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# Why White People Freak Out When They're Called Out About Race

By [Sam Adler-Bell](#) <sup>[1]</sup> / [AlterNet](#) <sup>[2]</sup>

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Stop me if you've heard this one.

Last year, a white male Princeton undergraduate was asked by a classmate to “check his privilege.” Offended by this suggestion, he shot off a 1,300-word essay to the *Tory*, a right-wing campus newspaper. In it, he wrote about his grandfather who fled the Nazis to Siberia, his grandmother who survived a concentration camp in Germany, about the humble wicker basket business they started in America. He railed against his classmates for “diminishing everything [he'd] accomplished, all the hard work [he'd] done.”

His missive was reprinted by *Time*. He was interviewed by the *New York Times* and appeared on Fox News. He became a darling of white conservatives across the country.

What he did not do, at any point, was consider whether being white and male might have given him—if not his ancestors—some advantage in achieving incredible success in America. He did not, in other words, check his privilege.

To Robin DiAngelo, professor of multicultural education at Westfield State University and author of *What Does it Mean to Be White? Developing White Racial Literacy*, [Tal Fortgang's essay](#) <sup>[3]</sup>—indignant, defensive, beside-the-point, somehow both self-pitying and self-aggrandizing—followed a familiar script. As an anti-racist educator for more than two decades, DiAngelo has heard versions of it recited hundreds of times by white men and women in her workshops.

She's heard it so many times, in fact, that she came up with a term for it: “white fragility,” which she defined in a [2011 journal article](#) <sup>[4]</sup> as “a state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves. These moves include outward display of emotions such as anger, fear and guilt, and behaviors such as argumentation, silence and leaving the stress-inducing situation.”

When the Black Lives Matter movement marched in the streets, holding up traffic, disrupting commerce, and refusing to allow “normal life” to resume—insofar as normalcy means a system that permits police and vigilantes to murder black men and women with impunity—white people found themselves in tense conversations online, with friends and in the media about privilege, white supremacy and racism. You could say white fragility was at an all-time high.

I spoke with DiAngelo about how to deal with all the fragile white people, and why it's worth doing so.

### **Sam Adler-Bell: How did you come to write about "white fragility"?**

Robin DiAngelo: To be honest, I wanted to take it on because it's a frustrating dynamic that I encounter a lot. I don't have a lot of patience for it. And I wanted to put a mirror to it.

I do atypical work for a white person, which is that I lead primarily white audiences in discussions on race every day, in workshops all over the country. That has allowed me to observe very predictable patterns. And one of those patterns is this inability to tolerate any kind of challenge to our racial reality. We shut down or lash out or in whatever way possible block any reflection from taking place.

Of course, it functions as means of resistance, but I think it's also useful to think about it as fragility, as inability to handle the stress of conversations about race and racism

Sometimes it's strategic, a very intentional push back and rebuttal. But a lot of the time, the person simply cannot function. They regress into an emotional state that prevents anybody from moving forward.

### **SAB: Carla Murphy recently referenced "white fragility" in an article for Colorlines <sup>[5]</sup>, and I've seen it referenced on Twitter and Facebook a lot lately. It seems like it's having a moment. Why do you think that is?**

RD: I think we get tired of certain terms. What I do used to be called "diversity training," then "cultural competency" and now, "anti-racism." These terms are really useful for periods of time, but then they get coopted, and people build all this baggage around them, and you have to come up with new terms or else people won't engage.

And I think "white privilege" has reached that point. It rocked my world when I first really got it, when I came across Peggy McIntosh <sup>[6]</sup>. It's a really powerful start for people. But unfortunately it's been played so much now that it turns people off.

### **SAB: What causes white fragility to set in?**

RD: For white people, their identities rest on the idea of racism as about good or bad people, about moral or immoral singular acts, and if we're good, moral people we can't be racist – we don't engage in those acts. This is one of the most effective adaptations of racism over time—that we can think of racism as only something that individuals either are or are not “doing.”

In large part, white fragility—the defensiveness, the fear of conflict—is rooted in this good/bad binary. If you call someone out, they think to themselves, “What you just said was that I am a bad person, and that is intolerable to me.” It's a deep challenge to the core of our identity as good, moral people.

The good/bad binary is also what leads to the very unhelpful phenomenon of un-friending on Facebook.

### **SAB: Right, because the instinct is to un-friend, to dissociate from those bad white people, so that I'm not implicated in their badness.**

RD: When I'm doing a workshop with white people, I'll often say, “If we don't work with each other, if we give in to that pull to separate, who have we left to deal with the white person that we've given upon and won't address?”

**SAB: A person of color.**

RD: Exactly. And white fragility also comes from a deep sense of entitlement. Think about it like this: from the time I opened my eyes, I have been told that as a white person, I am superior to people of color. There's never been a space in which I have not been receiving that message. From what hospital I was allowed to be born in, to how my mother was treated by the staff, to who owned the hospital, to who cleaned the rooms and took out the garbage. We are born into a racial hierarchy, and every interaction with media and culture confirms it—our sense that, at a fundamental level, we are superior.

And, the thing is, it feels good. Even though it contradicts our most basic principles and values. So we know it, but we can never admit it. It creates this kind of dangerous internal stew that gets enacted externally in our interactions with people of color, and is crazy-making for people of color. We have set the world up to preserve that internal sense of superiority and also resist challenges to it. All while denying that anything is going on and insisting that race is meaningless to us.

**SAB: Something that amazes me is the sophistication of some white people's defensive maneuvers. I have a black friend who was accused of "online harassment" by a white friend after he called her out in a harsh way. What do you see going on there?**

RD: First of all, whites often confuse comfort with safety. We say we don't feel safe, when what we mean is that we don't feel *comfortable*. Secondly, no white person looks at a person of color through objective eyes. There's been a lot of research in this area. Cross-racially, we do not see with objective eyes. Now you add that he's a black man. It's not a fluke that she picked the word "harassed." In doing that, she's reinforcing a really classic, racist paradigm: White women and black men. White women's frailty and black men's aggressiveness and danger.

But even if she is feeling that, which she very well may be, we should be suspicious of our feelings in these interactions. There's no such thing as pure feeling. You have a feeling because you've filtered the experience through a particular lens. The feeling is the outcome. It probably feels natural, but of course it's shaped by what you believe.

**SAB: There's also the issue of "tone-policing" here, right?**

RD: Yes. One of the things I try to work with white people on is letting go of our criteria about how people of color give us feedback. We have to build our stamina to just be humble and bear witness to the pain we've caused.

In my workshops, one of the things I like to ask white people is, "What are the rules for how people of color should give us feedback about our racism? What are the rules, where did you get them, and whom do they serve?" Usually those questions alone make the point.

It's like if you're standing on my head and I say, "Get off my head," and you respond, "Well, you need to tell me nicely." I'd be like, "No. Fuck you. Get off my fucking head."

In the course of my work, I've had many people of color give me feedback in ways that might be perceived as intense or emotional or angry. And on one level, it's personal—I did do that thing that triggered the response, but at the same time it isn't *only* personal. I represent a lifetime of people that have hurt them in the same way that I just did.

And, honestly, the fact that they are willing to show me demonstrates, on some level, that they trust me.

**SAB: What do you mean?**

RD: If people of color went around showing the pain they feel in every moment that they feel it, they could be killed. It is dangerous. They cannot always share their outrage about the injustice of racism. White people can't tolerate it. And we punish it severely—from job loss, to violence, to murder.

For them to take that risk and show us, that is a moment of trust. I say, bring it on, thank you.

When I'm doing a workshop, I'll often ask the people of color in the room, somewhat facetiously, "How often have you given white people feedback about our inevitable and often unconscious racist patterns and had that go well for you?" And they laugh.

Because it just doesn't go well. And so one time I asked, "What would your daily life be like if you could just simply give us feedback, have us receive it graciously, reflect on it and work to change the behavior? What would your life be like?"

And this one man of color looked at me and said, "It would be *revolutionary*."

**SAB: I notice as we've been talking that you almost always use the word "we" when describing white people's tendencies. Can you tell me why you do that?**

RD: Well, for one, I'm white (and you're white). And even as committed as I am, I'm not outside of anything that I'm talking about here. If I went around saying white people this and white people that, it would be a distancing move. I don't want to reinforce the idea that there are some whites who are done, and others that still need work. There's no being finished.

Plus, in my work, I'm usually addressing white audiences, and the "we" diminishes defensiveness somewhat. It makes them more comfortable. They see that I'm not just pointing fingers outward.

**SAB: Do you ever worry about re-centering whiteness?**

RD: Well, yes. I continually struggle with that reality. By standing up there as an authority on whiteness, I'm necessarily reinforcing my authority as a white person. It goes with the territory. For example, you're interviewing *me* now, on whiteness, and people of color have been saying these things for a very long time.

On the one hand, I know that in many ways, white people can hear me in a way that they can't hear people of color. They listen. So by god, I'm going to use my voice to challenge racism. The only alternative I can see is to not speak up and challenge racism. And that is not acceptable to me.

It's sort of a master's tools dilemma.

**SAB: Yes, and racism is something that everyone thinks they're an authority on.**

RD: That drives me crazy. I'll run into someone I haven't seen in 20 years in the grocery store, and they'll say, "Hi! What've you been doing?"

And I say, "I got my Ph.D."

And they say, "Oh wow, what in?"

"Race relations and white racial identity."

And they'll go "Oh, well you know. People just need to—"

As if they're going to give me the one-sentence answer to arguably the most challenging social dynamic of our time. Like, hey, why did I knock myself out for 20 years studying, researching, and challenging this within myself and others? I should have just come to you! And the answer is so simple! I've never heard that one before!

Imagine if I was an astronomer. Everybody has a basic understanding of the sky, but they would not debate an astronomer on astronomy. The arrogance of white people faced with questions of race is unbelievable.

Sam Adler-Bell is a journalist and policy associate at the Century Foundation, a NY-based think tank. Follow him on Twitter: @SamAdlerBell.

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