-centeredness and racialization that are inherent in contemporary American society and culture. The aim is to develop a conceptual framework by which dominant culture therapists and analysts might sensitize themselves to the implications of their dominance in the therapeutic process. While racialization is my fulcrum, the ideas I present could as easily be applied to heterosexism and to any situation in which a so-called normative standard regarding experience and behavior reigns. The article addresses the major difficulty in recognizing white-centeredness and challenges the common wisdom that white shame and white guilt need to be removed as barriers to the progress toward racial justice. The author addresses inherent power imbalances in the therapeutic setting and offers ideas for managing white guilt and shame productively.

Keywords: guilt; power; prejudice; racialization; shame, slavery; social location; white-centeredness

## INTRODUCTION

I am engaged in a project of unpacking white-centeredness and racialization in American culture, with the aim of sensitizing white therapists and analysts to how white-centeredness infuses our professional as well as personal lives. By “racialization,” I refer to the writing of psychoanalyst, Kimberly Leary. She introduces the notion of racialization this way, “racialized experience—[is] the experience of being raced” (Leary, 2007, p. 544). She is referring to the fact that race-based meaning making is an all-pervasive cultural fact of everyday life.

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My primary purpose in this article is to provide a user-friendly conceptual framework by which dominant culture therapists and analysts might sensitize themselves to the implications of their dominance in the therapeutic process. While racialization is my fulcrum, the ideas I present could as easily be applied to heterosexism and to any situation in which a so-called normative standard regarding experience and behavior reigns. Thus, I hope my ideas are useful for broad socio-political projects and for personal encounters as well, especially encounters in our consulting rooms.

I shall address the major difficulty in recognizing white-centeredness, and then I hope to challenge the common wisdom that white shame and white guilt need to be removed as barriers to the progress toward racial justice, and finally I will offer ideas for managing white guilt and shame productively.

Before I proceed further, I admit I cringe a bit at the optimism in my title, and in what I shall present. It brings to mind a vignette from the end of the film, *Hitler's Children*. The documentary filmmaker, Chanoch Ze'evi (2012), an Israeli third generation Shoah survivor, spoke at the end of the project. He had interviewed Hoess' grandson, Rainer. They had decided they would go and visit Auschwitz together. During the visit, Rainer agreed to take questions from a group of Israeli schoolchildren who happened to be visiting at the same time. The exchange was emotionally powerful, and the grandson's emotional courage was palpable. In the end, a teenage girl who had lost many family members at Auschwitz, exchanged a tearful hug with Rainer. Chanoch was trying to understand the uplifting power of that experience, given how trivial it was in the context of so much loss, grief and horror. With a poignant sigh, he wondered if we are all—including himself—seeking optimism where none can be found.

I refer to his comments now to remind us—and perhaps especially me—that my motives for exploring situations of guilty shame are complex and complicated. Yes, I want to feel good about my small part in challenging social injustice in my profession and elsewhere, and yes, I still get to live my privilege (as Rainer got to be born). One privilege, perhaps, is the chance to be taken seriously without raising white readers' defenses, because I speak to white listeners as a fellow white.

In what is probably a good example of what Leary calls, an “adaptive challenge,” in which different stakeholders may hold irreconcilably different meanings regarding a shared situation (Leary, 2012), I have struggled over the decision to use the racialized color terms, “black” and “white” in this article. The term, “African-American” is uncomfortable for me, at least in my position as a white person concerned with “white privilege.” When discussions about race occur, I often see “African-American” and “white” juxtaposed as though they are parallel terms. But the correct juxtaposition should be, “European-American.” European immigrants generally drop the hyphen within a few generations because it is easier for them to be incorporated into American consciousness as “Americans.” Blacks live doubly. They are quintessentially American, having been here—involuntarily, of course—from the start. And yet they are never fully “American,” they remain outsiders. Some blacks also want to reclaim their stolen heritage by using the term, “African-American.” With this I have no argument. However, I prefer the terms, “white” and “black,” because, aside from ethnic heritage, class etc., racialized skin color does matter in this country.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF RACIALIZING WHITENESS

I am acutely aware that I may be addressing fellow whites and people of color who are probably more articulate about whiteness than I am. And it raises the question: Is this still a necessary topic? I will offer two examples from my clinical communities that affirm the necessity of this topic.

## EXAMPLE 1

During my analytic candidacy at an institute (that is quite liberal in many ways, but in which white-centeredness and heterosexism are rampant and largely unnoticed) I was reading one of our assigned papers, something written by a popular and well-read white male author. I came across a passage that felt like a kick in the stomach. I have not been able to trace down the passage, but in an act of post-modern scholarship hubris, I shall reconstruct the essence of it that is relevant for us, and use it as if it is the correct passage.

The patient returned from her visit home somber and depressed. She reported a dream in which she was sleeping in her childhood bedroom and in the middle of the night a black intruder had climbed through the window and stolen her jewelry. We came to understand the dream as a depiction of her father's intrusion and that he had robbed her of precious childhood innocence. We also understood the dream as a depiction of her experience of my interpretations of the previous week. I had been intrusive and had, by addressing a defense, robbed her of a precious innocence.

That is the vignette and analysis from the article (as best as I can reconstruct it). Here is my disturbance. Note that there is a reference made to a black intruder. And yet, the blackness of the intruder was not addressed as relevant to the dream interpretation. So why include the reference to color? If the author was presenting the dream exactly as the patient had told the dream, the reference to color would make sense. However, the author had merely presented a dream *summary*, and yet included a detail that was not relevant for the analysis he wished to illustrate. I think perhaps the "black" intruder was left in—likely without conscious thought—as a way to convey a heightened anxiety about the intrusion. And this makes me sad, that for many white dreamers, black figures show up as frightening threats to our well-being.

The more disturbing aspect of this vignette is something more subtle and invisible. Namely, this author was insensitive to his participation in continuing to perpetuate this symbolization of threatening blackness, and apparently gave no thought to what his effect might be on his colleagues, especially those of color. He also made the common "whiteness-as-invisible" mistake of not reporting the color or ethnicity of the dreamer. But as soon as the words "black intruder" were read, the dreamer's ethnicity as not black—and likely white—emerged. Her whiteness is invisible until it comes into contact with someone of color. By not racializing whiteness we treat it as an invisible norm against which others are measured, and in this case, found wanting.

If I were a black clinician, I can well imagine feeling unwelcome to participate as an equal in the community of therapists, as my race has once again been invoked thoughtlessly and needlessly to reinforce threat. I imagine myself feeling a flush of humiliation, anger, and defeat. I might also sense that I, as a black colleague, am invisible. Crucially,

the author appears to be writing as if all of his colleagues are white, as if he has no colleagues of color.

### EXAMPLE 2

About five years ago I offered a workshop on cultural influences in the consulting room at a conference of gestalt therapists (the first of my psychotherapeutic communities). I treasure the general socio-political sophistication of my gestalt colleagues. I knew I wanted to address the issue of white-centeredness, and I felt sheepish and anxious, worrying that perhaps those who came to the workshop were already thoroughly aware of the issue, and that perhaps I was only one who needed the education.

I began the workshop with an experiment: I asked each person to write down five identifiers for themselves, and five ways in which someone who met them would identify them. Of course participants used such things as gender-identification, religion, profession, relationship status, etc. Not one white person noticed their whiteness as an identifier, either as self-identity, or as how they would be seen by others. And you can be sure that the people of color mentioned their color or race as both self-identity and as identifiable by others.

### INVISIBLE WHITENESS

From the examples given it is obvious we whites still live with whiteness as an invisible cultural norm. Our structural power dominance, which allows us to establish and enforce a kind of “normative mind,” is taken merely as a given by us, as that which is natural. In concrete examples, we do not give a second thought, for instance, to the fact that we are welcome—or at least not unwelcome, when we walk into a shop, a building, a bank. We do not give a thought to “driving while white.” We live with a pre-reflective expectation that our surround will provide stabilizing and affirming responsiveness. We have an unselfconscious confident belonging. Historian Grace Hale (1998) describes an insidious implication of the “givenness” of white privilege—the advantage of being identified as belonging:

Central to the meaning of whiteness is a broad, collective American silence. The denial of white as a racial identity, the denial that whiteness has a history, allows the quiet, the blankness to stand as the norm. This erasure enables many to fuse their absence of racial being with the nation, making whiteness their unspoken but deepest sense of what it means to be an American. (p. i)

Thus, we live in a white-affirmative world and that is taken for granted. It is never problematized. Our sense of ourselves as individuals *first*, and members of a racialized category only secondarily, remains a powerful fiction.

Dethroning white-centeredness is more radical than the (admittedly already radical and difficult) work to include otherness. George Yancy, professor of philosophy at Duquesne, points out that disempowering, or dethroning white-centeredness (the white normative gaze), will help whites emerge from the “bad faith” that haunts our white lives.

In, *Look, A White!* Yancy, who is black, asks us whites—using myriad examples—to see ourselves as blacks see us (2012). This will lead us to live doubly, with an uncomfortable sense of self-consciousness about the most minor of our actions. This double consciousness is something with which blacks are intimately familiar (Du Bois, 1903). Dethroning lessens the grip and power of white or Euro-centered norms in *all* of our conversations, not just with those who we originally take as “other.”

Through this process of examining and contextualizing the whiteness of our norms, we become more “other,” even to ourselves. In order to do this, we need to find language and concepts that can remind us, on an on-going basis, to problematize or question our taken-for-granted assumptive worlds. Psychotherapists and analysts interested in the power of language have made inroads in this project by borrowing from critical theory, such notions as discourse, interpellation, and resignification as tools for examining biases about normative consciousness (Dimen, 2011). Later in this article, I, however, will borrow primarily from a feminist American Studies academic, and draw also on a few philosophical ideas.

### SHAME AND GUILT TRAPS

The first hurdle to cross is our primary resistance to the exploration of guilt and shame. A key to the project of dethroning white-centeredness, is to be willing to bear the inevitable guilt and shame that accompanies awareness of the advantages and exclusivity that our white situation accords us. Generally, our first reactions are an increase in defensiveness, which of course creates problems in a therapeutic conversation. Most of us are familiar with white guilt. What I mean by shame is best described by a comment made by Francis Broucek (1991), that one form of shame is when one is treated as an object when one wishes to be treated as a subject. Of course, whites often see an *object* of color rather than a person. White shame is the shame of doing so. It is the excruciating recognition of a failure of our humanity.

Another failure of our humanity is what we do in order to “pass” as belonging in the white world:

Thandeka (2000), in a study about the harmful effects of being considered “white,” found that children have to be trained to be white. She suggested that part of that training consists of being taught to despise and disown parts of oneself, [while continuing to find] those qualities [in] people of color, and then to consider oneself superior to them. This training creates a deep shame in whites, a shame that profoundly harms them at the same time that it grants them important socioeconomic advantages. (Cushman, 2000, p. 163)

Gump (2000) avers that shame and guilt diminish a white therapist’s capacity to “see” the patient. Here she is discussing a case that white analyst, Neil Altman (2000), who is involved in anti-racism projects, detailed, in which, despite his compassion and admiration for his black patient, his complicated guilt inhibited him, and stalled the treatment.

But the therapist has also been damaged by racism. There is a way in which he cannot “see” the man who is his patient, a way in which the patient’s otherness renders

him opaque. I suspect it is one reason Altman fails to see the patient's shame. Or, put another way, it is the therapist's racism that deprives him of the chance to ascribe to this man the same motives and affects he would ascribe to someone who is white.

I want to be clear here: Particular racist thoughts and feelings got in the way of treatment, yes. The more significant problem, however, was the difficulty in extending to this other a presumption of sameness, the proposition which lies at the heart of racism.

Although I have written here of difference, it is ultimately to argue for psychological identity. It is consignment to the category "different from me" that obscures this patient, which renders him unknowable.

Here we come, I believe, to what is so tenacious and powerful about racism: in spite of Altman's awareness, in spite of his capacity at times to escape the restraints of his own constructed subjectivity, he could not, finally, accord to his patient an essential sameness (Gump, 2000).

On the other hand, the vastly different contexts of living while white and living while black need to be respected. My patient from many years ago, Carla, an intensely suspicious and terribly isolated young black woman with daunting fears and inhibitions, was struggling to establish a foothold in her profession. She never mentioned our race difference, and was uncomfortable on the rare occasions when I made my whiteness more figural. I finally asked her why that area of discussion was so off-limits. She said with some trepidation that she was afraid that our connection would break entirely if we talked about our racial differences because there were dimensions of her life that I could never fully understand. She thought that she was damned either way. If I could not understand her deeply, she would be lost and alone again, a painfully familiar psychological landscape. Yet if I endeavored to understand her as if I thought I actually *could*, grasp in all its depth, what it means to be black in this culture, than she would lose all faith in my self-awareness, and my racial awareness. Carla was hopelessly despondent at the end of the session.

It happened that our local paper that week posted an editorial about the racial divide, and about how blacks and whites could only begin to meet each other without rendering blacks invisible if whites could acknowledge the unbridgeable gap of understanding that exists between a life lived with privilege and one lived under the constant shadow of racism. I brought the editorial with me to our next session. To my surprise and delight, Carla had read the same editorial, and was quite receptive to placing our relationship in the context of "meeting-by-seeing-where-we-cannot-meet." She was relieved and heartened also that I had not been insulted, and had not wanted to give up, even when she felt hopeless. Over the course of our work together, she gained enough confidence and trust in me to tell me some excruciatingly painful and shameful stories of her childhood, something she had thought she would never be able to do (Jacobs, 2005).

A moment like the one between Carla and me is pregnant with the awful possibility of shame for the patient; shame over expression of hurt and bitterness, shame over caring about being an outsider, shame over being exposed as an "outsider" at a moment of vulnerability in the presence of an "insider."

Importantly, the moment is also ripe for guilt, shame, and defensiveness for the white insider therapist. I certainly feel guilt over the advantages I have, heightened at

moments when someone I care about who is an outsider is acutely aware of my privilege and his or her disenfranchisement. When that someone is black, I sometimes burn with a sense of shame, not just about present injustice, but about history, as well. Gump argues for taking into account how much the history of slavery infuses the psychology of blacks (Gump, 2010). I suggest that it infuses the psychology of whites as well, largely noted by our aversion to recognizing the on-going after-effects of slavery and our slave-holding history.

### THE SHADOW OF OUR SLAVE HISTORY

One form of resistance to acknowledging the on-going advantage that whiteness delivers, is a refusal to face the legacy of slavery. The legacy of the conditions that permitted slavery, the slave period itself, and the failure as a nation to cope with its dismantling, have infected all of our institutions, and cast a shadow on our experiential worlds. One example of how an idea can become dominant in reinforcing inequality, is the “scientific” racism of social Darwinism, which became popular just after slavery ended, and which affects policy-making even today.

Most white people who are alive today are children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren who arrived in America after slavery had ended. They tend to absolve themselves of responsibility for the problems of institutional, structural, and personal inequalities that abound. They ignore the fact that they have come to be seen as Americans, whereas black fellow citizens remain “other.” What is interesting is that the process of coming to be seen as “Americans”—that is, as white—was often a hard won gain. This was true for my Irish forbearers, and Jews, for instance, who “became white folk” (Brodkin, 1998) in part after they bought homes in the suburbs with help from the veterans’ benefits that they were accorded after World War II (and from which black veterans were excluded).

Another example of the how the effect of the slavery industry insinuates itself into our current consciousness is attitudes toward black sexuality. It was during the slavery times and the reconstruction era that ideas about black sexuality (especially in relation to whiteness) were developed, and they exist still today. During slave times, white slaveholders and family members and employees could rape black slave women with impunity. Self-serving mythology arose among whites that while white wives were chaste, black women were desirous sirens who lured white husbands into sex. During reconstruction, when black men could no longer be controlled and used for economic gain, a mythology about black male rapists was used as a terrifying means of re-establishing white social control (even though rape of whites by blacks was quite rare, compared to the reverse). Blacks could then be imprisoned, tortured, and publicly hanged to protect the “virtue” of white women (Olson, 2001). The link to the “black intruder” in my first vignette is glaringly, painfully obvious.

### GUILT AND SHAME AS A RESOURCE

When not well managed, whites’ complex and difficult amalgam of guilt, shame, anxiety, and awareness/un-awareness about our advantage become an ugly and self-defeating

combination that makes it all but impossible for even the most minor of cross-race interactions to proceed with the natural grace that is common in white-white interactions. A black patient of mine who conducts interviews about cultural mixing in Los Angeles says she has to allow twice as much time when she interviews whites. She says whites are more anxious about a racial faux pas, and also that they are the least articulate about cultural themes. And yet, if I resist my guilt, I resist knowing my privileged position. If I resist my shame, I remove myself from the visceral experience of the assault on dignity that my participation in privilege enacts.

However, I do not believe that our guilt and shame per se are the problem. We need our guilt and our shame. I refer here, not to the toxic shame with which clinicians are so familiar, but to the existential shame that reminds us we are all more alike, vulnerable, and fallible, than different. As I alluded to above, if we cannot acknowledge our guilt, we cannot recognize our privilege. If we disavow shame we lose access to humility, compassion, and moral inspiration. Problems arise when we try to avoid the guilt and shame. I want to have these conversations with my white colleagues. I can well understand that my black colleagues want no part of a discussion of white guilt and shame. I know that we whites have often turned to black conversational partners to expiate guilt and have compassion for our shame. I am interested in neither. I want to lean into the guilt and shame in order to learn and grow.

### CONTEXTUALIZING GUILT AND SHAME BY CONTEXTUALIZING WHITE-CENTEREDNESS

Over the years I have come upon some ideas that render guilt and shame both more manageable and useable. A key component is to contextualize guilt and shame as inevitable consequences of our culturally saturated experiential worlds. There is a paradox here: by rendering our guilt and shame as more impersonal, contextually emergent phenomena, I believe we find it easier to acknowledge our own difficult feelings, own them, and work with them more responsibly. So what follows are ideas I have found useful when engaging whites—myself, clinicians, and others—in discussions about white-centeredness.

One thing I usually do is to make a distinction between prejudice and racism. Jody Armour (1997), a lawyer who defends affirmative action in part by enumerating all the invisible affirmative action already accorded to whites, uses a four-square concept when he teaches. He says everyone can be placed into one of the four quadrants:

High racism	Low racism
High prejudice	High prejudice
Low racism	Low racism
High prejudice	Low prejudice

No one is free of racism, nor prejudice. But racism is about an investment in maintaining a race-based power inequality, and prejudice is about having stereotypic, negative ideas about racial groups. His point is that the people we want to “recruit” are those with low racism and high prejudice, because their prejudice matters to them. I place myself in that category, and when I teach, I give examples of my daily struggles with prejudice.

Next, somewhat akin to those who use critical theory to break into the cocoon of white-centeredness without locating racism as “inside” a “bad” white person, I use a concept I learned from American Studies professor, Ruth Frankenberg (1993): “social location.”

To dislodge ourselves from white-centeredness, we are called to understand and unpack the social location of our theories, our practices, and most importantly—because it subsumes our theory and practice—the social location of our experiential worlds (or subjectivity). This unpacking can awaken us whites to the fact that our own norms are mere perspectives rather than “the way things are.”

Social location is established by such observable traits as our economic class status, racial category, sexual orientation, marked gender, age, disability, and general appearance. We are born into this world of assigned social location based on observable traits. We are surrounded by it, we breathe the consequences of our social location well before we have language or self-awareness. It saturates our experiential worlds.

Importantly, the term refers to power relationships, in that we are all located somewhere along a continuum between an advantaged cultural center, and a marginalized cultural periphery, with centrality providing greater belonging, access to resources, security, and other advantages. In our culture, whiteness is a prominent signal of “privileged,” or central, social location.

People who are identifiably “other” usually *notice* the signals of how they are being placed in the social location hierarchy, because they are not placed in the taken-for-granted center, but are always in-relation to the center (the white location). In general, we inhabit a white-affirmative world. We do not by any means live in a black-affirmative world (nor, as but two other examples, in a gay-affirmative world, or a disabled-affirmative world). The gleam in the eye of the other is largely reserved for straight, white able-bodied folk.

Social location is important because, how we are treated by others, in large and small ways, at any given moment, is based on *observable* location, not on how we may experience ourselves. An example is President Obama’s poignant tale—after the Trayvon Martin case verdict—of hearing car doors clicked into “lock position” as he crossed the street. If our sense of selfhood is emergent from context, then the treatment we receive based on our social location is one factor that shapes our subjectivity. Being treated as if we are invisible, or do not belong, or are grudgingly acknowledged, or are a threat, is corrosive. I believe that developmental trauma is an almost inevitable outcome when our most salient sense of self has no place or is problematized.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Worthy of note is that for another marginalized group, gays and lesbians, sometimes the terrible disjunction is one where heterosexism reigns. That is, conversations initiated by straights often proceed with the

All of us, no matter what our social location, are bedeviled by self-experiences that do not match our treatment. For marginalized people, the treatment often includes disrespect. But look at the common fears of us white people, those of us who tend to be treated well as a matter of course. When push comes to shove, our individual fears boil down to a fear of disenfranchisement, marginalization, and non-belonging. In the middle of the night, alone without fears, we sometimes get a feel for how tenuous is our claim to belonging. Cushman (2000) points out that the centrality is tenuous, and we are taught how to behave, dress, etc., in order to retain the illusion of belonging. As with the so-called, “achievement” of stable gender identification, much potentially enriching subjectivity must be disavowed in order to remain “white.” So racialized thinking impoverishes even those who are most centrally socially located.

Ludwig Wittgenstein refers to this kind of invisible influence as “aspect blindness” (quoted in Orange, 2010, p. 51). That is, the delimiting horizons of our experiential worlds (as Gadamer would describe our perspectives on our world) are ordinarily invisible to us. We can become more “aspect-aware” by noticing those occasional contexts in which we are less centrally socially located (Orange, 2010, p. 109). Such an experience can be used well or poorly; I have spoken with whites who use their marginalization experiences to assert that they, too have suffered discrimination and marginalization, and blacks have no right to complain. On the other hand, we can use whatever experiences of marginalization we *have* had, as a way to begin to understand the life-space of those who bear more continuous and thoroughgoing marginalization.

### THE SHAME OF BEING GUILTILY SITUATED

Social location as an idea helps us to understand that our guilt is not exactly personal. We are inevitably, what I call, “guiltily situated.” In fact, if one takes seriously the Levinasian ethic that we are infinitely responsible toward others, and yet, merely finitely capable, then we are all, as a matter of our human situation, guiltily situated. Again, this helps depersonalize our racism. That is, I am not entirely a personally bad racist, but I do live guiltily situated in a racist culture, and it is inevitable not only that I will live privilege, but that my experiential world will be infused with racism and prejudice, whether I like it or not. Such an understanding not only helps bring my shame into manageable proportion, it helps me to be open to recognize and acknowledge the benefits that accrue to me from structural and institutional racism, so cogently described by Michelle Alexander (2012). Institutional racism and structural racism are easily understood through the lens of social location. Social location theory also helps me to look, find, and acknowledge the structural racism that affords me my privilege.

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unquestioned presumption that the other conversational partners are straight as well. The place of gays and lesbians in an analysis of social location is complicated, in part because at times their homosexuality (a marginalizing factor) is not apparent to straight conversational partners.

**EMOTIONS TELL US WHAT MATTERS**

Something I treasure about my gestalt therapy perspective, is its emphasis on our emotional lives. Gestalt therapy theory has always posited that emotions are contextually emergent and that they orient us to what matters in our lives and in any particular situation. Also, the theory of the change process is a paradoxical one. We believe that change is a natural occurrence when one is able to simply allow and identify with one's moment-by-moment, ongoing experience, especially one's sensory and emotional experience (Beisser, 2004).

Taken together, these two ideas are a user-friendly support for tolerating shame and guilt. A welcoming, dialogic attitude toward one's shame and guilt allows the feelings to complexify into a fuller apprehension of what matters—such as a moment in which, despite an anti-racist intention, you are in a guilty situation.

I frequently encounter moments of what my gestalt colleague Mark McConville (2005), in describing cross-race conversations, describes as “bewilderment,” and I would call “creeping shame.”

It is a dawning sense of my own ignorance, and with that, a realization that I am not as innocent as my good intentions claim. Beyond my intentions, there is an impact of my behavior on others, and an uncomfortable realization that I'm not owning enough responsibility for that impact, and worse yet, that I'm not owning up to my responsibility for this ignorance.

These half-formed awarenesses are fueled by my knowledge that bigotry indeed exists, that it is all around us, that it permeates the air we breathe, even this air, right here, present in this room, as we speak. It is, in other words, the simultaneous prehension of my innocence and my guilt, my non-racist intentionality and my immersion, in an atmosphere saturated with inequity and bias. This is bewilderment (McConville, 2005, p. 174).

Whenever I find myself bewildered by someone's response to an action of mine, it is because I am blind to the ground of their experience. My advice to myself here is simple: Get interested in the impact, particularly when it surprises me (McConville, 2005, p. 180).

To McConville's painful and inspiring description, I would add that the bewilderment is also a sign that we are ignorant of an important dimension of our own ground, our social location.

**SURRENDER TO DIALOGUE**

In both my psychoanalytic and gestalt worlds there is increasing emphasis on a dialogic attitude in our work, one that Martin Buber described (Buber and Friedman, 1965) in great detail, and which has been adapted for therapy (Jacobs, 1998). Frank M.-Staemmler (2005) and Donna Orange (2011) advocate for a Gadamerian dialogic hermeneutic approach. For Gadamer, one engages with the other with the expectation that one will learn something. And importantly, utterances that seem at first to be strange and foreign

must be explored until the statements make sense to the listener, that is, until the listener can see how the statement makes perfect sense from the speaker's perspective.

To me, the intent to listen until something makes sense is invaluable. My first reaction to statements that make no sense to me—or more frequently, to statements that I find disturbing, or that challenge my moral beliefs or beliefs about the nature of reality—is a defensive retreat into a judgmental stance. My judgmental retreat is a signal to myself engage in the process of asking myself what, in my perspective, limits my capacity to find the sense, the truth, in the patient's perspective. This has become a daily practice (Jacobs, 2004).

Regarding our embeddedness in our social location, I listen in large part for what I am not understanding. Then I can ask myself—and sometimes the patient—what is it about my horizontal limits (as Gadamer might say) or my aspect blindness regarding my social location that interferes with my ability to truly hear the patient. This can be understood psychoanalytically as a form of ongoing countertransference analysis.

What is interesting to me, is the paradox that in listening in a way that bursts my concepts and ideas, I find more of the unique humanity of the other, and in finding their uniqueness I am also drawn closer, and find more similarity between us, as Gump (above) has asked for. The very humanity of their uniqueness allows me to broaden my own experiential world, feel more vividly my own and the patient's humanity, and thus we are both enriching each other.

## TWO EXPERIENTIAL EXPERIMENTS

Another gift from my gestalt world is our tendency to engage in experiential experiments to illuminate or amplify experience. In this vein I will end by offering two experiments, one I use frequently, and one that President Obama has suggested.

### EXPERIMENT 1

Make a habit of listening to news reports from (what you imagine to be) the perspective of an "other." In my case, I often listen as someone black, or as someone who is gay or gender-fluid.

For instance, notice this interview that occurred on NPR radio in April of 2014:

Steinbeck's novel follows the Joad family as they flee Dust Bowl Oklahoma for a new life in California. When the book was first published—75 years ago Monday—it was a best-seller. But Susan Shillinglaw, an English professor at San Jose State University and author of the book *On Reading the Grapes of Wrath*, says it also came under fierce attack. Part of the shock, initially, was resistance to believing that there was that kind of poverty in America, "she says." (Neary, 2014)

Now, amend this interview by adding, "by its white readership" after the word, "attack." And insert the word, "white," before the word, "resistance," and also before the word, "poverty." Immediately one can see not only a more nuanced—and accurate

portrayal, but hopefully one can also see how the interview as conducted rendered black Americans invisible, excluded from the conversation.

## EXPERIMENT 2

Take President Obama up on his wonderful reversal experiment. Take some time to contemplate the many, many subtle and strong differences you find in your reactions to the killing of Trayvon Martin. Reverse the events, not just their identifiable colors. Let Zimmerman be wearing a hoodie. Let Martin be a neighborhood watch volunteer with a gun, who defied the police dispatcher and approached Zimmerman.

Imagine both participants are white. Imagine both are black. Imagine other races and colors. Our immediate bodily—sensate and emotional reactions—provide clues as to how race infuses everything.

## FINAL THOUGHTS

Given the impossibly complex dynamics of power which run throughout the ground of any black-white interactions, I sometimes feel pessimistic about whether it is really possible for a white therapist and black patient to establish a safe enough climate for deep, transformative therapeutic work. The very structure of therapy replicates the “power structure” which has disenfranchised them. We meet at a place of my choosing, and the times and fees are more for my convenience than for theirs. The power imbalance lives in the room. And while it may be merely a personal issue for a white person, the racialized grounds we bring to the meeting make it more than that when the patient is not white.

But my work with Carla (described above) leads me to think that one thing which may be affirming for a patient in this situation is the very fact that the intimate contact of therapy changes both participants. When a white therapist, representative of dominance, power and privilege, is willing to be changed by close engagement, the power balance shifts for both of them. I doubt that blacks often have the chance to have a white person listen closely to blacks’ experiences of their lives. When so many of their experiences are implicit criticisms of the therapist’s cultural status, generally blacks are heard only by *insisting* on being heard. In the consulting room the atmosphere can be one where their experiences and perceptions are welcomed, not just tolerated. Could this possibly be a healing dimension in a cross-racial dyad? I feel presumptuous in even suggesting it, but I think it might be so.

On the other hand I wonder if I should notice if a white patient never notices his or her whiteness. I have found that I feel free to contextualize experiences in terms of gender, or White Anglo-Saxon Protestant (WASP) culture. But rarely do I contextualize patients’ themes in terms of whiteness. Helping a patient to understand how WASP values have shaped his or her phenomenology is not the same as helping a patient to understand how racial thinking has shaped his or her phenomenology. Racial thinking is rarely figural when I am working with a white patient.

## THE LAST WORD

I leave you with the last words of an essay called “Crazy Sometimes,” by Leonard Pitts, Jr. (2008). It is a marvelous short essay—available on the web—about how “black people spend entirely too much time talking about race.” Race is such a tangled issue that race and race talk makes him crazy sometimes. He tells a few gripping and discouraging stories about how white people deny their blatant racism, and black people blame every trouble on racism, and then he ends with this:

“Because the truth is this: Black people spend way too much time talking about race. And white people don’t spend nearly enough.”

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### TRANSLATIONS OF ABSTRACT

Este artículo aborda la cuestión de la centralidad del ser blanco y la racialización que son inherentes a la sociedad y la cultura americanas. Mi objetivo es desarrollar un marco conceptual a través del que los terapeutas pertenecientes a la cultura dominante puedan sensibilizarse ante las implicaciones de su dominancia en el proceso terapéutico. Aunque la racialización es mi centro de interés, las ideas que presento se podrían fácilmente aplicar al heterosexismo y a cualquier situación en la que predomine el denominado estándar normativo en relación a la experiencia y a la conducta. Este artículo aborda la importante dificultad que tiene el reconocer la centralidad del ser blanco y desafía la sabiduría popular de que hay que superar la vergüenza y la culpa por ser blanco para progresar hacia la justicia racial. La autora aborda los desequilibrios inherentes al poder en el encuadre terapéutico y ofrece ideas para manejar productivamente la culpa y la vergüenza del ser blanco.

Cet article aborde les enjeux de «racialisation» et de la centration sur la race blanche de la société et de la culture américaine contemporaine. Le but est de développer un cadre conceptuel au moyen duquel les thérapeutes et analystes de la culture dominante pourraient se sensibiliser aux implications de cette dominance dans le processus thérapeutique. Bien que le pivot de mon propos soit la « racialisation », les idées présentées pourraient aussi bien s'appliquer à l'hétérosexisme ou à toute situation dans laquelle prévaut un standard normatif de l'expérience et du comportement. L'article souligne la difficulté notable à reconnaître cette suprématie et met en question la croyance communément admise que la honte et la culpabilité blanches sont des obstacles à l'établissement d'une justice raciale. L'auteure se penche sur le déséquilibre du pouvoir dans la situation thérapeutique et propose des pistes pour transiger avec la culpabilité et la honte «blanche».

L'articolo affronta i temi della centralità dei bianchi e della razza che sono intrinseci alla società e alla cultura contemporanea in America. L'obiettivo è quello di sviluppare una cornice concettuale che permetta a terapeuti e analisti appartenenti alla cultura dominante di acuire la propria percezione delle implicazioni connesse alla loro posizione dominante nell'ambito del processo terapeutico. Se il fulcro del mio lavoro ruota intorno al tema della razza, le idee che presento possono egualmente applicarsi all'eterosessualità e a qualunque situazione in cui prevalga uno standard cosiddetto normativo relativamente a esperienza e a comportamenti. L'articolo affronta la difficoltà maggiore che si frappone al riconoscimento della centralità dei bianchi e pone una sfida alla comune convinzione che la vergogna e la colpa dei bianchi debbano essere

rimossi in quanto costituiscono barriere al progresso della giustizia razziale. L'autore tratta gli squilibri di potere inerenti al setting terapeutico e suggerisce idee per gestire in modo produttivo sia la colpa che la vergogna.

Dieser Artikel befasst sich mit der ‚Zentriertheit auf die Weißen‘ und das Rassendenken die der zeitgenössischen amerikanischen Gesellschaft und Kultur inhärent eigen sind. Das Ziel ist es, einen konzeptionellen Rahmen zu schaffen, der es den Therapeuten und Analytikern, die zu der bevorzugten Kultur gehören erlaubt, sich für die Implikationen ihrer Dominanz im therapeutischen Prozess zu sensibilisieren. Während der Angelpunkt meiner Argumentation das Rassendenken ist, können die Ideen, die ich hier vorstelle, auch auf den Heterosexismus und auf jede Situation angewandt werden, in denen sogenannte normative Standards bezüglich des Erlebens und Handelns vorherrschen. Der Artikel adressiert die große Schwierigkeit, die Weissen-Zentriertheit zu erkennen und fordert die allgemeingültige Weisheit heraus, dass weiße Scham und weiße Schuld Barrieren darstellen, die aus dem Weg geräumt werden müssen, damit der Fortschritt in Richtung rassenbezogener Gerechtigkeit gelingen kann. Die Autorin spricht die inhärenten Kräfteunterschiede im therapeutischen Setting an und stellt Ideen vor, die weiße Schuld und Scham produktiv handhaben lassen.