

Chapters 7, 8, and 9:
Racial Triggers for White People
The Result: White Fragility
White Fragility in Action

Summary:

Elements from the preceding chapters (the ideology of individualism and objectivity, the bootstrap myth, the white racial viewpoint, simplistic definitions creating a good/bad binary, socialization through verbal and non-verbal messaging in multiple settings, white solidarity, white silence, color-blind and color-celebrate excuses, and a history of anti-blackness) all work in conjunction to create insulation that protects white people from racial stress. That is, whiteness begets whiteness, and we white folks are firmly within a white bubble ignorant to all of the inequity facing people and communities of color.

Further, DiAngelo explains that a lot of cultural awareness programs within work settings fail to address any real problems because the programs repeat racially coded language (urban, disadvantaged, etc) and make race the problem of people and communities of color instead addressing institutional racism and white supremacy culture. DiAngelo suggests these programs don't live up to their full potential because white facilitators may not have the deeper analysis needed to get into the weeds, facilitators of color don't go into the specifics in order to survive the session's predominantly white audience, and management could be pressuring to keep the content at a comfortable level in order to keep the peace (101).

DiAngelo introduces Pierre Bourdieu's concept of Habitus to understand why white people become aggressively defensive (ie, white fragility) when racial stress (eg, someone telling a white person their words or actions are racist) is introduced. In a general sense, habitus describes "a person's familiar ways of perceiving, interpreting, and responding to the social cues" around them (101). In any given setting, people will have a level of capital based on what position they have in that setting. DiAngelo's example is of a janitor and a receptionist in an office building: if the janitor goes upstairs into the corporate office space the receptionist will have more capital, just like if the receptionist goes downstairs to the maintenance areas the janitor will have more capital. Habitus is each person's internalized awareness of his or her status and capital in any situation and the rules they must follow (whether explicitly taught or learned through social patterns for unwritten rules) in these situations. Habitus provides comfort because everyone follows a predetermined script, but when a disruption is introduced in habitus people will unconsciously work to reestablish order. In this example, habitus would be interrupted if either the janitor or receptionist comes into the other's workspace and tells them how to do their job.

So when a white person says or does something that either supports white supremacy or perpetuates racism—and that action isn't perceived to be racist or supremacist because that action is a norm within white culture—and that white person is called out on their action, habitus (being able to act in a racially insensitive manner) has been disrupted by racial stress (being called out). Or maybe this white person didn't say or do anything racially offensive, but their ideology became challenged when another person began describing white advantages. The white person will now work reestablish habitus unconsciously through a variety of defensive means, aka white fragility.

In a basic sense: white fragility = white habitus interrupted by racial stress and the need to reestablish white habitus. White habitus being the comfortable white bubble we've been insulated within from the reality of our society.

DiAngelo describes white fragility manifesting itself as “patterns of confusion, defensiveness, and righteous indignation” in order to “protect their moral character against a perceived attack while rejecting any culpability” (109). By doing such, white people avoid the opportunity to learn and grow. DiAngelo details how white people invoke self-defense discourses that characterize themselves as the victims while blaming others—typically people of color who have less social capital—as bringing a dangerous, harmful level of discomfort. Then by claiming they're the victim of an attack, white people use the instance to illustrate how they cannot be beneficiaries of white advantage and privilege (remember, being called out is not actually being attacked). By waiving the victim flag, white people demand more social resources to themselves in order to reestablish habitus. DiAngelo points out how this script of white fragility perpetuates the classic racist narrative of people of color being dangerous and violent toward white people just for “merely talking about race with people of color” (110).

In this sense white fragility is more than just defensiveness. DiAngelo states it's a bullying tactic that makes the situation so miserable for others that the issue will never be raised again, and with no challenge the current hierarchy of power and control remains the same (112). It is a “sociology of dominance: an outcome of white people's socialization into white supremacy and a means to protect, maintain, and reproduce white supremacy” (113).

Common emotional reactions of white fragility include feeling singled out, attacked, silenced, shamed, guilty, accused, insulted, judged, angry, scared, and outraged (119).

Behaviors that result from these feelings include crying, physically leaving the space, emotional withdrawal, arguing, denying, focusing on intentions, seeking absolution, avoiding (119).

White people will also make some of the following claims to justify their feelings and behaviors (119-120):

--You're playing the race card

--I already know all this

--You are judging me

--You are generalizing

--I disagree

--The real oppression is class, gender, etc.

--I just said one little innocent thing

--Some people find offense where there is none

--You're being racist against me

--You're making me feel guilty

--That was not my intention

--I have suffered too

These claims white people make are based on some of these assumptions (121):

--Racism is simply personal prejudice

--I am free of racism

--Racism can only be intentional

--White people who experience another form of oppression cannot experience white privilege

--I'm a good person so I can't be racist

--I have friends of color, so I can't be racist

--I have an objective point of view

And finally, the consequences of white fragility (122):

--Maintain white solidarity

--Close off self-reflection

--Trivialize the reality of racism

--Hijacks/silences the discussion

--Allows white people to be victims

--Protects a limited [white] worldview

--Takes race off the table

--Protects white privilege

--Focuses on the messenger and not the message

--Rallies more social resources to white people

Analysis & Commentary:

Finally, the climax of the book. These chapters giving a brief examination of whiteness have served to make the point that we white people are raised in a culture where we are protected from the truth of our society. The truth being that our society was founded and built around the idea of white supremacy, and that the institutions of our society only work to benefit white people while keeping people of color largely oppressed and kept from opportunities that would bring real equality. The kind of devious truth that must be hidden at all costs because if many

were to see this truth the moral consciousness of the many would be compelled to destroy it for good.

The core of white supremacy's defense mechanism is the idea of individuality. White supremacy can only survive if the majority of white people prop it up and support it together as a group. So if we say white supremacy is only physical action by individual people or splinter groups, the majority of us will pat ourselves on the back thinking we're not involved in keeping white supremacy alive. But that view hides the fact that we participate in white supremacy unknowingly. Whenever it's pointed out that we do things that support white supremacy we return to that individualism, think we're that crazy white supremacist, and throw up a defensive front to save our character, and once our character is reaffirmed we go about our life. Yet in the process of defending ourselves, we support white supremacy because we're not looking at that truth. All that someone is trying to do is point out we as a group do things unwittingly that supports white supremacy, but because of individualism we cannot look at ourselves as a group that does this together.

This is ugliest when we take that concept of habitus into account. When looking at white fragility and habitus, what essentially is happening during moments of racial stress is a white person saying to a person of color "how dare you, a person of lesser social capital than me, point out that I'm doing something racially problematic! Especially when I'm clearly not a racist or white supremacist!" For some reason, we as white people believe we're above reproach—that we can do or be no wrong—as if we're the second coming of Jesus Christ. Yet when we take into account all the ways we uphold white supremacy without realizing it or not, we are in no position to have the moral high ground. If you want to be on any kind of high ground, you have to swallow your pride, accept the truth, take responsibility for your actions, and learn and grow from the experience. Because we've been raised in a white supremacist culture, we will never be free of white supremacy and racism no matter how much we work at dismantling it (maybe, if we work really hard at it, our grandchildren or great grandchildren will be free from it). We need to accept our learning will never be over. White fragility and the associated behaviors and defenses only serve as a way for us to double down on white supremacy and end our learning and growing.

DiAngelo has given us a list of signs we're enacting white fragility. Our job is to learn these signs in order to recognize when we and others are being fragile. If we are committed to learning, growing, and becoming better in order to create a more just and equal society we must squash white fragility in ourselves. It is the first and strongest barrier for us to overcome because it is the strongest defense white supremacy has created.