

In the Wake of George Floyd: A Reflection on Racialized Labor and White Fragility

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Abstract: *Racialized labor* is a term I coined to describe the work Black college students must do to navigate predominantly White environments—but racialized labor isn't just limited to college students. In this reflection, I apply the phenomenon of racialized labor to my own life, and I connect the concept of racialized labor to White fragility to generate mindfulness for White colleagues and allies. I hope to help everyone better recognize and name the often-invisible work of racialized labor in the lives of people of color and help to ease that burden.

Keywords: people of color, racial battle fatigue, racism, therapy

I recently coined the term *racialized labor* to capture the work of navigating predominantly White environments for Black college students (Grier-Reed et al., 2020). This phenomenon emerged as I listened to students over the last 15 years in the African American Student Network (AFAM), a group I co-founded. Yet, racialized labor isn't just limited to college students. In this reflection, I extend the phenomenon of racialized labor to my own life, particularly in this moment, in the wake of the killing of George Floyd at the hands of police, and I draw connections to Robin DiAngelo's (2018) concept of "White fragility."

I, like many Black people at this moment, have been inundated with notes and messages and validations and check-ins from White students (current and former), White colleagues, White friends, neighbors, and even the occasional stranger. These notes and messages, these attempts to reach out, are intended to validate me and let me know I'm cared about, at least on the surface. Underneath the surface, I sense a hunger and need for those initiating the contact to instead be validated and comforted *by me*.

It is reminiscent of my experiences as a young Black educator teaching multicultural counseling courses. As many of my White students would begin to discover the existence of racism in society and experience an inner conflict around the negotiation of Whiteness, their tears and guilt would begin to flow. Consequently, I would feel them reaching with an almost desperate need to be comforted by me. I often felt their unconscious desire to be absolved from racism, for me to tell them it was okay; that is, they could still experience themselves as good despite the racial dynamics of White supremacy and the evils therein. It seemed as if absolution from a Black person provided the ultimate dispensation.

It is the often-unstated norm of race relations that race work and dealing with racism is primarily the burden of people of color which also includes comforting our White friends, colleagues, and even allies when the work is uncomfortable. For Black people and people of color, this is part and parcel of the work of racialized labor. I have engaged this work as best I can, minimally responding with a heart or a thumbs up to White students reaching out to let me know I'm okay in their eyes with hopes that I will also respond to let them know that they are okay and good

White allies. I say thank you to the White allies emailing me with requests asking how they can help in the struggle. I even validate the White woman stranger on the street telling me that she loves me and that she's working on her White self and trying to take a new action every day. I feel their hunger to be acknowledged and thanked for their efforts.

In all of this, I find myself struggling against reprising the role of the Black mammy in 2020. I struggle against feelings of resentment when people who I thought knew better come to me asking me for "the solution" to institutional racism, as if there was a single solution. I experience the unwanted sensations of one-way relationships, where others take and have little or nothing to give me in return. Then I remember the words of my loving Black woman friend and community organizer who once described Black women as the mules of the earth, and I endure.

Robin DiAngelo (2018) describes the discomfort that White people experience in the face of racialized realities as *White fragility*. This includes the guilt, the anger, the tears, the defensiveness, and even the need to have people of color cosign on and validate the fragile White ego, which deeply needs to be acknowledged and to elicit gratefulness from people of color. The complement of White fragility for people of color is racialized labor; that is, explaining, educating, comforting, and validating even as people of color themselves bear the brunt of racism as targets of violence and discrimination.

Speaking freely about racial discrimination in the presence of White people without feeling the need to attend to White fragility is difficult. After a recent talk I delivered on racialized labor, I had a Black colleague and therapist approach me to tell me how much this concept resonated in his work. He told me that, when working with Black clients discussing White folks and racism in the presence of a White therapist, his Black clients consistently made a point of reassuring the White therapist. He noted with some wonder how seemingly automatic and spontaneous his clients would be as they consistently turned to the White therapist to say something like, "I mean, I am not talking about you, you are okay," excusing the White therapist from any burden of racism that the client had to bear. I share this example because it is endemic of the deep socialization of racialized labor in the lives of Black people, where this labor often happens in invisible, unconscious, and spontaneous ways in response to White fragility (both anticipated and enacted). For example, even in a therapeutic encounter, Black clients may automatically "take care" to attend to the ego of the White therapist in the room—essentially reversing the role of client and therapist by becoming the caretaker in those moments!

I connect the concept of racialized labor to White fragility to underscore the consequences of White fragility for people of color and to generate mindfulness. In Grier-Reed et al. (2020), one of the results of racialized labor seemed to be *racial battle fatigue*, which includes frustration, anger, and exhaustion. For White people, this reflection is not intended to ban the act of talking to Black friends and colleagues about race or racism, but to generate mindfulness. In sum, I encourage White people to reflect on whether their need to reach out to their Black friends and colleagues is coming from a place of White fragility and whether they are potentially adding to the racialized labor of the people of color in their lives. Lastly, I hope that everyone can better recognize and name the often invisible work of racialized labor in the lives of Black people and people of color and help to ease that burden.

References

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