

"A NECESSARY BOOK FOR ALL PEOPLE INVESTED IN
SOCIETAL CHANGE." —CLAUDIA RANKINE

WHITE FRAGILITY

WHY IT'S SO HARD



FOR WHITE PEOPLE TO
TALK ABOUT RACISM

ROBIN DIANGELO

FOREWORD BY MICHAEL ERIC DYSON

Adapted from a Guide by Özlem Sensoy and Robin DiAngelo

BEFORE YOU BEGIN: SUGGESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

On Facilitating

Heather Mizeur will be your facilitator for this conversation series. It will be her job to keep the conversation focused, on track, and with equitable sharing time among participants. She will be watching for these common patterns that can arise when white people experience discomfort talking about race. Please spend some time reading this list and becoming familiar with the patterns to either try to avoid the trap yourself during our conversation and/or to be open-minded when you are redirected by the facilitator.

Common Patterns

1. Distancing: Identifiable via expressions including “People should just___,” “Society is___,” “How do I tell my coworker___,” “What about all the people who aren’t here today who should be___,” “The executive team at my workplace___,” and “My family member___.”

Response techniques: “Can you speak to how you see this in *your own* behaviors/thoughts/ beliefs in life/work?” “What part do you see yourself playing?” “What might *you* do...?” “How is the most effective way for someone to talk with *you* about *your* racism?”

2. Checking out: Identifiable via behaviors including texting, working on laptop, engaging in side conversations.

Response techniques: At the start, ask participants to put phones/laptops away. Explain that effective discussion on racism often causes disequilibrium for those of us who are white and that technology functions as a way to check out. Further, when people of color are present, the distraction of technology sends a problematic message. Someone who has an emergency or is expecting a text or call should leave the room at that time. Regarding side conversations, the facilitator might say, “I am having trouble hearing. Please give your attention to the speaker.”

3. Dominating the discussion: The same person or people speaking first, at length, immediately, and/or several times while others sit back in silence.

Response techniques: “Who haven’t we heard from?” “Let’s wait a little longer to make space for people who need more time.” “I’m going to ask that if we have spoken twice already, we wait until everyone else has had a chance before we speak again.” “Let’s go around the table and check in.” “Does anyone else want to share their perspective?” We all have a responsibility to share our thoughts so others in the group know where we’re coming from or what we’re struggling with.”

4. Positioning themselves as already getting this/Giving evidence for why this discussion doesn't apply to them: "I already know all this." "I come from ___ and I can't believe how white it is here." "I realized many years ago that___." "I am married to/have children who are ___," followed by distancing (rather than insight and recognition that this doesn't exempt them and their learning is not finished).

Response techniques: "The book poses an important question, 'How do we know how well we are doing?' "Where do you see your current learning edge?" "DiAngelo states that nothing exempts us from the forces of racism. How are situations that are unique to us still informed by racism?" "How does being white shape one's sense that they are 'beyond' this discussion?" "Can you name three actions in the last month that demonstrate your awareness in practice?"

5. Hopelessness: "Racism is never going to end." "I can't do anything." "What are we supposed to do?" "This is just about making us feel guilty." "We have been doing this for years now and nothing changes." "The administration are the ones that need this and they just don't care."

Response techniques: "The author speaks to the question of guilt. What points does she make?" "If we apply the question the author asks, *How does our discouragement function?* how would we answer?" "What concrete actions have you attempted thus far? What books have you read? What antiracism networks have you joined? The perception that nothing can be done often keeps the existing system in place."

6. Expecting people of color to teach us (white people) about race: Turning to people of color for answers or to go first: "I grew up in a sheltered environment, so I don't know anything about race." "Sharon, tell me about the racism you have experienced." "Sharon, you go first."

Response techniques: If you are in a multiracial reading group, don't assume that the people of color will speak first. If uncertain, ask them what they prefer. "While those of us who are white need to listen to people of color, in this context let's take some risks and go first." "People of color and Indigenous people have spent a lot of time thinking and speaking out about white supremacy and against racism. This is the time for white people to step up to the conversation." "Mainstream society often has us focus on the targets of oppression rather than the agents. In this setting, focusing on people of color can let white people off the hook for naming their participation in racist systems." "How have you managed thus far not to know the answers to your questions on racism?"

Countering Common Patterns via Silence Breakers

These sentence starters, termed “silence breakers,”¹ are suggested openings intended to address two common challenges for white people in cross-racial discussions: First, the fear of losing face, making a mistake, or not being able to manage impressions that often prevent white people from authentic engagement. Second, the lack of humility we often have when discussing racism. The silence breakers can help engender a stance of curiosity and humility that counters the certitude many white people have regarding our racial perspectives. In doing so, they tend to open, rather than close, discussion and connection.

Silence Breakers

- 1. I'm really nervous/scared/uncomfortable saying this and/but ...**
- 2. From my experience/perspective as [identity] ...**
- 3. I'm afraid I may offend someone, and please let know if I do, but ...**
- 4. I'm not sure if this will make any sense, and/but ...**
- 5. I just felt something shift in the room. I'm wondering if anyone else did.**
- 6. It seems as though some people may have had a reaction to that. Can you help me understand why?**
- 7. Can you help me understand whether what I'm thinking right now might be problematic?**
- 8. This is what I understand you to be saying: ____ Is that accurate?**
- 9. I'm having a “yeah but.” Can you help me work through it?**
- 10. I'm engaged but just needing time to process this. What I am working on processing is ____.**

Additional Tips for a Productive Discussion

As DiAngelo notes, white people addressing white fragility surfaces several dilemmas. First, it requires that white people be centered in the conversation about racism. This can be problematic because it reinforces the white centering that is taken for granted in society at large (it is the author's hope, however, that it is a centering that *exposes*, rather than protects, the workings of white supremacy). Second, it positions white people—yet again—as the experts. Based on these dilemmas, the following points are important to keep in mind:

1. This book and its arguments build on antiracism scholarship and activism that people of color have written for generations. That scholarship has been fundamental to the ability of the author to explicate white fragility. Use this text as the starting point—rather than the ending point—to educate yourself on racism. There are many suggestions for engaging with the work of people of color in the Resources for Continuing Education section of the book.

2. The primary goal for white people working to understand racism is not to learn how racism impacts people of color. The primary goal is to recognize how the system of racism shapes *our* lives, how we uphold that system, and how we might interrupt it.

For all readers

The chapter questions are intended to deepen your reflection and understanding of the chapters and constructively inform your response to white fragility.

Keep the following principles in mind. You may need to return to them on occasion, so consider posting them in the room or having them available on cards:

1. **A strong opinion is not the same as informed knowledge.**
2. **There is a difference between *agreement* and *understanding*. When discussing complex social and institutional dynamics such as racism, consider whether “I don’t agree” may actually mean “I don’t understand.”**
3. **We have a deep interest in denying the forms of oppression that benefit us. We may also have an interest in denying forms of oppression that harm us. For example, people of color can deny the existence of racism and even support its structures. This denial may keep them from feeling overwhelmed by the daily slights or protect them from the penalties of confronting white people on racism. However, regardless of the reason, this denial still benefits whites at the group level, not people of color.**
4. **Racism goes beyond individual intentions to collective group patterns.**
5. **We don’t have to be aware of racism in order for it to exist.**
6. **Our racial position (whether we identify as white, a person of color, or multiracial) will greatly affect our ability to see racism. For example, if we swim against the “current” of racial privilege, it’s often easier to recognize, while it’s harder to recognize if we swim with the current.**
7. **Putting our effort into protecting rather than expanding our current worldview prevents our intellectual and emotional growth.**

Before you begin discussing chapter by chapter, spend some time reviewing the guidelines above.

Chapter 1

THE CHALLENGES OF TALKING TO WHITE PEOPLE ABOUT RACISM

1. Identify a passage from chapter 1 that invokes any sense of discomfort. Highlight this passage and return to reading it periodically as you work through the book. What does this passage reveal about your socialization into the white racial frame? Does your discomfort shift over time? If so, what supported that shift?
2. If you are working through these questions as part of a white discussion group, how will you keep the discussion on track (focused on *ourselves* and *our own* participation)? How will you ensure that when common white patterns surface (distancing, intellectualizing, rationalizing), you will work to identify and challenge them rather than ignore or avoid them?
3. How do so many white people feel so confident in their opinions on racism, even as they live their lives in segregation?
4. How can we make generalizations about what it means to be white when we don't know each person's individual story?
5. What are some constructive ways to use your emotional reactions when your opinions on racism are challenged?
6. Explain in your own words the author's critique of the ideology of individualism.

Chapter 2

RACISM AND WHITE SUPREMACY

1. What does it mean to say that race is "socially constructed"?
2. What is the difference between racial prejudice, racial discrimination, and racism?
3. What does the author mean when she says that there is no such thing as reverse racism?
4. How does the birdcage metaphor illustrate oppression?
5. What is scientific racism? Give some examples of how scientific racism is conveyed today.
6. What does Cheryl Harris mean when describing whiteness as a form of property?
7. What is problematic about the idea of the U.S. as a great "melting pot"? How did the melting pot actually work?
8. Discuss Coates's statement that race is the child of racism, not the father.

9. The author cites Ruth Frankenberg's description of whiteness as "a location of structural advantage, a standpoint from which white people look at ourselves, at others, and at society, and a set of cultural practices that are not named or acknowledged." Explain each of these dimensions in your own words.
10. How is the author using the term "white supremacy"?

The White Racial Frame

1. Explain the concept of the *white racial frame*. What are some examples?
2. Take a few minutes to share some of your answers to the reflection questions on pp. 35-37. What surprised you? What patterns in the answers to the reflection questions do you notice within the group?
3. What insights do the answers give you on implicit aspects of our racial socialization?
4. What are some ways in which racism is "deeply embedded in the fabric" of society? Provide some examples.

Chapter 3

RACISM AFTER THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

1. What is the impact of white people not knowing our racial history?
2. What is color-blind racism and why is it problematic?
3. How did racism change and adapt after the civil rights era? Consider attitudes as well as behaviors.
4. Why does the author say that white progressives cause the most daily harm to people of color?
5. Why does the author consider young white people today to be no less racist than white people in the past?
6. How would you respond to someone who says, "Doesn't it all come down to what your parents taught you?"

Additional Questions for Zoom Dialogue Chapters 1-3 on July 7th:

- How are you building racial stamina? Can you give voice to racial discomfort you are experiencing as you read this book? How it feels to be seen racially? What unsettles you?
- What do you notice about your own patterns of socialization that holds racism in place?
- How has individualism reinforced white supremacy in your life?
- Speak to the process of expanding rather than protecting your current worldview
- Whiteness is a position of social and institutional status imbued with legal, political, economic, and social rights and privileges denied to others. Make a list of such privileges you have experienced in your life. What negative experiences have you been shielded from by your white privilege? What positive experiences have they privileges granted?
- Take notice of when defensiveness arises in this work – as you read the book, have conversations, interact in the workplace. Consider finding the courage to share an example of how your defensiveness manifested and what it taught you as a way to facilitate a deeper group conversation
- Do you have any experience with aversive racism?
- Let's talk about "Backstage" and "Frontstage" settings for racial conversations and our experience navigating each

Chapter 4

HOW DOES RACE SHAPE THE LIVES OF WHITE PEOPLE?

1. In what specific ways has your life been shaped by racism?
2. Identify at least three ways that *white racial belonging* has been conveyed to you in the last week (you might start by opening your wallet and looking at the bills there).
3. What are the earliest racial messages you can recall? Try to move beyond what you were openly told and work to identify *implicit* messages.
4. How have you responded? What consequences have you faced or fear you will face by breaking with white solidarity?
5. The author describes the power of segregation. She argues that this segregation is "active." What does this mean?

6. Discuss how various patterns of segregation across your lifespan shape your racial frame.
7. If you are white, which of the patterns discussed in this chapter have you seen in yourself? Which of the patterns challenge you the most? Why?
8. The author states that white ignorance is not simply a matter of not knowing; it is a highly effective response that protects white investments in racism and thus is actively maintained. Discuss this statement.
9. What does the author mean when she says that white people are not, in fact, racially innocent? How can we know much about race if we have lived separately?

Chapter 5

THE GOOD/BAD BINARY

1. What does it mean to say that racism is “a structure, not an event”?
2. The author suggests that one of the most effective barriers to talking about racism with white people is the good/bad binary. How have you seen this binary at work in white responses to charges of racism? How might you respond when the binary surfaces in discussions about racism?
3. If you are white, share some examples of the good/bad binary in your own responses to suggestions that you are complicit with racism.
4. The author lists two types of narratives that are commonly used by white people to deny complicity with racism: *color-blind* and *color-celebrate* (p. 77). Which narratives have you used yourself, or still use? If you could speak back to yourself with the voice of the author, how would you counter the narrative?
5. If you are white, when was the last time someone challenged you to look at an aspect of yourself related to racism? How did you feel? How did you respond? What insights did/can you gain from the exchange? If no one has ever challenged you (or not in a very long time), what might that tell you about how whiteness shapes your life?
- 6.

Chapter 6

ANTI-BLACKNESS

1. The author claims that in the white mind, black people are the ultimate racial other. What does this mean?
2. How does the author make the case that the construction of white identity and white superiority was in fact dependent upon the simultaneous creation of a particular *idea* of blackness? How are these ideas sustained?

3. What are some of the misunderstandings about affirmative action and what do these misunderstandings reveal about anti-blackness?
4. Why haven't affirmative action programs changed our racial outcomes?
5. What does the author mean when she suggests that causing pain and suffering for black people rests on a sense of white righteousness?
6. The author states that the film *The Blind Side* is "insidiously anti-black." Using the framework of the book, explain how a viewer can not notice the anti-black messages yet still be shaped by them.
7. Consider the bulleted list following the author's analysis of *The Blind Side*. In which other films have you seen these racial scripts?
8. In what settings have you experienced the expectation of white solidarity/racial silence? How has that expectation been communicated to you?

Additional Questions for Zoom Dialogue July 14th:

- What striking example can you share from reading and discussing this book that has helped you to better understand who you are from the perspective of your whiteness? What has been revealed to you? Why do you think you did not see it before?
- Can you share an experience with "aha!" moment of reading about the underlying foundations of white fragility? Belonging; freedom from the burden of race; freedom of movement; just people; white solidarity; the good old days; white racial innocence; segregated lives
- After reading about these foundations, do you accept or reject the statement that "I exude a deeply internalized assumption of racial superiority"?
- White solidarity requires both silence (about anything that exposes the advantages of white positioning) and tacit agreement (to remain racially united in the protection of white supremacy). Why does speaking up about racism ruin the ambiance or threaten our career advancement?
- How is it that we have a culture of seeing white segregation as racially innocent?
- What is our complicity with our white privilege?
- Why are we only now having an awakening on what is whiteness? Why haven't we sought out this information before now?
- On page 68 begins a list of socialization patters that are foundational to white fragility. Let's discuss a few:
 - Dismissing what we don't understand
 - Wanting to jump over the hard, personal work to get to "solutions"
 - Guilt that paralyzes or allows inaction
 - A focus on intentions over impact
 - Others?
- Speak to the observation the author makes about how our energy goes to deflecting the charge of racism rather than reflecting on our behavior. How does it feel to yield and allow rather than reject? Are you truly here to learn or justify?

- In what ways do you effort to keep yourselves on the “good” side of a false binary?
- How does it feel instead to view your actions on an active and changing continuum to notice where you are at any one moment?
- Let’s discuss the experience of white guilt and trauma. Have you tried to locate it in your body?
- The author states that “anti-blackness is a complex and confusing stew of resentment and benevolence, for we also use blacks to feel warmhearted and noble. We are drawn to the those who cast eyes downward in our presence...the ones we can ‘save’ from the horrors of their black lives with our abundance and kindness.” Discuss.
- What was your response to the author’s critique of the movie, “The Blind Side?”

Chapter 7

RACIAL TRIGGERS FOR WHITE PEOPLE

1. Discuss the social taboos mentioned on p. 100. Give examples of each from your own life.
2. Explain the triggers listed in this chapter in your own words and share examples of each in daily life.
3. The author writes that white people have limited information about what racism is and how it works, while at the same time they have very strong opinions about racism. Explain how both of these can be true at the same time. In your own words, practice stating the difference between having information about what racism is and having opinions about what racism is.
4. How does the author challenge the idea that our *intentions* are “what count”?
5. Discuss Bourdieu’s concept of *habitus* as a way to understand the racial disequilibrium that leads to white fragility. In what ways is this concept helpful in explaining how racial disequilibrium works?

Chapter 8

THE RESULT: WHITE FRAGILITY

1. What is the “discourse of self-defense”? Have you ever used it? If so, thinking about it now, how did it function in the interaction?
2. Share a time that you experienced your own or another person’s white fragility.
3. What strategies do white people use to reset white racial equilibrium?
4. Why are questions such as “What is the right thing to say?” or “What am I supposed to say?” the wrong questions? How might you respond the next time you hear these questions?

5. The author claims that white fragility functions as a form of bullying. How so?
6. What is meant by the statement that white fragility is “white racial control.” How does white fragility function as racial control?
7. The author ends this chapter by sharing an interaction with a man of color who, when asked what it would be like for white people to be open to feedback, replied, “It would be revolutionary.” She asks white readers to consider the profundity of this man’s reply. What feelings did you have when you read that response?
8. How might this man’s reply inform how you respond to feedback from people of color, going forward?

Chapter 9

WHITE FRAGILITY IN ACTION

1. Why are white people more receptive to other white people (rather than people of color) educating them on race? What does this say about the role white people must play in addressing systemic racism in society broadly and specifically in our homes, with our friends and family members, and in our workplaces with our colleagues?
2. What are the opportunities and dilemmas of white people educating each other on racism?
3. Discuss the *claims* on pp. 119-120. Have you ever made any of these claims?
4. Now consider the *assumptions* underlying those claims on p. 121. Which ones have you held? Do you still hold some of these? If so, how do they function for you and what would it mean to you to shift them (what do you see yourself as having to “give up”)?
5. What is the language of self-defense and why is it problematic?

Additional Questions for Zoom Dialogue July 21st:

- In what ways do you notice being isolated from race-based stress?
- Which of the reasons for white defensiveness on racism resonate with you?
- What are your earliest memories of racialization? Think back to childhood
- How did you feel reading this sentence: “White children born in the U.S. inherit the moral predicament of living in a white supremacist society.”
- The author suggests that white people’s moral objection to racism increases their resistance to acknowledging their complicity with it. How would you rate your level of resistance? Have you identified ways that you are/have been complicit?

- Spend time thinking about the default way that white people use the coded language of violence to describe being “attacked” when our racism, racialization, or white privilege is pointed out. Has this been your experience?
- Discuss what the author means by suggesting that white people have split consciousness on race that leads to irrationality and incoherence.
- Do you have an example of having your white equilibrium being thrown off balance?
- Let’s discuss how white fragility is a form of white racial control
- The author says that white people are receptive to the presentation of this information in the abstract but that white fragility gets triggered if you name a racially problematic dynamic in the moment. How would you respond in this group if Heather were to point out and gently correct something that you say?
- Spend extra time absorbing the concept of what feelings and behaviors are triggered when our assumptions and behaviors on race are challenged; and reviewing the claims that white people suggest when challenged; what assumptions those claims rest on; and most, importantly, how all of this promotes the functions of white fragility.

Chapter 10

WHITE FRAGILITY AND THE RULES OF ENGAGEMENT

1. The author presents a set of eleven “cardinal rules” (pp. 123-24) when giving feedback to white people regarding racist assumptions and patterns. For each rule of engagement, provide an example of the rule in action.
2. What assumptions do these rules rest on?
3. DiAngelo presents these rules in a language of critique in order to reveal how they function. Of course the “rules” are rarely explicitly expressed this way. Consider what you hear white people say that communicates “do not give me feedback under any circumstances.” Go through each of the eleven rules and share how you have heard these rules expressed in practice.
4. How would you rewrite these rules from an antiracist framework? (See attached worksheet)
5. In your own words, what is problematic about common guidelines for building trust in discussions about racism (e.g., “don’t judge”)? How do these guidelines function? Who are they for? Whose comfort do they protect?
6. The rules of engagement around white fragility have at least three parts: those giving feedback, those receiving feedback, and those witnessing these exchanges. Practice some language for each by preparing your own “sentence starters” such as the silence breakers above. How might you begin to give

feedback? How might you respond to feedback given to you? What might you say as you witness an exchange of feedback?

Chapter 11

WHITE WOMEN'S TEARS

1. The author opens this chapter with the story of a woman of color in a multiracial group stating that she did not want to be subjected to white women's tears. Why were white women asked not to cry in the group?
2. The author argues that emotions are political. How are emotions political?
3. What does it mean to take an "intersectional" approach? Provide some examples.
4. Throughout the book the author reinforces the idea that we "bring our histories with us." What does this mean and why is it so important?
5. White women often assume a shared sisterhood with women of color. What is problematic about this assumption?
6. Discuss some of the ways in which white men's fragility manifests. What is important for white men to understand about the impact of each of these behaviors?
7. The author writes, "Since many of us have not learned how racism works and our role in it, our tears may come from shock and distress about what we didn't know or recognize. For people of color, our tears demonstrate our racial insulation and privilege" (pp. 135-36). Discuss this passage and the ways that white emotional distress and shock (tears, defensiveness, anger, grief) shape conversations on racism. What do these dynamics reveal about the sociopolitical function of emotions
8. Consider how emotions function in public space. For instance, how do white people often read the emotions of women of color, and peoples of color generally? Consider how emotions are read racially by white people with cultural figures such as Serena Williams, Nicki Minaj, Cory Booker, Maxine Waters, and Mazie Hirono, as well as the way that institutions (like media) respond to emotions in racialized ways. Conversely, how are the emotions of white people read (and the intersections between race and gender in all readings)? Consider cultural figures such as Christine Blasey Ford, Elizabeth Warren, Brett Kavanaugh, Lindsey Graham, and Donald Trump.

Chapter 12

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

1. Using an antiracist framework, how would you respond to a white person who said, “You just want me to feel bad and guilty about something that I had nothing to do with”?
2. Very little if anything in society at large supports us to persist in the work of antiracism. In fact, much pressures us *not* to continue the work. Because of this, we need to set up support for ourselves to continue. How will you set up support for yourself to stay on the journey? How will you resist complacency? Consider both in-group support and racially mixed group support networks. How will both settings be important in different ways?
3. The author states that it isn’t enough for white people to be nice and that, in fact, racism depends on white people simply being nice. Discuss this statement. How does niceness alone uphold the racial status quo?
4. If we accept that racism is always operating, the question becomes not “*Is* racism taking place?” but rather “*How* is racism taking place in this specific context?” How does awareness of that change how we think about our lives and our actions?
5. The author shares a time that she perpetrated racism toward a coworker and the steps she took to repair the damage. Identify the underlying antiracist assumptions listed on pp. 142-143 that are demonstrated in these steps.
6. Discuss the suggestions for continuing the work of antiracism. Which are the most challenging? How can you meet those challenges?

Additional Questions for Zoom Dialogue July 28th:

- The author states that feedback is key to our ability to recognize and repair our inevitable and often unaware collusion with white supremacy. As you fill out the attached worksheet on reframing the white rules of engagement, what do you notice about your own patters of collusion? What have been your blind spots?
- Stopping our racist patterns must be more important than working to convince others that we don’t have them. How has reading this book, doing a deeper internal examination, and participating in this group helping you in this regard?
- What, if any, emotional response did you have reading the chapter on White Women’s Tears?
- Practice embodying the behaviors and feelings that come from a more enlightened approach to receiving feedback on our racist patterns of being.

- **Practice the examples of claims that upend racism on p. 141. Envision yourself being corrected about something racist you said or did and how it would be to respond with these claims rather than defensiveness or justifications.**
- **Do you have any examples of repair from situations in your own life that you feel comfortable sharing with the group? Do you feel readier and more capable to be courageous in this way moving forward?**
- **We must never consider ourselves finished with our learning!**