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White Tears: Emotion Regulation and White Fragility

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1. Introduction

Robin DiAngelo defines “white fragility” as “a state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves” (2011, 54). She notes that many white people insulate themselves against racial stress—e.g., by living, learning, and working in predominantly white spaces, or by refusing to engage with the realities of race. As a result, many white people have little practice thinking or talking about race in any kind of sustained, honest, or meaningful way. This leads them to become stressed, or even distressed, and to react in ways that are counter-productive to racial justice when thinking or talking about race.¹

Picture Steve, a white college student from an upper-middle class family who is presented with the concept of white privilege in a philosophy class. Steve hasn’t spent much time thinking about the advantages he has received on the basis of being white, and he quickly discovers that he doesn’t like thinking about them. He feels that he is being called a racist, despite the fact that he was raised to respect people of all races. Steve throws up his hand, and before being called on, launches into a monologue about how *he* has overcome myriad disadvantages through hard work and perseverance, whereas *those people* have been given special privileges but haven’t made the most of them. After making his points, Steven leans back in his chair, folds his arms, lifts his chin, and mutters, “QED.” Steve’s response

¹ bell hooks identified this phenomenon long before DiAngelo: “In 1981, I enrolled in a graduate class on feminist theory where we were given a course reading list that had writings by white women and men, one black man, but no material by or about black, Native American Indian, Hispanic, or Asian women. When I criticized this oversight, white women directed an anger and hostility at me that was so intense I found it difficult to attend the class. When I suggested that the purpose of this collective anger was to create an atmosphere in which it would be psychologically unbearable for me to speak in class discussions or even attend class, I was told that they were not angry. I was the one who was angry” (hooks 1984, 12-13).

exemplifies the concept of white fragility. Since he is not used to thinking about his whiteness, the invitation to do so induces racial stress, which Steve interprets as a threat to his self-image as morally pure. He then responds defensively so as to restore and fortify this self-image.

In response to racial stress, “white fragility triggers a range of defensive moves” (DiAngelo 2011, 54). DiAngelo clarifies that the response can take many forms, “including the outward displays of emotions such as anger, fear, and guilt, and behaviors such as argumentation, silence, and leaving the stress-inducing situation” (2011, 54). Steve’s primary response to racial stress is argumentation. He rationalizes his defensiveness as a justified response to an unjustified attack on his moral character. This discursive strategy fits in line with a concept introduced by Alice McIntyre (1997) and refined by Alison Bailey (2014), namely “white talk.” Bailey defines white talk as:

A privilege-exercising discourse that usually springs from the lips without notice. White people habitually fall into white talk as a strategy for steering clear of entertaining the possibility that many of our actions, utterances, and thoughts contribute to the perpetuation of racial injustices and that we bear some responsibility for these...white talk is designed, indeed scripted, for the purposes of evading, rejecting, and remaining ignorant about the injustices that flow from whiteness and its attendant privileges. (2015, 38 & 41)

In other words, white talk is a discursive strategy that white people (and others) deploy either intentionally or unintentionally to avoid dealing with the realities of racism and white supremacy. Although white talk may succeed in making the white person feel better, it often does so at the cost of making people of color feel worse, and often prevents constructive conversations about race from occurring. White talk is connected to white fragility in that white talk is a common discursive strategy that white people draw upon when coping with racial stress.

Our aim in this paper is to explore some of the distinctively *emotional* manifestations of white fragility, using Bailey’s (2014) and McIntyre’s (1997) exploration of one of its *discursive* manifestations as a guide. White fragility can trigger strong feelings of anger, frustration, disgust, guilt, aggression, loathing, or hostility, which can transform the way in which all the parties involved view and respond to the situation. As we’ll see in the next section, strong emotional responses to racial stress often have the effect of hijacking an interaction, making the white person’s feelings of anger or distress, rather than people of color’s feelings, the focal point of the interaction. We can picture Steve responding to the concept of white privilege

not only with discursive *argumentation*, but also with behavioral expressions of *aggressiveness* that signal his unwillingness to confront his own privileges, thereby making it riskier for others to engage him on the topic, or with behavioral expressions of *distress* that signal his inability to handle difficult racial truths, thereby discouraging others from pushing him to confront these truths.

To help focus our investigation, we use the term “emotional white fragility” to denote the experience and expression of emotion triggered by racial stress.

Emotional White Fragility: The experience and/or expression of emotion that results from white fragility and that makes it more difficult for white people to have constructive, meaningful thoughts and conversations about race.

In this paper we are specifically interested in cases where relationships (romantic, platonic, and familial) have been morally damaged by racist behavior and emotional white fragility gets in the way of morally repairing those relationships. Emotional white fragility can occur in many other circumstances as well, but we will not be exploring those circumstances here.

Our central claims are (1) that emotional white fragility typically involves a failure of emotion regulation, or the ability to manage one’s emotions in real time, (2) that this failure enacts or reinforces white supremacy, but (3) that a number of emotion regulation techniques can be deployed to avoid or mitigate the harms of emotional white fragility. In other words, we see emotional white fragility as an instance in which white people fall short of standards of emotion regulation to which all people ought to be held, and to which people of color typically are held. As such, we think that the measures we propose for white people to implement are both reasonable and practically within reach.

2. Moral Damage and Moral Repair

Emotional white fragility can appear in many different circumstances, but we shall focus on its appearance within close relationships, including romantic partnerships, platonic friendships, and familial relations. Anecdotally, we have observed that emotional white fragility can erode even the strongest interpersonal bonds, but that individuals are highly motivated to improve themselves in the context of such relationships, making these circumstances ideal sites for intervention. To make sense of the ways in which emotional

white fragility can erode close relationships, we draw on the ideas of *moral damage* and *moral repair* from the growing literature on non-ideal ethics.

Margaret Urban Walker (2006) explains that many of our relationships are anchored in our confidence that others share the same normative expectations that we have. By trusting that others will be responsive to shared moral standards, we presume that they will do as they ought to because they recognize this as the right course of action and furthermore that they will accept accountability if they fail. Many relationships are therefore built on a kind of hopeful attitude, “one that includes a belief in the possibility of responsiveness and a desire for responsiveness” to moral expectations” (Walker 2006, 69). When this hope dwindles, relationships are endangered. Elizabeth Spelman writes that “To cease to have hope in the context of moral relations is to cease to believe in the possibility that the norms by which one has been guided are the right ones to live by, that others can and should be trusted to live by them and help sustain them” (Spelman 2008, 229). A loss of hope as outlined here represents a threat to many relationships. This is because the loss of hope carries with it a termination in trust, which lies at the root of our normative expectations and thus relationships. In contrast, the process of restoring hope and trust is what Walker calls “moral repair.” These notions of moral damage and moral repair are central to our analysis.

Let us now consider three examples of emotional white fragility, involving three different types of close relationships. Kevin and Kim have been dating for three years. Kevin is black and Kim is white. In conversation one night, Kim refers to a Latinx person using a racial slur. Kevin mentions that this word is offensive and that Kim shouldn’t say it. Kim feels her face turning red and her voice cracks as a surge of anger wells up inside her. “Oh my God, Kevin, why are you so PC all the time? It’s not a big deal. I’m dating you, after all, aren’t I? So it’s not like I’m racist!” Alarmed by Kim’s extreme reaction, Kevin replies that he’s not trying to hurt her feelings, but before he can finish Kim stomps away and slams the bedroom door shut. The next time Kevin hears Kim use the racial slur, he says nothing, but resents Kim for it.

In this case, the relationship between Kim and Kevin is damaged in the wake of Kim’s emotionally fragile response to Kevin calling her out for using a slur. Moving forward, Kevin might experience a reduced sense of trust in Kim. He might be less certain that she shares the same moral convictions that he does or that she recognizes his feelings as having the same importance or weight as hers do. Kim’s fragility leaves little room for Kevin’s need to feel morally and emotionally supported. Had Kim responded more productively—by acknowledging her mistake and pledging to be better—their relationship may have recovered. But, because Kim’s response prevented the moral damage from being repaired and then enacted further damage, the relationship was compromised.

Consider another case. Sam, a white man, and Lakeisha, a black woman, have become friends through their mutual love of comic books. They meet up at a comic book convention, and while flipping through the newest titles Sam holds up a comic book featuring a black superhero and then jokes that the hero's arch-nemesis is probably a white cop and his weakness is probably the chokehold. Lakeisha's stomach churns. She builds up her courage and finally says, "I can't believe you would make a hurtful joke about that, Sam. I'm really disappointed in you." Sam's face immediately turns red. His eyes bulge and his lips quiver. With a shaky voice he exclaims, "Oh no! I am so sorry! I really didn't mean it! Do you hate me? Does this make me racist? Will you ever forgive me?" Sam's display of distress is so strong that Lakeisha comes to his aid. "It's ok! You're not a racist! I was just upset. I know you were just joking." Sam and Lakeisha remain friends, but Lakeisha notices that Sam becomes more withdrawn, is less likely to joke around with her, and seems to keep an emotional distance between them. Lakeisha is saddened that their friendship has taken this turn, but given the way Sam responded to her hurt feelings the last time, she has no desire to bring up the incident again.

Sam's emotional response to Lakeisha's comments functioned to make *him* feel better. It hijacked the conversation, drawing attention away from the place where moral repair was needed: addressing and taking responsibility for a hurtful comment that made light of police murdering black people. Furthermore, Sam's emotional response prevented him from acknowledging any feelings of moral abandonment, hurt, shock, or dismay that Lakeisha might have been experiencing. In addition to failing to repair the damage done by his initial comments, Sam's fragile responses further morally damages their relationship by demonstrating his inability to address his interlocutor's needs in the relationship. This lack of support can result in Lakeisha's diminished sense of trust, hope, and confidence in the strength of the relationship. And indeed Sam became more withdrawn and less emotionally engaged with Lakeisha.

Finally, imagine that Shelly, a 20-year-old mixed race college student is talking with her white father about her classes. She mentions she is taking a class called "Racism in America." Her father scoffs incredulously, "you're taking *what*?" When Shelly tries to explain what the course is about, her father angrily interrupts her and tells her, "I didn't raise you to victimize yourself." When Shelly tries to explain that the class isn't about "victimizing herself," her father pleads with her and expresses disappointment and frustration: "I thought I raised you better than this."

Here, Shelly's father's insistence that talking and thinking about race is a harmful or morally corrupt endeavor shows cracks in presumed shared values between father and daughter. The message that Shelly will receive from an

exchange like this—that her father’s love is conditional on her not talking about racism—works to drive them apart. In terms of emotional white fragility, his emotional response of anger followed by despair and sadness prevent him from listening to what his daughter is saying or from working to support her.

All three of these examples highlight the ways in which emotional white fragility gets in the way of rebuilding, repairing, or stabilizing relationships damaged by racist behaviors or attitudes. Furthermore, emotional white fragility is morally troubling in that it helps perpetuate and sustain white people’s racial comfort and inability to confront and deal with racism and racial injustice. The flip side of this effect is that *reducing* emotional white fragility can help repair relationships or at the very least work to avoid further damage. All this leads to the question: How can one avoid or mitigate emotional white fragility in the heat of the moment?² In the next section we will present the conceptual groundwork needed to present a response to this question. But the basic idea is that one can avoid or mitigate emotional white fragility by engaging in various forms of emotion regulation, which enable one to take control of rogue emotions.

3. Emotion Regulation

Most of us engage in “emotion regulation” every day, often without realizing it. When encountering a stressful situation, we might take a few deep breaths to calm down. When our friend tells us tragic news, we might focus our attention on how to help her so as not to be overcome with our own grief and rendered useless as a source of support. Or we might think about something upbeat and happy to maintain enthusiasm and energy when teaching an early morning class. “Emotion regulation is the set of automatic and controlled processes involved in the initiation, maintenance, and modification of the occurrence, intensity, and duration of feeling states” (Webb, Miles, & Sheeran 2012, 775; see also Eisenberg et al. 2000; Gross and Thompson 2007).

There are multiple processes involved in the regulation of emotion, which target different stages in the unfolding of an emotion. Following James Gross and colleagues (Ochsner & Gross 2014; Suri & Gross 2016), we conceive emotional episodes as “W-PVA cycles.” The first stage in this cycle is the

² The best way to mitigate emotional white fragility is via upstream solutions that focus on education, upbringing, etc. But we are focusing here on downstream solutions—that is, solutions to employ when one is already going to or already has experienced emotional white fragility.

World Stage (W). The world provides an individual with objects and events that can excite different emotions, ranging from bears (fear) and death (sadness) to clowns (amusement/terror) and birth (love). The second stage is the Perception Stage (P). For an object or event to trigger an emotion, the individual must perceive it. The Perception Stage is followed by the Valuation Stage (V). Once an individual perceives an object and event, she must interpret it. For instance, fear results from interpreting an object or event as dangerous, sadness results from interpreting it as a loss, amusement results from interpreting it as incongruous, and love results from interpreting it as an object of reciprocal affection. These evaluations can be conscious or unconscious, automatic or deliberate. The final stage is the Action Stage (A). Having perceived and interpreted an object or event, the individual will respond in a variety of ways, ranging from involuntary physiological changes (increased heart rate) to spontaneous behavioral changes (smiles and growls) to coordinated actions (fleeing and fighting).

To complicate this picture a bit, the emotional episode doesn't always end with A; rather, a W-PVA cycle can serve as an input for another W-PVA cycle, which in turn can serve as an input for yet another. Everyone has had the experience of dwelling on an emotion. The more one contemplates one's sadness, the deeper and more profound that sadness becomes. In this case, one gets stuck in a cycle of interpreting and reinterpreting sadness as a basis for being sad, which prolongs the episode. Thus, while the initial object of the emotion may be an external object, the emotion can become its own object in subsequent cycles.

Jesse Prinz points out that while psychologists tend to construe emotions broadly as multi-stage episodes, philosophers tend to search for the one component in that episode that is both necessary and sufficient for emotion (2004, 17-18). Thus, a philosopher might say that a person's fear is her appraisal of the bear as dangerous, whereas a psychologist might say that a person's fear is the complete sequence of seeing, appraising, and responding to the bear. The notion of "emotion regulation" that we adopt in this paper utilizes the psychological conception of emotion, and so we shall define an emotion broadly as the PVA part of the W-PVA cycle. Thus, an episode of fear would include the process of seeing a bear, appraising it as dangerous, and then acting on this assessment. Philosophers may wish to construe emotions more narrowly, perhaps as the assessing of the bear as dangerous (the V stage), and no part of our account is inconsistent with that approach.

As we mentioned before, there are multiple different ways of regulating emotions, and these varied approaches target different stages in the W-PVA cycle. In what follows, we will describe the strategies that research has found to be most effective in regulating our emotions in real time. Imagine that you are camping out deep in the woods, and that you are awoken one night in your

tent by the sound of rustling branches. You don't know what is making the sound, but your mind immediately conjures the image of a hungry grizzly bear, prowling for tasty campers, and you begin to feel scared. Your fear is unpleasant, and so you attempt a series of strategies to fight your fear.

First, you might try to distract yourself from the scary sounds outside the tent.³ Humming loudly, for instance, will drown out the crunching of dried leaves and the crackling of small branches. This strategy, which targets the P stage in the W-PVA cycle, is called "Distraction":

1. **Distraction:** The attempt to alter one's emotional state by turning attention away from stimuli that trigger one's present state. (Gross and Thompson 2007, 13; Webb, Miles, and Sheeran 2012, 779)

Notice that the goal may not be to prevent fear from ever taking hold, but rather to eliminate a fear that has already taken hold. The sooner you can expunge those unpleasant feelings, the better.

If this strategy doesn't work, then you may attempt to reinterpret the stimuli that trigger fear in hopes of triggering a different emotion in its place. You may think about how there aren't supposed to be any grizzlies in this part of the country, or that it's most likely a beautiful doe or a cuddly raccoon that's making the noises. You might think that even if it's a bear, it's not likely to attack. After all, you've taken the proper precaution of hanging your food in a bear bag a good distance from your tent, and besides, you saw plenty of wild berries on the trail that would sate the bear's appetite. All of these thoughts target the V stage of the W-PVA cycle, since you are trying to reinterpret the sounds in a way that will eliminate the thought of danger. This strategy is called "Reappraisal of Emotional Stimulus":

2. **Reappraisal of Emotional Stimulus:** The attempt to alter one's emotional state by reinterpreting a state of affairs so as to elicit a different emotional state. (Gross and Thompson 2007, 14; Webb, Miles, and Sheeran 2012, 780)

Again, the goal may not be to prevent the initial fear response, but to nip it in the bud, so to speak.

³ We are intentionally leaving out strategies that target the W phase, such as "Situation Selection," or the attempt to alter one's emotional state by seeking out situations that elicit desirable emotions and avoiding situations that elicit undesirable emotions (Suri and Gross 2016, 457-458; Webb, Miles, and Sheeran 2012, 775-776). White fragility surely causes people to avoid situations that elicit racial stress, but because we are interested in responses to moral damage that has already occurred, we won't discuss tendencies to avoid morally damaging situations in the first place.

A closely related strategy is to try to take a different perspective on the situation that may elicit a different emotional response. You might think about how much your students will laugh at you when you tell them on Monday that you spent your weekend fearing for your life in a tent. This thought may elicit amusement in place of fear. Or you might think about how a more courageous person would respond to the mysterious noises outside the tent. This thought may calm your fear. This strategy likewise targets the V phase, and is called “Perspective Taking”:

3. **Perspective Taking:** The attempt to alter one’s emotional state by adopting a distinct perspective on a state of affairs. (K. N. Ochsner et al. 2004, 484; Webb, Miles, and Sheeran 2012, 780)

If none of these strategies works, then you might try to fight the symptoms rather than the underlying condition. This might involve hiding the way you are feeling, for instance, forcing yourself to have a neutral face instead of a grimace or to act in such a way that would not give away your true emotional state. In other words, you may attempt to prevent the unpleasant physiological and behavioral manifestations of your fear. You may take large deep breaths in an attempt to calm yourself. You may rub your face to loosen your jaw muscles. You may rub your hands together to keep your fists from clenching. All of these actions target the A phase, and are collectively termed “Suppression”:

4. **Suppression:** The attempt to eliminate an emotion by suppressing its behavioral expression. (Suri and Gross 2016, 458–59; Webb, Miles, and Sheeran 2012, 780).

So far we have discussed four strategies for regulating emotions in real time. These strategies intervene on different stages of the unfolding of an emotion, but all of them seek to alter this emotion’s course. As mentioned before, the research indicates that all these methods are in fact effective at regulating emotions.

4. Emotional White Fragility

With this framework for emotion regulation in mind, we suggest that emotional white fragility may be understood as a systematic, multi-level failure of emotion regulation. Recall the incident between Sam and Lakeisha. Lakeisha feels wounded by Sam’s joke about police brutality, and, rather than letting it pass, she tells Sam how she feels about it. There has been moral damage, but Lakeisha opens up the possibility of moral repair. If Sam comes to understand how his joke affected Lakeisha and why it was morally

problematic, then their relationship may not only be repaired, but also strengthened. Sadly, Sam reacts in a way that not only prevents moral repair, but also compounds the damage that his initial comment caused. We suggest that Sam's reaction is characteristic of emotional white fragility. Because he is not used to coping with racial stress, this stress causes him to lose control of his emotions, and to respond in unconstructive and damaging ways, when constructive and reparatory options are also available to him.

First, consider the Perception Stage of his response to being called out. Even though Lakeisha is clearly upset, Sam's attention is drawn to *his own* feelings of distress and moral character. His priority becomes that of ameliorating his own feelings, not understanding and responding to Lakeisha's. Thus, his response works to re-center the conversation around himself, and indeed Lakeisha ends up trying to make him feel better, which is the opposite of what ought to have transpired. Had Sam engaged in Distraction, trying to ignore his feelings of distress and focusing instead on Lakeisha's feelings of hurt, then he may have calmed his distress, and he could have reacted more constructively and repaired the damage that his initial joke caused. But due to his lack of emotion regulation, his reaction was that of emotional white fragility—unconstructive and further damaging.

Second, consider the Valuation Stage of Sam's response. Sam is focused on his own distress, and he interprets the cause of this distress—Lakeisha's act of calling him out—as a *threat* to his moral standing. He interprets her disappointment as an indictment of his self-ascribed moral purity, which puts him on the defensive. As with the focus of Sam's attention, Sam's valuation of the incident centers it *on him* and his moral reputation. Had Sam realized that Lakeisha was not impugning his character, but rather inviting him to demonstrate his character by apologizing, learning from his mistake, and comforting her, then he would not have become defensive. Again, due to his lack of emotional self-control, his reaction was that of emotional white fragility—unproductive defensiveness aimed toward expunging any record of moral fault.

Finally, consider the Action Stage of Sam's response. Sam manifests his distress through a dramatic expression of guilt and sadness that functions as a plea for forgiveness. In the ideal case, even if Sam were distressed by Lakeisha's reaction to his joke, he would suppress the expression of his distress so that he can better attend to and comfort Lakeisha's feelings. But due to his lack of emotion regulation, his reaction is that of white fragility—his expression overshadows Lakeisha's feelings and has the force of demanding that his feelings be attended to first.

In sum, it is the lack of emotion regulation that separates Sam's actual response from the available response that would have repaired the damage caused by his insensitive joke. Had Sam done more to control his feelings, he

may have been able to comfort Lakeisha and to take responsibility for his mistake. In the next section we will explore why this lack of emotion regulation is morally problematic, independently of the immediate moral damage that it causes.

5. Who's Regulating? Whose Emotions?

Emotion regulation is a form of work. It is effortful and at times exhausting. Too much of it can even lead to burnout (Jeung et al. 2018). Given these facts, we suggest that in relationships among equals, the burdens of emotion regulation ought to be shared equally, unless the members of the relationship consent to an unequal distribution of these burdens.⁴ Imagine that coworkers Nina and Ted learn that their company will soon move from its current location, next to a salad restaurant, to a new location, next to a seafood restaurant. After the meeting, Ted is brimming with excitement, given his love of seafood. Nina, a vegetarian, is disappointed. Despite their opposing reactions, both Nina and Ted manage to share the burdens of emotion regulation equally. Nina suppresses her dismay a bit and thinks about how happy Ted is about the new location. Ted focuses on Nina's disappointment, thus tempering his delight a bit. As the two discuss the upcoming move, they are careful not to let their own emotions interfere too much with the other person's emotions, and both begin to feel a little more moderately toward the relocation. This regulation enables them to support each other, while also not completely losing sight of their own emotions. As long as Ted and Nina share the burdens of emotion regulation equally, this regulation is morally unproblematic. Of course, there may be some days in their relationship where Nina will fail to emotionally regulate in such a way that causes Ted to do a little more work on this front and vice-versa, but on the whole, neither is expected to emotionally regulate to protect the other person's feelings or relationship more than the other.

Patterns of emotion regulation become morally problematic in cases where there is an *unfair* distribution of the burdens of emotion regulation between parties. Imagine that Kim and Kevin have entered into their relationship with the expectation that both will engage in emotion regulation to a more-or-less equal extent. However, Kevin ends up regulating his emotions a great deal while Kim ends up doing very little. This arrangement

⁴ There are many contexts in which an equal distribution of these burdens would be inappropriate, such as in the therapist/patient relationship. But in such contexts there ought to be mutual understanding and consent to the unequal distribution of emotion regulation.

is unhealthy, disrespectful, and unfair for Kevin, who has to shoulder the greater burdens.

The insight that patterns of emotion regulation can be unjust allows us to understand what is going on with regard to emotional white fragility more clearly. In many cases, white interlocutors fail to regulate their emotions in ways that can be detrimental to the relationship. Not only are emotionally fragile white people failing to pull their fair share with regard to emotion regulation, their unwillingness to do so can also often result in people of color doing *more* than their fair share of emotion regulation. For example, after Sam's comment, Lakeisha must not only be exposed to his full display of feelings but she must also work to ignore her own feelings in order to comfort and calm Sam.

In this paper we are interested in a very specific set of circumstances: cases in which the unjust distribution of emotion regulation reinforces oppressive systems such as white supremacy. We maintain that it is unjust when people from oppressed groups are *overburdened* with emotion regulation in a way that supports oppressive social patterns such as white supremacy. Put differently, it is unjust when people from racially privileged groups fail to pull their weight in emotion regulation and when this failure reinforces racial injustice. In these cases, the injustice stems not just from an unequal distribution of burdens, but from the ways in which this distribution supports and is related to harmful and morally wrong ideologies, institutions, and social organizations.

Evans and Moore's (2015) investigation into emotion regulation in the context of historically white institutions helps to illuminate some of the ways in which people of color are pressured to engage in emotion regulation in the professional setting to a greater extent than their white counterparts. In particular, employees of color must choose between engaging in an unfair share of emotion regulation and being seen as fulfilling stereotypes (e.g. the "angry black man" or the "minority bitch"), which can threaten their employment status. Since these stereotypes operate to maintain white power by denigrating people of color as less qualified and emotionally unstable, the decision that employees of color face about whether to emotionally regulate more than their fair share also often has implications for how they chose to be seen as resisting these harmful tropes.

Evans and Moore report the experience of Tina, an African-American pilot who felt pressured to endure the racist comments of a white co-pilot during a flight:

As Tina evaluated her options for a response, a process that takes both time and energy, she made the conscious decision to disengage from the discussion. While many have the option of leaving a conversation, the

spatial reality of experiencing discomfort in the flight deck introduces the notion that Tina not only had to stay in this environment in order to maintain a productive and comfortable environment, she had to also suppress her emotional distress. (Evans and Moore 2015, 448–49)

In addition to Suppression, Tina also engages in Distraction when she notices people in the airport gawking at the sight of a black female pilot. As she articulates it:

When my co-workers come and walk with me they constantly tell me [about people’s reactions]. I know it’s there but they think it’s funny and they really, really see it. I usually walk through the airport with my head down so that I don’t have to make eye contact. When I do look at people, some smile, but most don’t know what to do. (Evans and Moore 2015, 447)

By turning her attention away from the gawking onlookers and concentrating on the ground, Tina is able to regulate her discomfort so as not to become too upset. Tina’s story provides an example of historic and ongoing patterns of racial and gender injustice resulting in unfair patterns of emotion regulation.

While Tina must engage in a great deal of emotion regulation to get through her day and keep her job, her white colleagues are not expected or required to regulate to the same extent, despite the fact that they are not in the kind of relationship with Tina where an imbalance would be morally appropriate. This unequal pattern of emotion regulation—where people of color are required (both implicitly and explicitly) to regulate more than their white counterparts—helps produce and sustain patterns of white supremacy. Not only are people of color required to do more emotional work, but also the specific type of emotion regulation required often involves mitigating an emotional reaction to racial injustice. For instance, Tina must resist reacting to her racist co-pilot or the gawkers in the airport. These unequal expectations with regard to emotion regulation can therefore help to suppress opposition to racism. Tina is not able to voice her concern about her co-pilot’s comments or the onlookers’ behaviors. As bell hooks states:

To perpetuate and maintain white supremacy, white folks have colonized black Americans, and a part of that colonizing process has been teaching us to repress our rage, to never make them targets of any anger we feel about racism” (1996, 14).

An imbalance in emotion regulation between white people and people of color can thus help protect and insulate white people from dealing with racism and its implications for them as moral agents.

Because emotion regulation allows us to modify our feeling states, and emotional white fragility is a manifestation of one's feeling state that contributes to injustice, we propose that engaging in strategies for emotion regulation can help white people work to (1) repair relationships damaged by their racist behaviors and (2) prevent supporting larger patterns of racial injustice. Furthermore, we argue that white people *should* engage in these strategies when they experience emotional white fragility, since a failure to do so can result in racial injustice and white people should strive to act in such a way that resists racial injustice. In the next section we will describe how emotion regulation can be used to mitigate the harms of emotional white fragility.

6. How to Do Better

So far we've claimed that white fragility can trigger unproductive emotional responses and that these emotional responses can get in the way of repairing close relationships damaged by racist behaviors. Furthermore, we've suggested that these unproductive emotional responses can often be analyzed as failures of emotion regulation. Although the person in question may regulate his or her emotions properly in other relational conflicts, white fragility makes racial stress intolerable, and stands in the way of this regulation.

Kim may be more open to other types of justified criticism from Kevin, and may control her emotional response so as to react more constructively, but when Kevin calls her out for using a racist slur, she loses control and reacts unconstructively. Similarly, Sam may normally tend better to his friend Lakeisha's feelings, even when he is the one who hurt them and feels guilty for it, but in this case his feelings of guilt get the better of him and prevent him from being a responsible friend. Finally, Shelly's father may normally be able to set his feelings aside for the good of his daughter, but when Shelly brings up the topic of race, he loses control. In each case, white fragility leads to an unproductive, unregulated emotional response, which does moral damage or which stands in the way of repairing a moral damage. And in each case, increased emotion regulation would enable the person in question to react in more productive ways.

Here we will illustrate how to use the strategies introduced in §3 to mitigate the harms enacted by emotional white fragility. By harnessing these strategies, those prone to emotional white fragility can react more

productively to race-based moral damage. To review briefly, emotional episodes unfold over the course of several (iterating) stages: World, Perception, Valuation, and Action (W-PVA). Each stage of the emotional episode's development represents a point of intervention at which one could engage in differing strategies of emotion regulation. One can intervene at the Perception stage by engaging in Distraction, at the Valuation stage by engaging in Reappraisal or Perspective-Taking, and at the Action stage by engaging in Suppression. Research confirms that all four of these strategies are effective at controlling one's emotions in real time.⁵

“It’s not the end of the world.” The first strategy we recommend is Perspective-Taking. When called out for racist or racially problematic behavior, it is common for white people to react defensively. This reaction is fueled by the ideology that white people are either vile racists or pure post-racists, and thus allegations of racist conduct are taken to imply that a person falls into the vile racist, rather than the pure post-racist, category. But this ideology is wrong-headed and counter-productive. There are many shades between these two extremes, and it is important for white allies to acknowledge that they often enact and reinforce white supremacy in their daily lives. Although the ultimate goal is the upheaval of white supremacy, the more proximate goal may be the uprooting of harmful habits and attitudes.

When a white person is called out for racist behavior, and her fragility triggers a strong emotional response, she may be able to bring her emotions under control by considering how an impartial bystander would assess the situation. She might access this perspective by asking, “What would I think if someone I care about made a racially insensitive remark?” To this question she would probably answer that this person has made mistake but is nonetheless a good person and can repair the damage she has caused. By ascribing this attitude to the impartial spectator viewing the moral damage that she herself has caused, the person may succeed in gaining control of her emotions. She will realize that it’s not the end of the world, and that she is fully capable of recovering from her harmful mistake. Her feelings of hostility and guilt may weaken, allowing her to respond to the situation in a more measured and productive way. Where a strong emotional reaction may

⁵ Webb et al. (2012) found that between Reappraisal and Perspective-Taking, the latter is slightly more effective than the former, but other studies have found that Reappraisal is more effective when regulating *negative* emotions (Suri and Gross 2016, 458; C. Dandoy and G. Goldstein 1990; J. Gross 1998). Because white fragility often triggers negative emotions, we will focus on both strategies. Research has also found that Suppression is in general more effective than Distraction, yet studies suggest that in the sorts of interpersonal contexts with which we are interested, Distraction may actually be preferable. This is because Suppression can have the effect of making interlocutors less comfortable or less at ease in the interaction (Suri and Gross 2016, 459; Butler et al. 2003).

multiply the damage done, a weak emotional reaction may permit moral repair to be accomplished.

Recall Kim's reaction to Kevin asking her not to use a racial slur. She felt attacked, and responded with rage. After blowing up on Kevin, she exited the situation, slamming the door behind her. Not only did she fail to address her wrongdoing, which hurt Kevin, but she further communicated an unwillingness to engage on the topic, which added to the damage. Had Kim paused to reevaluate the situation, she may have responded differently. She might have thought about how Kevin often calls friends out for using slurs, but that this doesn't mean that Kevin dislikes them or considers them to be bad people. By taking up the perspective on an impartial spectator, Kim might find that her initially strong emotions have weakened, and that what at first seemed like the end of the world is instead a speed bump in an otherwise strong relationship. With her anger under control, Kim might have apologized and pledged to be better. This response would, among other things, acknowledge her transgression and the wound opened by her use of a slur, and set a foundation for reconciliation.

"It's a learning opportunity." The second strategy we recommend is Reappraisal. Although it can be upsetting to realize that one is responsible for causing moral damage, this realization presents an opportunity for self-improvement. Part of becoming an effective white ally is learning to accept one's moral failings and to use the recognition of these failings as a springboard for moral development.

Emotional white fragility often results from appraising moral concern as destructive criticism, or criticism aimed at maligning one's moral character. Reappraising the concern as constructive, then, can re-orient one's response to it. Rather than feeling the need to defend oneself, tooth and nail, one might instead feel the need to learn from the situation. Feelings of hostility or guilt may thus slowly be transformed into feelings of gratitude or determination.

Kim took Kevin's concern and suggestion as destructive criticism, leading her to lash out and then disengage. But had she taken it as constructive, she might have responded more productively. She might have appreciated Kevin's patience with her, his desire for her to live up to higher standards, and his hopes for a strong relationship grounded in the shared values and ideals.

"First you, then me." The third strategy we recommend is Distraction, but with an important qualification. One reason why emotional white fragility is harmful is that it works to re-center a situation around the fragile person. This person becomes entirely focused on herself, demanding the attention of others too. Kim, Sam, and Shelly's father, despite being the instigators of moral damage, respond in a way that prioritizes their feelings, rather than those they hurt. To prevent this re-centering, the fragile person can engage in

Distraction, turning her attention away from her feelings and toward something else that doesn't elicit the same emotional reaction.

The important qualification is that in using Distraction, the fragile person ought not to distract herself from the damage she has done. Although thinking about something positive or neutral that is unrelated to the present circumstances may allow the person to gain control over her feelings, she would do so at the cost of ignoring the harm she has done. Thus, we recommend that the best way to utilize Distraction is to focus on the hurt feelings of the other person or the strength of the relationship between parties instead of one's own vulnerabilities. This approach will give one the opportunity to temper one's strong emotions without disengaging completely from the difficult conversation. In this way, one can still utilize Distraction strategies without becoming distant or evading thinking about the issue at hand. Because there is a pattern of white people failing to fully engage in conversations about race and racism, it's crucial that this strategy is employed in such a way that paves the way for meaningful exchange as well as helps regulate difficult emotions. Because one could use Distraction in such a way that promotes disengagement in an unhelpful way, we caution readers to be mindful when using this approach in the context of emotional white fragility.

“Take a deep breath.” Research shows that Suppression is also an effective strategy for managing emotions in real time. If Kim pauses before reacting to Kevin's admonishment, and takes a few deep breaths, allowing her teeth and fists to unclench and her shoulders to loosen, then she may take control of her feelings. However, we do not recommend this strategy for the sorts of situations we have addressed here, since research suggests that Suppression often makes interlocutors less comfortable and less at ease (Suri and Gross 2016, 459; Butler et al. 2003). This strategy may be productive in other sorts of interactions, but when a close relationship is challenged by a racist comment, one should avoid tactics that will add to the moral damage already caused. Suppression, in other words, would simply exchange one harmful outcome (emotional white fragility) for another.

One can use a mixture of the strategies outlined in this section—alternating and combining approaches—and we recommend doing so when dealing with emotional white fragility. Remember that the significance of the strategies outlined in this section extends beyond the fact that they are useful tools to help mitigate one's experience of difficult feelings. In addition, these tips for emotion regulation in the context of emotional white fragility can help white people meet their obligation to maintain morally healthy patterns of emotion regulation in the context of their relationships and avoid patterns of interaction rooted in racism.

7. Conclusion

We have argued that imbalances in emotion regulation can represent injustices within relationships and can support large-scale patterns of oppression. Our specific focus has been on emotion regulation with regard to emotional white fragility, and we have presented readers with strategies for emotion regulation in these contexts. One important thing to keep in mind with regard to the strategies we have recommended here is that, while effective to varying degrees, these methods for emotion regulation are not guaranteed to be effective always. Yet, despite this fact, we contend that it is worthwhile and morally decent to attempt to regulate one's emotions during episodes of emotional white fragility, due to the harms that a failure to regulate emotional white fragility can produce. Engaging in emotion regulation in the cases we have in mind is what one ought to strive to do, given existing obligations already in place concerning one's interlocutor and avoiding contributing to systems of white supremacy. Thus, what we are suggesting here is by no means supererogatory, but instead what we view as fulfilling one's moral obligations while in the throes of emotional white fragility.

In instances where relationships are damaged by racist behaviors and emotional white fragility gets in the way of repairing these relationships, regulating one's emotions is only the first step toward repairing the damaged relationship. Emotion regulation helps to prevent incurring further damage to the relationship and can help position both parties to be in a better position to engage in the reparative work needed to rectify the relationship. In this way, the emotion regulation strategies we have suggested here are important preliminary steps that can help make the work of moral repair more efficacious.

Finally, we would like to end by reminding readers that, in many ways, the strategies of emotion regulation outlined here are "downstream" solutions. In other words, there are things one can do prior to specific instances of emotional white fragility to increase one's tolerance for race based stress and therefore avoid episodes of emotional white fragility all together. However, given that white fragility is common among white individuals and these more upstream strategies take time and work to cultivate, there is a great deal of value associated with the strategies outlined in this paper and we recommend one incorporates them into their repertoire of strategies for approaching future conversations about race.

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