

Democracy's College Podcast

Episode 34: Racial Battle Fatigue

Announcer: Welcome to the Democracy's College Podcast Series. This podcast focuses on educational equity, justice, and excellence for all students in P through 20 educational pathways. This podcast is a product of the Office of Community College Research and Leadership, or OCCRL, at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Learn more about OCCRL at occrll.illinois.edu.

In this episode, Colvin T. Georges Jr. of OCCRL talks with Dr. William A. Smith about racial battle fatigue. Dr. Smith is a professor and the chair of the Department of Education, Culture & Society at the University of Utah.

Colvin T. Georges Jr.: Here with me today for OCCRL's Democracy's College podcast, I have the distinct pleasure of speaking with Dr. William A. Smith, a professor in the division of ethnic studies and chair of the Department of Education, Culture and Society at the University of Utah. Dr. Smith, thank you so much for being with us today.

Dr. William Smith: It's my pleasure.

Colvin T. Georges Jr.: As a nationally renowned scholar, you introduced racial battle fatigue as a theoretical framework in 2003. Since then, many other scholars have started your work and have used this in their practice to best support and understand the lived experiences of people of color, particularly students of color. To provide our listeners with context, how would you define racial battle fatigue?

Dr. William Smith: In a simple way, racial battle fatigue is the cumulative psychosocial, physiological impact of racial micro- and macro-level aggressions on a racially marginalized target, or targets. So more specifically, racial battle fatigue is caused by the toxic and persistent racialized micro-level aggressions, which produces the subsequent negative health outcomes for these kinds of marginalized groups. Racial battle fatigue is experienced at a racially oppressed individual or group level. The symptoms are often cumulated as experiences of pain and stress are shared among family members, friends, and a larger racial group.

Colvin T. Georges Jr.: During the past decade, there has been an increase in reported cases of racial bias, racism, racial microaggressions, microinvalidations, and microinsults that students, faculty, and administrators of color have experienced on college campuses. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, between 2011 and 2016 there has been a 40% increase in campus hate crimes. These experiences have resulted in psychosocial and mental health concerns, especially for black students. How does this affect retention and persistence to

completion for collegians of color, and what similarities and differences play out at two- and four-year institutions?

Dr. William Smith: At both campuses, they play out in similar ways, but for people of color, we're exerting a lot of energy, an exorbitant amount of energy responding to these mundane forms of racism, forms of racist violence. And that has to be clear that racism is a violent act. These direct and indirect attacks cause increased forms of stress. We have energy loss that should be used for more productive efforts like being successful at work and school, our interpersonal relationships, and just relaxing.

See, the dominant group gets to relax and play while we have to fight to stay healthy, sane, and alive. So, consider for a moment that black boys and men have to deal with on a daily basis. According to a recent study by Rutgers University, police are now the seventh leading cause of death for African American boys and men. Black men under 30 are two and a half times more likely to be killed than their white counterpart.

What this means for black men is that the odds of them being killed by the police is one in 1,000. The odds of being drafted in the NBA is one in 3,333 for men. The odds of winning a scratch ticket lottery is easier than being a black man.

So think about the cumulative stress associated with this for a black man who walks out of his household, or for a black woman who is concerned about her black son. That's constantly on your mind, and that wears and tears on your body. That's part of that cumulative stress that I talk about.

Colvin T. Georges Jr.: Increasingly, research shows that racism negatively affects the physical and mental health of children of color. In a recent article published by the *American Academy of Pediatrics*, children can experience the effects of racism from other individuals as well as through the places they live and learn through limited access and resources to economic opportunity and how their rights are enforced and exercised. Dr. Smith, what policy and procedural recommendations can you provide to faculty and staff to dismantle racism and create equitable opportunities for students of color while protecting their physical and mental health?

Dr. William Smith: That article was good at getting the word out to the larger society. I would only adjust *some* of the recommendations that they had, because I thought they were pretty good. But we have to also think about how when students experience chronic stress, they are flooded with the stress hormones, such as cortisol, that have prolonged exposure that leads to all kinds of inflammatory reactions. This can harm children's health in the short term and could also harm it in the long term. It increases the likelihood of having diseases like diabetes and depression. That's all part of this article, and I agree with that.

So those recommendations that I would tweak just a bit would be things like create a culturally safe school environment using evidence-based tools to improve treatments with students and offer better communications with families and school administrators. We have to have a better link about what's going on with the students in the school, and that needs to be reported to the parents, and these school administrators *have* to be more culturally aware, more culturally sensitive to that environment in which they are leaders of.

I also believe that we need to have advocates at the local and the federal government to support policies like the article recommended for implicit bias training. We need to understand where teachers, administrators, staff members are in their racial identity in the thoughts about different groups of people of color.

So if you have leaders who have a high degree of racial bias toward a Latina or Latinx students, that's problematic. How are those students going to learn in an environment where the leaders and the teachers bring to their classroom, to their offices, these notions of what it means to be brown or black, especially when those are deficit notions. So we have to advocate for things that will increase the sensitivity of students of color while also recognizing that many people bring implicit biases to the classroom, to the office, and it also can be people of color who bring these things and these ideas to the classroom.

We also should engage in community-level advocacy to develop action and policies that can respond to social justice. And I would also say that we need to have increasing numbers of African American men as teachers. This has been proven to be an effective strategy. However, we need to make sure that they don't bring deficit notions of what it means to be black into the classroom as well. But this is also true of *all* teachers and administrators as I mentioned moments ago. So, we need to increase, on one end, having more Latino and African American faculty, and on the other end, we need to be *much* more aware of these implicit biases that people bring to the institution.

Colvin T. Georges Jr.: Dr. Smith, I understand that you are currently working on a new book that examines racial battle fatigue across educational tiers. As you seek to further the conversation of how your framework is applicable to P through 20 education, can you tell us more about this anticipated body of work?

Dr. William Smith: Yeah, I'm really excited about the book. It's still in progress. I hope to finish it real soon. And what I want to do is offer a very clear definition of racial battle fatigue and racial micro-level aggressions and macro-level aggressions for academics, as well as laypeople. I'm working on making sure that language is transferable and understandable to *all* levels of communities, so the academic community and the laypeople community, so it can be useful.

In the book I want to offer a better way to understand racial battle fatigue contagion, and how race-related stress is passed on to other group members.

This is very important to address, especially dealing with the academic challenges in schools, from preschool all the way to graduate school. There was a book written by Debra Van Ausdale and Joe Feagin that reported their findings. The book was called *The First R: How Children Learn Race and Racism*. And in that book, they reported their findings that racism starts as early as preschool.

So these children already come pretty well equipped with a defined racial attitude of what it means to be the *other*. So they would get into their own little racial cliques, based upon racial groups, and they had beliefs and stereotypes about the *other* kids, the kids of color. So white kids having stereotypes about kids of color, and they would act out these stereotypes in the playground and in the classroom.

So we know that it is important to attack racism as early as possible, from preschool all the way to graduate school. When we don't do this, what happens is those attitudes, those beliefs, those actions are reinforced, strengthened, and carried out through each additional level of education; they get more empowered. They feel that their belief and value systems are correct because they haven't been adjusted or challenged. So by high school, it's gotten stronger, by college they start to act out in stronger ways, and then by the time if you can get to graduate school, it becomes highly problematic, to the point that students of color are being forced out of institutions of higher learning because of the racist, violent atmosphere that's being created by primarily white students and white faculty.

Colvin T. Georges Jr.: Dr. Smith, the work that you have done and are currently doing as related to racial battle fatigue is highly valued and sought out in our field. Your research is greatly appreciated, especially with psychological and physiological stressors that students of color are navigating on a daily basis on their campuses and communities at large. We even see more students of color engaging in activism, where demands for social change and dismantling systems for white supremacy is paramount.

According to a national study conducted by UCLA's Higher Education Research Institute, during the fall of 2015, the incoming freshmen class had the highest anticipation to engage in some form of activism. For example, protests, rallies, marches, et cetera, while in college since 1967. What advice or action steps can you provide to our listeners of color who are actively engaged in fostering racially just educational activities, and advice for those that are not necessarily involved in activism but are dealing with trauma and racism that find themselves trying to cope with racial battle fatigue?

Dr. William Smith: It's a very deep question. I definitely believe that activism is what we need, so I applaud those students. But I also want to encourage people to understand the power of one. We can't always wait for others to do the things that we can do

ourselves or waiting for a leader. Oftentimes what we're doing, because of systemic racism, it hits groups at a group level, as well as an individual level.

We believe that it only can be countered by a group activity or event or having a leader to lead a group. But we have to understand this power of one is *very powerful*; that one person can do an *act* that can make a change that can be impactful for others. So if everyone is finding what their strength is in that power of one, the power of one then becomes a group attack, and we can then find others who also share that power of one that is closely related to our power of one.

That's when we can form revolts. We can form some of the things that that research is putting out that students have a high value of socially conscious, social justice demonstrations. We need that. We shouldn't be looking for a leader. We should be looking for what we can do to help with change.

I believe *that's* the only way that we can overthrow a racist society, a homophobic society, a classist society, a society that only believes that able-bodied people should be in certain positions. *Any* forms of discrimination has to be led by people who have passion and believe that these are injustices and an injustice to one is an injustice to *all*. So that's the thing that I advocate, and I hope my research can reinforce.

Now, to your second question about coping with racial battle fatigue, I don't believe that racial battle fatigue will ever end because I don't believe racism will ever end. I share the belief of Derrick Bell that it's endemic. I *wish* that it would end in my lifetime, but until that is a possibility, we will have to deal with coping strategies for racial battle fatigue, for racism. And part of that is to have outlets. We have to find positive outlets that we can release the stress that we endure on a day-to-day basis.

So we have to start to be more planful of what we do in positive ways. Going out with friends to do things that are enjoyable, finding moments of solitude, not to move away from people, to become more depressed with what we're dealing with, but just to be at peace; to listen to music, to read a good book, to go to the movie, go walk in the park, exercise, go to a comedy show, go out to dinner with friends. So all of these types of things are outlets to get rid of some of that stress.

So the more that we have these outlets and we can reduce stress, the healthier we become. The more that we participate in communities, the less stress that we have. So communities that are dealing with a fight against the oppression that we deal with on a day-to-day basis because we're not alone. When we feel like we're alone dealing with it by ourselves, our stress level is heightened because our hope is lessened. If we have high hope that we can overcome certain situations, then stress reduces.

We have to remember what Dr. Chester Pierce told us that when STEM is controlled, and what he meant by STEM is our space, time, energy, and movement—when those things are controlled by an oppressive group, oppressive force, stress goes up. When we have control of our STEM—our space, our time, our energy, our movement—then our stress is lessened. So we have to always think about any activity that we deal with, any confrontation that we have: What does this mean regarding our STEM?

So if we keep that in mind as an effective strategy, so if we take on one thing, we have to remove another. We can't just take on so much that our plate is overwhelming. So STEM is important. Outlets are *critically* important to reduce our stress and reduce racial battle fatigue. Being in a collective community is very important. So those are just some of the things that I would recommend for those people who are dealing with heightened levels of racial battle fatigue.

Colvin T. Georges Jr.: And I do have a follow-up for that question and it is: What advice or action steps can you provide to listeners that are not members of racially minoritized groups, but would still like to offer support?

Dr. William Smith: White people who want to help in this way have to help just like their brothers and sisters did in the '60s, in the '50s, and earlier. There were abolitionists. There were the Students for a Democratic Society. So many advances that we achieved, particularly for black and brown people in higher education, would never have happened without white allies.

White allies were right there fighting for ethnic studies. They were there for the increase of faculty of color on campuses. Some of these campuses only had very, very small numbers of black and brown students on them, and also Asian American students. Without the help of white allies fighting and putting their lives on the line, we would not have achieved some of the successes that we've had, at least as soon as we would have had them. So, having people in big numbers also helps to advance any kind of calls. If it's just based on the group that's being targeted, it's always harder.

So just like men have a role to play in fighting sexism against women, straight people have a role to play to fight against homophobia; it can't just be the LGBTQ community fighting for those efforts; it has to be straight people. It also has to be white people who teach their children, who argue in their churches, who argue in board meetings for the social justice for people of color. The places that we don't get a voice, so we're not visible in. So just because we're not there does not mean that the fights shouldn't be had.

So we have to understand that black and brown people go through racial socialization on a day-to-day basis from childhood all the way to our grave. You're being taught, somebody's giving you experience that helps to racially socialize you to prepare you for a racist society. We hear about it in sermons and churches, we hear about it in lectures that we go to. When do white people

have those racial socialization moments in those intimate occasions? And when those things are missing, and they're not thinking about them, that's when the attack against people of color is heightened. So we need our white brothers and sisters to be on the front lines fighting just like people of color.

Colvin T. Georges Jr.: All right, thank you so much, Dr. Smith. I just want to say thank you for your time and providing *such* rich insight into your research on racial battle fatigue. I'm sure the information provided today will be very helpful to all of our listeners. Again, Dr. Smith is a professor in the division of ethnic studies and chair of the Department of Education, Culture and Society at the University of Utah. Thank you again for joining us today, Dr. Smith.

Dr. William Smith: Thank you.

Announcer: Tune in next month when Jason Keist of OCCRL interviews Dr. Stephen John Quaye about what prompted his journey into higher education. Keist and Quaye will also discuss issues pertaining to student support, issues related to intergroup dialogues about race, and about civility on college campuses. Dr. Quaye is an associate professor in the Department of Educational Studies at Ohio State University.

Background music for this podcast was provided by Dublab. Thank you for listening and for your contributions to equity, justice, and excellence in education for all students.