WHITE FRAGILITY

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I am a white woman. I am standing beside a black woman. We are facing a group of white people who are seated in front of us. We are in their workplace, and have been hired by their employer to lead them in a dialogue about race. The room is filled with tension and charged with hostility. I have just presented a definition of racism that includes the acknowledgment that whites hold social and institutional power over people of color. A white man is pounding his fist on the table. His face is red and he is furious. As he pounds he yells, "White people have been discriminated against for 25 years! A white person can't get a job anymore!" I look around the room and see 40 employed people, all white. There are no people of color in this workplace. Something is happening here, and it isn't based in the racial reality of the workplace. I am feeling unnerved by this man's disconnection with that reality, and his lack of sensitivity to the impact this is having on my co-facilitator, the only person of color in the room. Why is this white man so angry? Why is he being so careless about the impact of his anger? Why are all the other white people either sitting in silent agreement with him or tuning out? We have, after all, only articulated a definition of racism.

When ideologies such as colorblindness, meritocracy, and individualism are challenged, intense emotional reactions are common. There are many

complex reasons why whites are so defensive about the suggestion that we
benefit from and are complicit in a racist system. These reasons include:
- Social taboos against talking openly about race
- The racist = bad/not racist = good binary
- Fear and resentment towards people of color
- Our view of ourselves as objective individuals
- Our guilt and knowledge that there is more going on than we can or
  will admit
- Deep investment in a system that benefits us and that we have been
  conditioned to see as fair

As I have discussed throughout this book, all of these reasons serve to protect
and shelter white people from an honest exploration of racism, while allowing
us to live in a social environment that protects and insulates us. This insu-
lated environment of racial privilege builds our expectations for racial com-
fort while at the same time it lowers our tolerance for racial stress.

For many white people, a single required multicultural education course
taken in college, or required "cultural competency training" in their work-
place, is the only time they may encounter a direct and sustained challenge
to their racial realities. But even in this arena, not all multicultural courses
or training programs talk directly about racism, much less address white
privilege. It is far more the norm for these courses and programs to use
racially coded language such as "urban," "inner city," and "disadvantaged,"
but rarely use "white" or "over-advantaged" or "privileged." This racially
coded language reproduces racist images and perspectives while simulta-
neously reproducing the comfortable illusion that race and its problems
are what "they" have, not us. Reasons that the facilitators of such training
may not directly name the dynamics and beneficiaries of racism range from
the lack of a valid analysis of racism by white facilitators and the personal
and economic survival strategies for facilitators of color to the overall pres-
sure from management to keep the content comfortable and palatable for
whites.

However, if and when an educational program does directly address rac-
ism and the privileging of whites, common white responses include anger,
withdrawal, emotional incapacitation, guilt, argumentation, and cogni-
tive dissonance (all of which reinforce the pressure on facilitators to avoid
directly addressing racism). So-called progressive whites may not respond
with anger but still insulate themselves via claims that they are beyond the

need for engaging with the content because they "already had a class on this" or "already know this." These reactions are often seen in antiracist education endeavors as forms of resistance. These reactions do indeed function as resistance, but it may be useful to also conceptualize them as the result of the reduced psycho-social stamina that racial insulation inculcates. I call this lack of racial stamina *white fragility* (DiAngelo, 2011).

Triggers

White fragility is a state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves. These moves include the outward display of emotions such as anger, fear, and guilt, and behaviors such as argumentation, silence, and leaving the stress-inducing situation. These behaviors, in turn, function to reinstate white racial equilibrium. Racial stress results from an interruption of what is racially familiar. These interruptions can take a variety of forms and come from a range of sources.

The following are examples of the kinds of challenges that trigger racial stress for white people:

- Suggesting that a white person's viewpoint comes from a racialized frame of reference (challenge to objectivity)
- People of color talking directly about their racial perspectives and experiences (challenge to white taboos on talking openly about race)
- People of color choosing not to protect the racial feelings of white people in regard to race (challenge to white racial expectations and need for/entitlement to racial comfort)
- People of color not being willing to tell their stories or answer questions about their racial experiences (challenge to the expectation that people of color will serve us/do our work for us)
- A fellow white not providing agreement with one's racial perspective (challenge to white solidarity)
- Receiving feedback that one's behavior had a racist impact (challenge to white racial innocence)
- Suggesting that group membership is significant (challenge to individualism)
- An acknowledgment that access is unequal between racial groups (challenge to meritocracy)

- Being presented with a person of color in a position of leadership (challenge to white authority)
- Being presented with information about other racial groups through, for example, movies in which people of color drive the action but are not in stereotypical roles, or racial justice education (challenge to white centrality).

In a white dominant environment, each of these challenges becomes exceptional. In turn, we are often at a loss for how to respond in constructive ways, and resort to withdrawal, defensiveness, crying, arguing, minimizing, ignoring, and in other ways push back to regain our racial position and equilibrium. We have not had to build the cognitive or affective skills or develop the stamina that that would allow for constructive engagement across racial divides.

White fragility may be conceptualized as a response or "condition" produced and reproduced by the continuous social and material advantages of whiteness. When disequilibrium occurs—when there is an interruption to that which is familiar and taken for granted—*white fragility* functions to restore equilibrium and return the resources "lost" via the challenge. Resistance towards the trigger, shutting down and/or tuning out, indulgence in emotional incapacitation such as guilt or "hurt feelings," exiting, or a combination of these responses results. These strategies are often not conscious but rather are reflexive (automatic). Given that white people hold the social, economic and cultural capital, our strategies for maintaining our racial position or "balance" trump those of people of color.

What Does White Fragility Look Like?

At the same time that it is ubiquitous, white superiority is also unnamed and denied by most whites. If we become adults who explicitly oppose racism, as do many, we often organize our identity around a denial of the racially based privileges we hold that reinforce racist disadvantage for others. What is particularly problematic about this contradiction is that white moral objection to racism increases white resistance to acknowledging complicity with it. In a white supremacist context, white identity in large part rests upon a foundation of (superficial) racial toleration and acceptance. Whites who position themselves as liberal often opt to protect what we perceive as our moral reputations, rather than to recognize or change our participation in systems of

inequity and domination. In so responding, whites invoke the power to chose when, how, and how much to address or challenge racism. Thus pointing out white advantage will often trigger patterns of confusion, defensiveness and righteous indignation. This enables defenders to protect their moral character against what they perceive as accusation and attack while deflecting any recognition of culpability or need of accountability. Focusing on restoring their moral standing through these tactics, whites are able to avoid the challenge (Marty, 1999).

Those who lead whites in discussions of race may find the discourse of self-defense familiar. In this discourse, whites position themselves as victimized, slammed, blamed, attacked, and being used as a "punching bag" (DiAngelo & Sensoy, 2014). Whites who describe the interactions in this way are responding to the articulation of counternarratives; no physical violence has ever occurred in any inter-racial discussion or training that I am aware of. These self-defense claims work on multiple levels to: position the speakers as morally superior while obscuring the true power of their social stations; blame others with less social power for their discomfort; falsely position that discomfort as dangerous; and, reinscribe racist imagery. By positioning themselves as the victim of antiracist efforts, they cannot be the beneficiaries of whiteness. Claiming that it is they who have been unfairly treated via a challenge to their position or via an expectation that they listen to the perspectives and experiences of people of color, they are able to demand that more social resources (such as time and attention) be channeled in their direction to help them cope with this mistreatment.

A cogent example of *White fragility* occurred recently during a workplace antiracism training I co-facilitated with an inter-racial team. One of the white participants left the session and went back to her desk, upset at receiving (what appeared to the training team as) sensitive and diplomatic feedback on how some of her statements had impacted several of the people of color in the room. At break, several other white participants approached us (the trainers) and reported that they had talked to the woman at her desk, and that she was very upset that her statements had been challenged. (Of course this was not how it was framed. It was framed as her being "falsely accused" of having a racist impact). Her friends wanted to alert us to the fact that she "might be having a heart-attack." Upon questioning from us, they clarified that they meant this *literally*. These co-workers were sincere in their fear that the young woman might actually physically die as a result of the feedback. Of course when news of the woman's potentially fatal condition reached the rest

of the participants, all attention was immediately focused back onto her and away from engagement with the impact she had had on the people of color. As Vodde (2001) states, "If privilege is defined as a legitimization of one's entitlement to resources, it can also be defined as permission to escape or avoid any challenges to this entitlement" (p. 3).

This lack of stamina results in the maintenance of white power because the ability to determine which narratives are authorized and which are suppressed is the foundation of cultural domination. Further, if whites cannot engage with an exploration of alternate racial perspectives, they can only reinscribe white perspectives as universal.

White Fragility and the Rules of Engagement

You can't wake a person who is pretending to be asleep

—Navaho Proverb

As a professor, facilitator, and consultant I am in a position to give white people feedback on how their unintentional racism is manifesting. This has provided me the opportunity to observe countless enactments of *white fragility*. One of the most common is outrage: *How dare you suggest that I could have said or done something racist!* Outrage is often followed by righteous indignation about the manner in which the feedback was given. I have discovered (as I am sure have countless people of color) that there is apparently an unspoken set of rules—rooted in white fragility—for how to give white people feedback on our inevitable and often unaware racism. In this section I will overview these "rules."

After years of working with my fellow whites, I have found that the only way to give feedback correctly is *not to give it at all*. Thus, the first rule is cardinal:

1. **Do not give me feedback on my racism under any circumstances.**

   If you break the cardinal rule:

   1. Proper tone is crucial—feedback must be given calmly. If there is any emotion in the feedback, the feedback is invalid and does not have to be considered.

2. There must be trust between us. You must trust that I am in no way racist before you can give me feedback on my racism.

3. Our relationship must be issue-free—if there are issues between us you cannot give me feedback on racism.

4. Feedback must be given immediately, otherwise it will be discounted because it was not given sooner.

5. You must give feedback privately, regardless of whether the incident occurred in front of other people. To give feedback in front of anyone else—even those involved in the situation—is to commit a serious social transgression. The feedback is thus invalid.

6. You must be as indirect as possible. To be direct is to be insensitive and will invalidate the feedback and require repair.

7. As a white person I must feel completely safe during any discussion of race. Giving me any feedback on my racism will cause me to feel unsafe, so you will need to rebuild my trust by never giving me feedback again. Point of clarification: when I say "safe" what I really mean is "comfortable."

8. Giving me feedback on my racial privilege invalidates the form of oppression that *I* experience (i.e., classism, sexism, heterosexism). We will then need to focus on how *you* oppressed *me*.

9. You must focus on my intentions, which cancel out the impact of my behavior.

10. To suggest my behavior had a racist impact is to have misunderstood me. You will need to allow me to explain until you can acknowledge that it was *your* misunderstanding.

The contradictions in these rules are irrelevant; their function is to obscure racism, protect white dominance, and regain white equilibrium, and they do so very effectively. Yet from an understanding of racism as a system of unequal institutional power, we need to ask ourselves where these rules come from and whom they serve.

Many of us actively working to interrupt racism continually hear complaints about the "gotcha" culture of white antiracism. There is a stereotype that we are looking for every incident we can find so we can spring out, point our fingers, and shout, "You're a racist!" While certainly there are white people who arrogantly set themselves apart from other whites by acting in this way, in my experience of over 20 years, this is not the norm. It is far more common for

sincere white people to agonize over when and how to give feedback to a fellow
white person, given the ubiquity of white fragility. *White fragility* works to pun-
ish the person giving feedback and essentially bully them back into silence. It
also maintains white solidarity—the tacit agreement that we will protect white
privilege and not hold each other accountable for our racism. When the person
giving the feedback is a person of color, the charge is "playing the race card"
and the consequences of *white fragility* are much more penalizing.

Racism is the norm rather than an aberration. Feedback is key to our
ability to recognize and repair our inevitable and often unaware collusion. In
recognition of this, I follow these *guidelines*:

1. How, where, and when you give me feedback is irrelevant—it is the
   feedback I want and need. Understanding that it is hard to give, I will
   take it any way I can get it. From my position of social, cultural and
   institutional white power and privilege, I am perfectly safe and I can
   handle it. If I cannot handle it, *it's on me* to build my racial stamina.
2. Thank you.

The above guidelines rest on the understanding that there is no face to save
and the jig is up; I know that I have blind spots and unconscious investments
in white superiority. My investments are reinforced every day in mainstream
society. I did not set this system up but it does unfairly benefit me and I am
responsible for interrupting it. I need to work hard to recognize it myself,
but I can't do it alone. This understanding leads me to gratitude when others
help me.

In my workshops I often ask people of color, "How often have you given
white people feedback on our unaware yet inevitable racism and did that go
well for you?" Eye-rolling, head-shaking, and outright laughter follow, along
with the general consensus of *never*. I then ask, "What would it be like if you
could simply give us feedback, have us graciously receive it, reflect, and work
to change the behavior?" Recently a man of color sighed and said, "It would
be *revolutionary*." I ask my fellow whites to consider the profundity of that
response. *Revolutionary* that we would receive, reflect, and work to change
the behavior. On the one hand it points to how difficult and fragile we
are. But on the other hand, how simple taking responsibility for our racism
can be.

If we can't listen to, or comprehend, the perspectives of people of color,
we cannot bridge cross-racial divides.

Discussion Questions

1. What does it mean to say that white people live in a social environ-ment that insulates them from racial stress? How have you seen white fragility at play in discussions of race and racism? If you are white, how have you seen it in yourself?
2. Discuss each item on the list of triggers. Explain in your own words what each item is challenging.
3. How have you seen the "rules" at play when whites are receiving feed-back on unaware but inevitable racism? What beliefs about racism is each rule rooted in? What do white people have to "give up" in order to challenge the factors that lead to white fragility? Discuss the state-ment the author quotes from a man of color who says that for whites to graciously receive feedback on their unaware but inevitable racism, reflect on the feedback, and seek to change the behavior would be *revolutionary*.