

## **So, what is white fragility?**

In a nutshell, it's the defensive reactions so many white people have when our racial worldviews, positions, or advantages are questioned or challenged. For a lot of white people, just suggesting that being white has meaning will trigger a deep, defensive response. And that defensiveness serves to maintain both our comfort and our positions in a racially inequitable society from which we benefit.

**You say in the book that white fragility occurs because white people have not built up our tolerance for racial discomfort. But you also say that white fragility is not weakness. It's not that you can't handle this discussion; you're asserting power within it. But you're asserting that power through a display of fragility.**

Think of it as a weaponized weakness. Weaponized tears, weaponized hurt feelings. The weakness is just in how little it takes to trigger it. But the impact is not weak at all. It's a powerful means of white racial control.

**I was fascinated by your list of how white men react to being challenged: They will blow up, or they will accuse the other person of playing the “race card” or “distracting from the real issues.” White women cry.**

It's not all we do, but it is one of the techniques we use to repel challenges. I want to be really clear that it does not have to be conscious or intentional to function in that way. I'm probably not thinking to myself, “all right, I'll cry now, and then that person will back off, and everyone else will rush to comfort me.” I'm not thinking that. But actually, I *should* be thinking that, in the sense that I should be aware that that is how my tears are going to impact other people in the room. Middle-class white women in general are taught to avoid conflict, so we can be passive-aggressive in a range of ways. We could withdraw, we could start to avoid the other person, we could talk behind their back, we could galvanize

resources offline to punish them. There's a lot of ways that white women undermine women of color, and black women in particular.

That makes sense. There are studies about <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/women-use-indirect-aggression-to-succeed-study-says/> women and indirect aggression. Men are encouraged to assert power through violence. With women — you use the example of Emmett Till [a 14-year-old boy who was lynched because a white woman falsely accused him of harassing her]. Women get other people to be violent for us. But I imagine that the white woman reading this knows about Emmett Till. She knows that 53% of white women voted for Trump. There are women who openly support white patriarchy. But you write that “white progressives cause the most daily damage to people of color,” because we think we’re above all that.

There's a couple of reasons why I think white progressives can be the most difficult. First of all, we are the most likely to be around people of color. And to the degree we think we already know all this, we have nothing more to learn, we're woke —we're going to put all our energy into making sure that YOU think that we're woke, and YOU think that we're not racist. So racism comes up and what do I say? Oh, well, “I tutored on the reservation, I've been to Costa Rica, I marched in the sixties, I was in Teach for America, I went to a really diverse high school.” We give this evidence that in our minds establishes that we can't be racist, and it's actually absurd evidence if we take the time to think about it, which we rarely do, right?

You talk about how white people have this image of what “a racist” looks like. So if I were a Baby Boomer, I could say “well, I'm not bombing black churches, that's what a racist does, so I'm not a racist.” Now, I can say, “well, I'm not carrying a tiki torch in Charlottesville.” But if the bar white people think we have to clear is “I'm not a Nazi,” that's a very low bar.

Exactly. It's perfectly low. It serves perfectly to be so low as to exempt us. That criteria is the root of virtually all white defensiveness on this topic. You align me in my mind with that image, and I am going to perceive that as a question of my very moral character. Because, of course, those are bad people, and I'm a good person, and therefore I cannot be racist. And if you put me over there with those bad people, I'm going to have to defend my moral character. And I will. We've all seen it.

**We don't want to be identified in our minds with what we think of as bad, mean people. But I will be honest, reading your book, I found some of my own patterns in there. You write that “the way we are taught to define racism makes it virtually impossible for white people to understand it.”**

It's that idea of an individual who consciously doesn't like people based on race and intentionally is mean to them. It's just a perfect way to prevent us from understanding the system of racism that shapes our lives. And yet white people understand a lot earlier than we often admit to. The research shows that by age 3 to 4, all children who grow up in the United States understand that it's better to be white. There's no way we could miss that message, it's relentless. In our movies, our TV, our media, our games, our teachers, our heroes, our heroines, our novels, our role models, our neighborhoods, our schools. Labels like “good” to describe white space and “sketchy” to describe non-white space. We know very early on, but we learn to suppress it because it gives the adults in our lives anxiety.

**And that leads to the aversive racism you describe, where white people are very anxious not to be racist, but that doesn't lead to learning, it leads to finding a way to do and say racist things while convincing yourself they're okay.**

Right. In aversive racism, the concept of racism is abhorrent to that person. But they're filled with racist conditioning and bias, as we all are. Because that conflicts with their identity as good people, they suppress it and are even more in denial about it. They are even more likely to erupt in defensiveness if it gets called out. It's the classic racism of a white progressive, aversive racism.

**We should maybe talk about the power dynamics of this exchange. We are two white women talking about racism. Do you see any particular value in that?**

I think it is a critical part of the process. Because of the nature of implicit bias, white people are generally a little more open to hearing about it from other white people. You don't automatically assume I'm biased, oversensitive, or playing the race card. And there's another important reason to do this, which is that we don't want our learning to be at the expense of people of color. Now, there are many people of color who are willing to help us learn, who write and speak and present, and who expect to be paid for that, and should be. But the average person of color should not be put on the spot to bear that burden.

**As a white person who considers myself progressive, I've found that the temptation for me is to be Susie Superhero and zoom around explaining racism to everybody. Is there a way for white women who care to keep themselves in check?**

You have to be in accountable relationships across race. Accountable means that they're authentic, they're sustained, and that you do talk about racism, and you are able to be given feedback. I could not articulate what I can articulate today — and my learning will never be finished — but I could not begin to articulate it if I had not had years of being mentored by people of color. In a way you have to center whiteness in order to de-center whiteness. But you have to center whiteness differently than it remains centered now, wherein it is centered through invisibility. You decenter it by shining a light on it and exposing it. It's

ongoing and it's lifelong and we're not going to get there with easy answers. And yet there's nothing that I've found more transformative and liberating than this work.