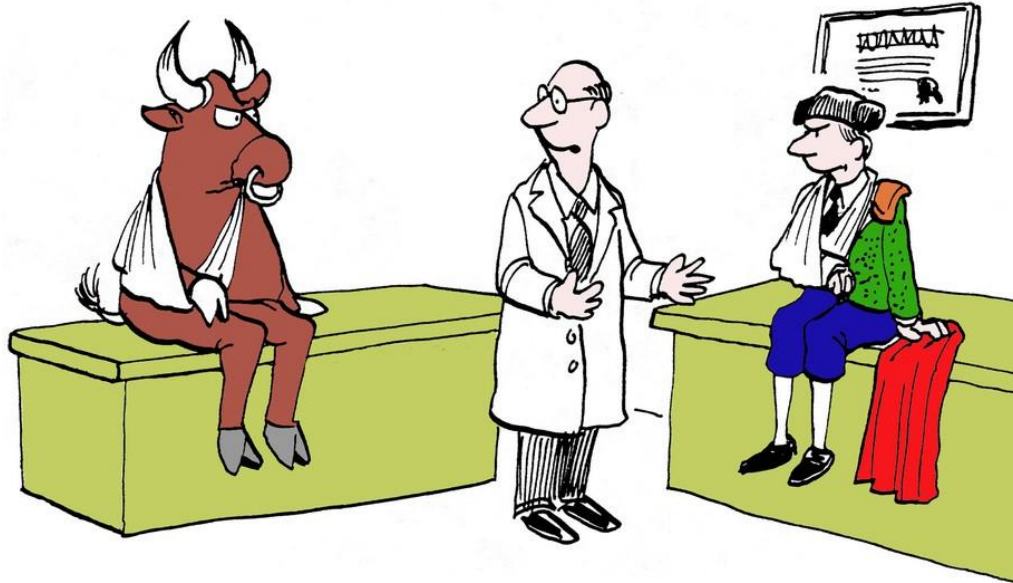


NBC's Billy Bush: Why more White males should acknowledge the arrogance and privilege of White males, By Brian Norgaard



“Workplace conflict?”

As a White male who sees the enormous value that social equality can bring, I find no compelling reason to deny that White male privilege exists. I didn't always think this way. It was only after I made a conscious decision to deepen my knowledge about intercultural issues that I was able to perceive the world through a cleaner, clearer cultural lens.

I can now say unequivocally that past and present sociopolitical forces have acted in my favor, granting me unearned privileges because of my White race and male gender. To reach this conclusion, I became neither more nor less conservative or liberal than before, and neither did I adopt any particular political ideology. I just decided that I didn't want to whittle away what precious little time I have left on this beautiful planet ignorant, angry and miserable, living a life predicated on self-deception and dishonesty.

I decided to open up my mind and heart so that I might be more accepting of critical self-analysis. I also tried listening to people without interjecting as much, so that I might understand their stories instead of constantly defending mine. With those two changes alone, something interesting happened. For the first time, I felt like I could engage the world in three dimensions. My previous life, the life dominated by one-dimensional beliefs, had severely limited my capacity for reason and logical analysis on just about every social and economic issue of importance. More significantly, it had subverted my egalitarian sense of compassion, a foundational virtue that should have always remained firmly rooted irrespective of cultural context. I have come to learn above all that any type of self-perpetuated ignorance is destined for an inglorious end.

Willful ignorance, I suppose, is a fitting segue to this article's topic: the inseparable link between unearned privilege and arrogance and its damaging consequences.

I've been grappling with the unsettling fact that I, a generally good-natured fellow with no particular ax to grind, have for most of my life embraced self-serving discriminatory social standards. There are thousands of instances where I had known darn well that people in my midst

were suffering from inequality, while I was not. Yet I did nothing in response. Instead, I habitually colluded with the mainstream and went quietly about my business.

Until now, that is. I can't willfully ignore the disparities anymore. I realize just how cold hearted I was in the past. My sense of superiority was engrained to the point that I treated White male privilege as the natural order. I had allowed myself to believe that I was more important, more entitled, than anyone not White or male for no other reason than I was White and male.

Part of this self-deception was sub-conscious, a by-product of living in a White-male-centric society. But there was also the conscious deception, which unnerved my soul and manifested as cognitive dissonance. To quell the psychological distress, I decided to deny that inequalities existed at all. This was the one and only argument in support of my awkward position that there weren't any unfair advantages to which I was benefitting. To keep up the ruse all I had to do was limit my information intake exclusively to pro-White-male content, while perpetuating a deny-and-lie smokescreen in support of maintaining the inherently biased status quo.

From what I can see, widespread denial of social inequalities remains the modus operandi of privileged White males. As a card-carrying member of the White Male Club, I'd like to openly explore this subject and publicly share my findings via works such as this article. I am hopeful that more White males will join in with me and the rest of society to participate in this conversation, so that we all might contribute insights and try to change for the better in a unifying manner.

I was particularly moved by the dustup involving Billy Bush and Al Roker at the 2016 Rio Olympics, so will use that incident as a backdrop to spur further discussion about White male privilege and arrogance.

Here's a recap: On location in Rio for the 2016 Olympics, NBC's Good Morning America broadcasters Al Roker, Natalie Morales and Billy Bush had the unfortunate duty to comment on Ryan Lochte's internationally infamous "gas station" incident.

Al Roker characterized Ryan as a person who "lied" to a host of people about his experience at the gas station that night. He bolstered his argument with examples of Ryan's lies: police pulling the swimmers' taxi over, man cocking gun and putting it to Ryan's forehead, Ryan demonstrating heroic bravado. Natalie was in agreement with Al that this was a case where a lie was objectively a lie, and not an "embellishment" of the truth. Billy disagreed. With notable passion he defended Ryan's character, insisting that the swimmer embellished parts of his story, but did not lie.

Al was having none of Billy's transparent Whitewashing of Ryan's account of events, so he pointedly reiterated what were proven, demonstrable examples of Ryan having lied to his mother, the Rio police and the Rio Olympics' worldwide television viewing audience. Billy appeared genuinely appalled by Al's accusations, so he retorted as only an arrogant White male might retort in this situation. He unleashed a guttural comeback brazenly meant to take Al down a notch: "Okay, *calm down*, listen," Billy blurted, unable to keep his immense sense of superiority in check. He was so full of himself, so rude, so arrogant, and, yes, so male and White, that he felt it proper to dress down America's most famous weatherman, who is, of course, Black.

Watching this spectacle unfold, my eyes widened like saucers. Then emotional empathy had me cringing. Clearly, a red line had been crossed.

There are instances when television co-hosts playfully banter, where one might tell another to calm down as a humorous device. This was different. Billy's comment had bite. His message came across cold and mean. It was an emotional outburst without premeditation. It was neither logical, nor relevant to the broadcast. It was visceral, compulsive and ugly. At that moment, Billy Bush tossed every shred of professional credibility he may have rightly earned as a commentator straight out the window.

Under pressure to navigate a topic that suddenly threatened his privileged White male identity, Billy retreated to baser instincts. His true comfort zone, the belief system he was raised by and falls back on to cope with stressful situations, had him devolve into attempting a character assassination on “this Black fellow,” rather than face up to unsettling truths about his own belief system and with just a touch of humility show some respect for his trusted colleague’s views.

The two men’s confrontation was noteworthy because of Billy’s decision to single Al out as the target of his microaggression. Women, unfortunately, are traditional targets for the calm-down insult (see origins of the word “hysteria” for this connection), but male minorities as well have long suffered from this indignity.

For the reader struggling to understand how this all suggests foul play, try asking a woman of any race, or a person of color of any gender, the psychological and emotional effect that follows, after having been told by a White male to calm down as a requirement for engaging in debate or discussion. The answer to your question should grant you omniscient insight into the folly of Billy’s intransigence.

At the very least, it’s important to understand what it sounds like to be told to calm down in these situations. It sounds like this: CALM DOWN! That’s because attitude controls volume, and an attitude marinated in White privilege tends to, despite its civil facade, make a lot of noise in mixed company.

It’s also imperative to read into the meaning behind Billy’s message. Was he issuing a command? Offering advice? Making a suggestion? Billy failed to extrapolate, which makes it difficult to ascertain his exact intent. What’s clear is his remark was neither constructive nor relevant to the moment. There are very few circumstances in which it is appropriate to tell an adult to calm down. Trying to reason with an erratic, dangerous individual or attempting to bring order to an angry mob are examples that come to mind, which makes Billy’s intent suspect. So I will extrapolate on Billy’s remark, and contend that any one of the quotes below would have worked as an equivalent alternative.

“Okay, calm down, listen, you’re getting hysterical. Obviously, you can’t be reasoned with.”

“Okay, calm down, listen, you’re too emotional right now. You can’t judge things squarely.”

“Okay, calm down, listen, you’re being childish about this. Let me handle it.”

“Okay, calm down, listen, you’re out of control. Pull yourself together.”

“Okay, calm down, listen, you’re coming on strong. Your aggression is threatening.”

“Okay, calm down, listen, you ought to be following my lead. Look, I’m calm, lucid, in control.”

There is no benefit to rationalizing Billy’s intent. It would be more constructive to assess the effects of his actions. His comment came out of left field during a live broadcast, the least likely time and place Al would have taken issue with a racially prejudicial insult. This gave Billy free reign to arrogantly spout off with little fear of pushback, an advantage to which White males are accustomed.

A beverage sitting on the table in front of Al got a brisk stir; it was Al’s method of channeling pent-up energy in a safe direction for the sake of a harmonious broadcast, and tangible evidence Billy’s remarks stung. Billy became increasingly agitated as Al and Natalie proceeded to challenge his assumptions. He tried desperately to force the remainder of the discussion into a direction that would portray Ryan in positive terms.

Natalie and Al, who no doubt both have long histories dealing with emotionally fragile White men, could see Billy was about to crack from stress, so they relented and let him off the

hook. It was a classic White-Male-Emotional-Caretaking-101 moment. Natalie diplomatically bowed out of the conversation and Al, choosing not to confound Billy any further with clear-headed commentary, swallowed the young man's criticism and let him have the last word.

Billy had revealed something very interesting as a result of the encounter. He plainly demonstrated how White males sustain White male privilege: They unconditionally support and systematically justify the attitudes, behaviors, institutions and laws that preserve unearned historical White male privilege, while denigrating and silencing those who challenge their presumed social prominence.

The goal of this piece is not to vilify Billy. I want people to understand the impact of his offhanded comment so that such comments are no longer granted immunity in the public sphere. As a civil society, we've reached the precipice of intolerance where it is no longer acceptable to idly watch instances of social inequality get swept under the rug.

Billy was the only person on that panel who lost any sense of control. If anybody needed to calm down, it was he. Lively discussion with clashing opinions is good and healthy and valuable and vital to learning and solving problems. Dialogue dominated by socially coddled individuals with fragile egos, who deal in insults instead of rational ideas, will only serve to repress logic, stifle free thinking, inhibit learning and prolong inequality.

Social progress should at this point allow for a diversity of opinions on any subject without fear of reprisals from insecure White men accustomed to driving personally threatening conversations into the gutter, as Billy Bush had done. Additionally, it is high time White males are called out for their thoughtless behavior, so that they can learn from their misguided and hurtful actions and will be given a chance to willingly take part in humanity's collective healing process toward unity and equality.

That White men historically have not been held to account for prejudicial behavior contributes to their entrenched arrogance. Billy exemplified this problem in part during the Rio broadcast. He completely ignored the gravity of Ryan's actions. Among other things, Ryan had filed a false report with the Rio police, an offense punishable by up to six months in jail in Brazil. Contrast that with Billy's argument that Ryan's only serious offense was that he had lied to his mother. This was Billy's thought process: To mom, Ryan lied; to everybody else, he embellished; and to the Rio police, he gave them a well-deserved middle finger.

Billy didn't care one bit that Ryan had maliciously used the Rio police to cover his indiscretions, or that he had feigned victimization by thoughtlessly playing up the stereotype that the Rio police are shakedown artists. Both Billy and Ryan were treating the Brazilian people and authorities like they were nobodies, as if the sum of their existence was an inconsequential back story to Ryan's mighty struggles. This extraordinary level of arrogance is why Ryan felt perfectly comfortable falsely dragging the Brazilians through the mud as a means to saving his own hide.

Billy also notably pushed hard the absurd notion that Ryan Lochte is just a "kid," which was somehow meant to justify the swimmer's missteps. Let's stop for a moment, take a deep breath, and get real about this perspective. A kid is a child. Billy Bush describes thirty-two-year-old White men as children. Allow me to stray from rational analysis to say that this is a seriously bent, off the charts, crazy way of thinking.

It would follow that he believes adult White males shouldn't be held fully accountable for their actions, up to and including criminal behavior, because they are merely children at heart. Put another way, Billy's adult buddies are basically "good" kids that sometimes have off days, so from a criminal justice standpoint they should be treated as juveniles (White juveniles, mind you).

Adolescent naivety was the very argument Billy propounded to rationalize Ryan's makeshift story about the gas station incident. The way Billy told it, little Ryan Lochte, cold, scared and confused, became lost in a foreign land. He had the terrible misfortune of running into some big, bad, foreign-speaking men who frightened him so. Without rhyme or reason, the men drew their pistols and threatened Ryan menacingly until he gave them all of his money. By the grace of God, he made it out alive. Little Ryan was traumatized by the encounter, so he understandably might have exaggerated or embellished – certainly not lied about – details in retelling his harrowing tale of escape.

I'd bet the farm that if Al Roker was White, Billy would never have entertained the notion of telling him to calm down. I am also curious to know how the media and public would have reacted had Billy attacked not Al, but Natalie. I could be wrong, but I think there would have been a bit more outrage and widespread support for Natalie, given our heightened sensitivity to the historical use of this particular slight against women of all backgrounds.

****RECORD-SCRATCHING SOUND****

Okay, hold on! Just as I was about to wrap up this article, I saw the news flash that Billy Bush was asked to leave NBC, and not because he had denigrated a Black man on air. No, he was caught on tape having a raucous conversation with another privileged White male about denigrating women (White women, no less). Billy had found another venue to demonstrate his unflagging support for White male supremacy; in this instance it was at the expense of his female colleagues' well being. The taped encounter will remain a well-documented example of White males sustaining White male privilege. It also provides food for thought regarding NBC's decision to call out Billy over gender bias before race bias. It's possible both instances factored into the network's final decision to let him go.

As it turns out, one of these two catcalling White males (the less powerful of the two) paid a tangible price for his arrogance. Billy lost his job (with severance, mind you). The other man went on to become the president of the United States, confirming yet again the fickle and fleeting nature of social progress.

I would really like to see more White males get serious about participating in a meaningful dialogue about their own entrenched arrogance and White male privilege as part of a broader discussion about the opportunities inherent in promoting social equality. There is no better time than now to get involved, to step up the work, which will lead toward a future where Al, Natalie, Billy, Ryan and each and every Brazilian will be granted respect on an equal footing.