

Chapter 7

SOCIAL STATUS AND WHITE FRAGILITY: GENDER AND SOCIOECONOMIC VARIATIONS

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ABSTRACT

Purpose – Although recent work has made significant contributions to our theoretical understanding of white fragility, more empirical work is needed to establish the social causes of this particular form of racial stress. Our chapter builds on previous research by assessing gender and socioeconomic variations in white fragility.

Methodology/Approach – Data come from the 2018 Survey of White Fragility, a convenience sample of 279 non-Hispanic white undergraduate students aged 18 years and over attending two large public universities in the southeastern and southwestern United States.

Findings – Results indicate that women tend to exhibit higher levels of remorse fragility (feeling sad, guilty, and angry). There were no gender differences in depletion fragility (feeling drained/exhausted, unsafe, attacked, and confused). Parental education was unrelated to levels of white fragility. Overall parental socioeconomic status was initially associated with lower levels of remorse and depletion fragility, but these associations were confounded by a general measure of nonspecific psychological distress.

Race, Ethnicity, Gender and Other Social Characteristics as Factors in Health and Health Care Disparities

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Research Limitations/Implications – *Research limitations include a non-probability sampling design and low external validity.*

Originality/Value of Paper – *This study contributes to previous work by establishing gender variations in white fragility. We also reveal that socio-economic variations in white fragility may be confounded by the broader social distribution of psychological distress.*

Keywords: White fragility; racial stress; racism; race; gender; socioeconomic status; mental health; psychological distress

INTRODUCTION

The concept of white fragility has garnered considerable attention in popular and scholarly discussions of race and racism in America for nearly a decade. In 2011, Robin DiAngelo introduced the concept in an article published in the *International Journal of Critical Pedagogy*. In 2018, DiAngelo published the first book on the subject entitled *White Fragility: Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk about Racism* through Beacon Press. Since publication, the book has received the attention of top news media outlets (e.g., CNN, *The Washington Post*, *The Atlantic*, and *USA Today*), appeared on the *New York Times* Bestseller List for 39 weeks, and earned enthusiastic endorsements from race scholars and public intellectuals like Michael Eric Dyson. According to *Google Scholar*, the book has already been cited over 800 times!

Conceptually, white fragility refers to “a state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves” (DiAngelo 2011:54). While defensive moves include the “display of emotions such as anger, fear, and guilt, and behaviors such as argumentation, silence, and leaving the stress-inducing situation” (DiAngelo 2011:54), racial stress refers to any challenge to whiteness, including critical discussions of white privilege, racism, race-based discrimination, and racial prejudice. DiAngelo (2011:55) argues that whites are “fragile” because they live in an “insulated environment of racial privilege” that “builds whites expectations for racial comfort while at the same time lowering the ability to tolerate racial stress.” In short, White fragility refers to a state in which a range of emotional and behavioral strategies are employed to cope with racial stress. These coping strategies are considered pathological in the sense that they effectively inhibit or shutdown any challenge to or critical discussions of whiteness and the racist structures of society. DiAngelo (2018:113) explains that white fragility “is much more than defensiveness or whining” and “may be conceptualized as the sociology of dominance: an outcome of white people’s socialization into white supremacy and a means to protect, maintain, and reproduce white supremacy.

Although DiAngelo's work has made significant contributions to our theoretical understanding of white fragility, more empirical work is needed to establish the social causes and social consequences of this particular form of racial stress. Perhaps the most fundamental sociological question pertains to social status variations in white fragility. Intersectional approaches to race suggest that there can be remarkable heterogeneity in the experiences of whites (Collins & Bilge, 2016). In this chapter, we build on previous research by formally assessing gender and socioeconomic variations in white fragility. In the pages that follow, we discuss the theoretical foundations for these status variations and some alternative explanatory models. After describing our data, measures, and statistical procedures, we summarize the results of our analyses. We end with a discussion of our key findings and research limitations. We also describe several avenues for future research.

BACKGROUND

Gender Variations

In her book, DiAngelo (2018) states that white men and women are both racially fragile, but they express their fragility in different ways. Through years of personal observations as a diversity trainer, DiAngelo (2018) observed white women displaying their fragility by crying when their comments or actions were condemned as racist. In these same settings, white men demonstrated their fragility through hostile body language, controlling conversations, and challenging claims of racial inequality. In studies of related concepts, white women tend to report higher levels of white empathy and guilt while white men tend to exhibit higher levels of cultural insensitivity and white fear (Poteat & Spanierman 2008; Sifford, Ng, & Wang 2009; Spanierman, Beard, & Todd, 2012; Spanierman, Poteat, Beer, & Armstrong 2006; Todd & Abrams, 2011). The patterns for women are in line with the notion of white women's expressions of femininity and professed shared experiences of discrimination (Brown, 2018; Collins, 1990). The tendencies for men also support previous research showing gender differences in racial attitudes, such that white men's experiences are centered on fears associated with the loss of power and status (Fine & Weis, 1998; Scott & Robinson, 2001).

Socioeconomic Variations

Although we could find no direct empirical evidence of socioeconomic variations in white fragility, white people of lower socioeconomic status should theoretically exhibit the highest levels of white fragility. DiAngelo (2018, p. 79) writes that The animosity felt by the white working class toward racial and ethnic minorities dates back centuries in America (Du Bois, 1935; Golash-Boza, 2015; Metzl, 2019; Quadagno, 1994). Today, lower socioeconomic status whites continue to exhibit more conservative racial attitudes and behaviors

(Branton & Jones, 2005; Oliver & Mendelberg, 2000; Strother, Piston, & Ogorzalek, 2017). Due to their precarious social positions, lower socioeconomic status whites may be less likely to recognize the privileges afforded by their race. For example, Hochschild's (2016) ethnographic study of a working class community in Louisiana revealed a narrative of racial minorities as "line cutters" on the way to the American Dream, supported by affirmative action policies and the visibility of racial minorities in powerful positions. This perception, paired with their own economic struggles (e.g., trouble paying bills), contributed to feelings of anger and morning (Hochschild, 2016), which are also elements of white fragility.

...although globalization and the erosion of workers' rights has had a profound impact on the white working class, white fragility enabled the white elite to direct the white working class's resentment toward people of color.

Alternative Explanations

So far we have argued that white fragility should vary for women and men and across levels of socioeconomic status. Although our models assume that status variations in white fragility are attributable to gender and socioeconomic status per se, we must at least consider the possibility that these processes may be confounded by social desirability and mental health. For example, a study of the "Psychosocial Costs of Racism to Whites Scale" includes a measure of social desirability to assess the "tendency to make socially desirable self-representations" in the context of controversial race-related topics (Spanierman & Heppner, 2004, p. 253). The same study also considered the role of "participants' general emotional state" given the conceptual overlap between specific indicators of white sadness and white fear with general symptoms of depression and anxiety (Spanierman & Heppner, 2004, p. 258). If women and people of higher socioeconomic status tend to exhibit higher levels of social desirability (Fraboni & Cooper, 1989; Nolen-Hoeksema & Jackson, 2001), and women and people of lower socioeconomic status tend to report higher levels of emotional distress (Hill & Needham, 2013; Mirowsky & Ross, 2003), these factors must be controlled to better isolate any status variations in white fragility that are attributable to gender or socioeconomic status per se.

Hypotheses

In accordance with previous research, we developed four hypotheses to guide subsequent analyses:

H1. Women will tend to exhibit higher levels of white fragility related to feelings of guilt and sadness than men.

H2. Men will tend to exhibit higher levels of white fragility related to feeling attacked and unsafe than women.

H3. People of lower socioeconomic status backgrounds will tend to exhibit higher levels of white fragility than people of higher socioeconomic status.

H4. Any observed status variations in white fragility will be at least partially confounded by social desirability and mental health.

Data

The data for this investigation come from the 2018 Survey of White Fragility (Hill & Mannheimer, 2018) (SWF). The SWF is based on a longitudinal convenience sample of 423 undergraduate students aged 18 years and over taking courses at two large public universities in the southeastern and southwestern United States. All surveys were administered in class on a voluntary basis and lasted approximately 25 minutes. The data were collected from the same students in September/October (Wave 1) and again in November/December (Wave 2). Wave 2 data collection included 94% of the original Wave 1 sample ($n = 399$). The primary purpose of the SWF is to explore the operationalization and social patterning of white fragility. Given our focus on white fragility, the current study is limited to non-Hispanic white students who completed surveys at Wave 1 ($n = 279$) and Wave 2 ($n = 239$).

MEASURES

White Fragility

Following previous work (Hill, Mannheimer, & Roos, 2019), we measure two domains of white fragility. We asked how often respondents feel confused, attacked, guilty, angry, unsafe, sad, and drained/exhausted when they are included in discussions of racism or race-based discrimination in the United States (Stem 1). We also asked how often respondents feel these ways when they are included in discussions of “white privilege” in the United States (Stem 2). We measure *remorse fragility* as a mean index of five items ($\alpha = 0.84$), including feeling guilty (Stem 1 and 2), sad (Stem 1 and 2), and angry (Stem 1 only). We measure *depletion fragility* as a mean index of six items ($\alpha = 0.80$), including feeling unsafe (Stem 1 and 2), drained/exhausted (Stem 1 and 2), attacked (Stem 1 only), and confused (Stem 1 only).

Gender and Socioeconomic Status

We measure *gender* with a single item. Respondents were asked to describe their gender. Original response categories included (1) man, (2) woman, and (3) other – please specify. Since none of our respondents identified as other, we coded gender (1) for men and (0) for women. We measured *parental education* as an index of two items ($\alpha = 0.61$). Students were asked to indicate the highest degree of schooling that their father and mother completed, respectively. These items were coded (0) for none, (1) for high school diploma or

GED, (2) for associate degree, (3) for bachelor's degree, and (4) graduate degree. We also measured *parental socioeconomic status* as a mean index of two items ($\alpha = 0.76$). Specifically, we used the MacArthur Scale of Subjective Social Status to measure the respondent's assessment of the social status of their parents (Adler et al., 2008). Respondents were given the following prompt: Response categories referred to a ladder with 10 rungs (1–10). All respondents were asked to rate their mother and father separately. The ratings were indexed for each respondent. If the respondents rated only one parent, that rating was used for their index score.

Think of this ladder as representing where people stand in the United States. At the top of the ladder are the people who are the best off – those who have the most money, the most education, and the most respected jobs. At the bottom are the people who are the worst off – those who have the least money, least education, and the least respected jobs or no job. The higher up you are on this ladder, the closer you are to the people at the very top. The lower you are, the closer you are to the people at the very bottom. Where would you place your parent or parents on this ladder?

Confounding Variables

Given the sensitive nature of race-related topics, we included a five-item index ($\alpha = 0.40$) tapping social desirability (Crowne & Marlowe, 1960). Respondents were asked to rate the following statements from their perspective as true or false: “If I could get into a movie without paying and be sure I was not seen, I would probably do it.” “I sometimes try to get even rather than forgive and forget.” “I am always courteous, even to people who are disagreeable.” “When I don't know something, I don't at all mind admitting it.” “I have almost never felt the urge to tell someone off.” All social desirability items were coded so that higher values indicate greater social desirability. While the “false” response is socially desirable for the first two items, the “true” response is socially desirable for the last three items. Due to the conceptual overlap between specific indicators of white fragility with general symptoms of psychological distress, we also measure *psychological distress* as the mean response to six items developed by Kessler et al. (2002) to assess symptoms of nonspecific psychological distress ($\alpha = 0.86$). Respondents were asked to indicate how often in the past 30 days they felt: (1) nervous, (2) restless or fidgety, (3) so sad nothing could cheer them up, (4) hopeless, (5) everything was an effort, and (6) worthless. Response categories ranged from (1) never to (5) very often.

Control Variables

Subsequent multivariate analyses control for two additional background variables. We measure *age* with a single item. Respondents were simply asked to indicate their birth year. *Research site* was coded (1) for southeast and (0) for southwest.

STATISTICAL PROCEDURES

Table 1 provides descriptive statistics for all study variables, including variable ranges, sample means, standard deviations, and alpha reliability estimates. In our focal analyses, we employ ordinary least squares (OLS) regression to model our continuous white fragility outcomes as a function of gender (Table 2), parental education (Table 3), and parental socioeconomic status (Table 4). Each regression analysis proceeds in two steps. Model 1 regresses the outcome of interest on social status, respondent's age, and research site. Model 2 adds social desirability and psychological distress to Model 1. These adjustments are intended to capture confounding due to social status variations in mental health and the way people talk about sensitive topics. For example, men and women may differentially report symptoms of white fragility and distress. We also used multiple imputations by chained equations to replace missing values on all independent and dependent variables (White, Royston, & Wood, 2011).

RESULTS

Descriptive Statistics

According to Table 1, respondents reported low to moderate levels of white fragility. Approximately 27% of respondents identified as male. The average respondent reported that their parents had at least a bachelor's degree and moderate levels of overall socioeconomic status. The average age of the sample is 19 years. Most (80%) respondents were surveyed in the southeast. Finally, respondents also reported low to moderate levels of distress and desirability.

Gender Variations

In Table 2, men tend to exhibit *lower* levels of remorse fragility than women. Although this association is attenuated by approximately 10% ([0.552 – 0.499]/

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics and Reliability Estimates.

	Range	Mean	SD	Cronbach's α
Remorse fragility	1–5	2.89	1.00	0.84
Depletion fragility	1–5	2.08	0.73	0.80
Male respondent	0–1	0.27		0.70
Parental education	0–4	2.87	0.92	0.61
Parental socioeconomic status	1–10	6.76	1.49	0.76
Respondent's age	18–22	19.23	1.24	
Southeast site	0–1	0.79		
Social desirability	0–5	2.47	1.25	0.40
Psychological distress	1–5	2.77	0.83	0.86

Note: $n = 279$.

Source: Survey of White Fragility (2018) (Hill & Mannheimer, 2018).

Table 2. Ordinary Least Squares Regression of White Fragility Domains on Gender.

	Remorse Fragility		Depletion Fragility	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Male respondent	-0.552 (0.133)***	-0.499 (0.129)***	-0.092 (0.101)	-0.056 (0.099)
Respondent's age	-0.064 (0.057)	-0.057 (0.056)	0.046 (0.043)	0.049 (0.042)
Southeast site	-0.340 (0.171)*	-0.285 (0.168)+	0.102 (0.131)	0.157 (0.129)
Social desirability		-0.029 (0.046)		0.016 (0.035)
Psychological distress		0.312 (0.069)***		0.211 (0.053)***

Notes: $n = 279$. Shown are unstandardized coefficients, standard errors (in parentheses), and two-tailed significance tests (*** $p < 0.001$, * $p < 0.05$, + $p < 0.10$). Reference groups include females and Southwest.

Source: Survey of White Fragility (2018) (Hill & Mannheimer, 2018).

Table 3. Ordinary Least Squares Regression of White Fragility Domains on Parental Education.

	Remorse Fragility		Depletion Fragility	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Parental education	0.052 (0.065)	0.088 (0.063)	0.002 (0.049)	0.025 (0.048)
Male respondent	-0.554 (0.133)***	-0.500 (0.129)***	-0.092 (0.102)	-0.056 (0.099)
Respondent's age	-0.058 (0.058)	-0.047 (0.056)	0.046 (0.044)	0.052 (0.042)
Southeast site	-0.347 (0.172)*	-0.295 (0.168)+	0.102 (0.131)	0.154 (0.130)
Social desirability		-0.031 (0.046)		0.016 (0.035)
Psychological distress		0.324 (0.070)***		0.214 (0.053)***

Notes: $n = 279$. Shown are unstandardized coefficients, standard errors (in parentheses), and two-tailed significance tests (*** $p < 0.001$, * $p < 0.05$, + $p < 0.10$). Reference groups include females and Southwest.

Source: Survey of White Fragility (2018) (Hill & Mannheimer, 2018).

Table 4. Ordinary Least Squares Regression of White Fragility Domains on Parental Socioeconomic Status.

	Remorse Fragility		Depletion Fragility	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Parental socioeconomic status	-0.080 (0.065)*	-0.046 (0.039)	-0.067 (0.030)*	-0.047 (0.030)
Male respondent	-0.554 (0.132)***	-0.503 (0.129)***	-0.094 (0.101)	-0.060 (0.099)
Respondent's age	-0.077 (0.058)	-0.065 (0.056)	0.035 (0.043)	0.041 (0.042)
Southeast site	-0.357 (0.171)*	-0.297 (0.168)+	0.087 (0.130)	0.145 (0.129)
Social desirability		-0.025 (0.046)		0.020 (0.035)
Psychological distress		0.296 (0.071)***		0.193 (0.054)***

Notes: $n = 279$. Shown are unstandardized coefficients, standard errors (in parentheses), and two-tailed significance tests (*** $p < 0.001$, * $p < 0.05$, + $p < 0.10$). Reference groups include females and Southwest.

Source: Survey of White Fragility (2018) (Hill & Mannheimer, 2018).

0.552) when psychological distress is controlled in Model 2, this general pattern is consistent across models. Levels of depletion fragility are *comparable* for women and men across models. Psychological distress is also consistently associated with *higher* levels of remorse fragility and depletion fragility.

Socioeconomic Variations

According to [Table 3](#), parental education is *unrelated* to remorse fragility and depletion fragility across models. Although parental socioeconomic status is initially associated with *lower* levels of remorse fragility and depletion fragility in Models 1 and 3, these associations are attenuated by 43% and 30% in Models 2 and 4, respectively, when social desirability and psychological distress are controlled. In these models, parental socioeconomic status is *unrelated* to remorse fragility and depletion fragility. Because social desirability is *unrelated* to white fragility, the confounding of the association between parental socioeconomic status and white fragility is primarily due to status variations in psychological distress.

Supplemental Analyses

In supplemental analyses (not shown), we tested several interactions to assess potential subgroup variations. The association between gender and white fragility did not vary according to any measure of socioeconomic status or research site. The association between socioeconomic status and white fragility also did not vary according to research site. We also examined the association between overall parental socioeconomic status and symptoms of psychological distress. The results of this analysis suggest that respondents from higher status backgrounds tend to exhibit *fewer* symptoms of psychological distress, even with adjustments for gender, age, research site, and social desirability. This confirms that the confounding observed for parental socioeconomic status is primarily due to status variations in psychological distress.

DISCUSSION

Although recent work has made significant contributions to our theoretical understanding of white fragility, more empirical work is needed to establish the social causes of this particular form of racial stress. We aimed to extend previous research by assessing gender and socioeconomic variations in white fragility.

Our first hypothesis stated that women would tend to exhibit *higher* levels of white fragility related to feelings of guilt and sadness than men. This hypothesis received consistent support. Our analyses showed that women tend to exhibit higher levels of remorse fragility (feeling sad, guilty, and angry in the context of discussions related to racism, race-based discrimination, and white privilege) than men. This pattern is generally consistent with previous studies of the Psychosocial Costs of Racism to Whites Scale ([Spanierman, Beard, & Todd, 2012](#); [Spanierman et al., 2006](#)); however, our general measure of remorse fragility is conceptually

distinct from more specific concepts like the “antiracist racial affect type” and “cluster of informed empathy and guilt,” which do not include the elements of sadness or anger.

In her book, DiAngelo (2018) includes a chapter entitled, “White Women’s Tears.” In this chapter she argues that emotions are political, and white women crying in response to discussions about racial issues demonstrates their racial insulation and privilege (p. 136). Women scholars of color have also used the act of crying to describe how white women occupy a unique position of simultaneous racial privilege and gender disadvantage that results in what Brown (2018) calls “white women’s particular brand of white fragility.” Ajayi (2018) explains:

White women tears are especially potent and extra salty because they are attached to the symbol of femininity. These tears are pouring out from the eyes of the one chosen to be the prototype of womanhood; the woman who has been painted as helpless against the whims of the world... But the truth is, white women have been bullies themselves because they’ve been the shadows behind the white men who get all the blame. They have been doing much of the subjugation in white supremacy without any of the accountability, because: innocent white woman is a caricature many have chosen to embrace, even subconsciously. Why? Because it shields them from consequences. We talk about toxic masculinity but there is toxicity in wielding femininity in this way.

Hamad (2018) adds that white women’s tears are weaponized in that they are a form of emotional violence which inflicts trauma on women of color, ultimately reinforcing the system of white supremacy rather than opposing it. As a reaction to discussions about race, white women crying makes the issue about herself rather than those experiencing racial injustice and derails meaningful conversation and change, which again reifies the power of white women and their emotions (DiAngelo, 2018; Stewart-Bouley, 2018).

The focus on white women’s rather than white men’s tears is rooted in dominant ideology linking femininity with emotion and white women’s ability to feign alliance with women of color through a perceived shared experience of sexism (Patton, 2014). Along with traditional femininity, which encourages white women and restricts white men from expressing hurt or vulnerability, contrived solidarity enables white women to proclaim that they too experience discrimination and are not the enemy, whereas white men do not have this option (Patton, 2014).

Our second hypothesis stated that men would tend to exhibit *higher* levels of white fragility related to feeling attacked and unsafe than women. We found no evidence to support this expectation. In fact, men and women reported comparable levels of depletion fragility (feeling drained/exhausted, unsafe, attacked, and confused in the context of discussions related to racism, race-based discrimination, and white privilege). We were unable to find any previous studies of gender variations in related concepts.

Our third hypothesis stated that people of lower socioeconomic status backgrounds would tend to exhibit *higher* levels of white fragility than people of higher socioeconomic status. This hypothesis also received no empirical support. Parental education was unrelated to levels of white fragility. Overall parental socioeconomic status was initially associated with lower levels of remorse and

depletion fragility, but these associations were explained away by a general measure of nonspecific psychological distress. These findings are inconsistent with patterns of racial resentment and conservative racial attitudes among people lower socioeconomic status (DiAngelo, 2018; Oliver & Mendelberg, 2000). The key could be our measurement of parental socioeconomic status. The resentment and conservative attitudes could develop later in the life course when people have established their own socioeconomic status. For example, Poteat and Spanierman's (2008) analysis of data collected from a sample of employed adults shows that education can be positively associated with white empathy and white guilt and negatively associated with white fear.

Our final hypothesis stated that any observed status variations white fragility would be at least partially confounded by social desirability and mental health. This hypothesis received consistent support. Gender variations in remorse fragility were attenuated by adjustments for social desirability and psychological distress but were ultimately robust. This suggests that the association between gender and remorse fragility is not due to gender differences in the willingness to discuss potentially controversial race-related feelings or the fact that women tend to exhibit higher levels of psychological distress. Socioeconomic variations in white fragility were confounded to a greater degree by the broader social distribution of psychological distress. Given the nature of fragility symptoms like sadness and guilt, it is important for future research to distinguish between specific race-related emotions and general symptoms of psychological distress. At the same time, it is important to acknowledge the comorbidity of white fragility and symptoms of depression and anxiety. This reminds us that white fragility is also an indicator of human suffering.

Our analyses are limited in two key respects. Our data were collected from a nonprobability sample of college students from two universities. Our sampling design dictates that our population is undefined. Our statistical tests should be interpreted in this context. Our external validity is also low. There is no direct indication that our results would be observed beyond our very specialized sample of undergraduate students. We are nevertheless encouraged by the theoretical and empirical consistency of our results with previous research.

CONCLUSION

Despite these limitations, we are the first to quantitatively assess status variations in white fragility according to gender and socioeconomic status. Our results suggest that gender may be more important in the development of white fragility than socioeconomic status. Although this chapter contributes to previous work concerning the social foundations of racial stress, the veracity of our results is contingent upon replication using other data sources and samples of older adults living in different regions of the country. Additional research is also needed to explore variations in white fragility according to indicators of socioeconomic status across the life course and direct assessments of masculinity and femininity. We should also extend beyond status-based contingencies to include variations in

institutional commitments like religious and political attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors. Research along these lines would advance our collective understanding of the social distribution of white fragility.

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