

Curriculum for NCC Psychiatry DEI Home Study

White Fragility

Estimated Completion Time: 8 hours

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Required Prior Reading:

DiAngelo, Robin. White fragility. *International Journal of Critical Pedagogy*. 2011

<https://libjournal.uncg.edu/ijcp/article/viewFile/249/116>

Suggested Reading/Watching:

DiAngelo, Robin. *White Fragility: Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism*. 2018

Kendi, Ibram X. *How to be an Antiracist*. 2019

Kendi, Ibram X. TED Talk. [The difference between being "not racist" and antiracist | Ibram X. Kendi](#)

McWhorter, John. The Dehumanizing Condescension of White Fragility. *The Atlantic*. July 15, 2020. [How 'White Fragility' Talks Down to Black People](#)

Bergner, Daniel. 'WhiteFragility' Is Everywhere But Does Antiracism Training Work?. *The New York Times*. July 15, 2020. ['White Fragility' Is Everywhere. But Does Antiracism Training Work? \(Published 2020\)](#)

Transcript for:

NCC Psychiatry's [Companion Podcast to *White Fragility*](#) (30 minutes)

By: Dr. T. Ryan O'Leary

INTRO

In 2011, Robin DiAngelo published a paper titled “White fragility” in the *International Journal of Critical Pedagogy*. Few noticed. Then, in 2018, she published a book titled *White Fragility: Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism*. The book has now spent years as a best seller, and DiAngelo became a prominent white voice in the antiracism movement. It should be noted here that the antiracism movement is not a single ideology, but a collection of different thinkers, philosophers, and intellectuals in many fields who seek to define different ways in which simply claiming to “not be a racist” is not enough. The intent of this podcast is to inspire the listener to engage with antiracism literature with a critical mind. The end result being, hopefully, to help cultivate a culture of engagement in racial issues.

DiAngelo's book is one perspective. It is not a feel good story about overcoming racial prejudice that makes the heart warm. Instead, it inspires more than a little discomfort. It makes people fume. It makes them scream. It makes them write scathing responses. It also got her an invitation to speak to 184 Democratic members of Congress; this, in addition to invitations to numerous American corporations including Goldmans Sachs, Nike, and Google.

Today, I'd like to take a look at what her initial paper and subsequent book is trying to achieve, why so many people are praising it, why DiAngelo says it angers so many people, and why other people say it angers them.

As a disclaimer, I should state that my analysis and opinions are my own, even when I quote others, I do it using a framework that I conceived. I am NOT a race scholar, and my knowledge on this subject is sorely limited.

As a middle-aged, mostly white, middle class male, I am one of the primary targets DiAngelo has identified as suffering from white fragility. According to DiAngelo white fragility is a collection of beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors that serve to shield people who look like me from engaging in a meaningful way with issues surrounding race and ethnicity. Because I do not engage, I perpetuate a system that is inherently white supremacist. I benefit from this system so I have no motivation other than a moral imperative to change it. According to DiAngelo, it is impossible for this system to change unless I and hundreds of millions of others like me CHANGE... and RADICALLY so... but as I'll discuss later, I am not her only target. An entire economic and political system sits in her crosshairs.

My birthright is whiteness. As a white person, I get to pretty much ignore race if I want to. It has little effect on me. In fact, I get to say things like, "I wasn't raised racist. I was raised to treat everyone equally. I am not part of the problem. I am part of the solution. After all, race isn't even really a thing. Science has proved that. It's just a social construct my parents, grandparents, and their ancestors used to hold onto power. Society has mostly moved beyond it, so let's talk about something else, something that really matters." Then I can drop the mic and walk away, proud of myself for my infinite wokeness.

Robin DiAngelo disagrees. She is a doctor of Multicultural Education and tenured professor at Westfield State University in Massachusetts. She was employed as a facilitator hired by various organizations to teach their members about race and racism, and more specifically, how not to be racist. Over decades, while doing this, DiAngelo began to notice how defensive and angry many of the people, especially white people, in the audience would become. Many others would just politely listen and then disengage. She also noticed how this would affect the people of color in attendance, who were effectively silenced and marginalized. DiAngelo sees these groups as a recapitulation of

society itself. She summarizes the concept of white fragility thus: “White Fragility is a state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves. These moves include the outward display of emotions such as anger, fear, and guilt, and behaviors such as argumentation, silence, and leaving the stress-inducing situation. These behaviors, in turn, function to reinstate white racial equilibrium.”

She points out that over the decades that she taught these groups, white people have become less reactive. Initially, just the mention of racial inequality might inspire angry white men to complain about how affirmative action is racist and white people can't get jobs anymore. She would look around the room and marvel at the irony of all the gainfully employed white faces staring back at her. She notes that now, she can talk in generalities (such as saying things like, “we are all racist”) without arousing much of a response, but as soon as she implies that any person in the room may have implicit racial biases and act in racist ways, the typical response is denial, anger, argumentation, or even tears. She goes even further and chastises white women for crying in these groups, reminding them that white women's tears have led to the beatings, imprisonment and lynching of many thousands of innocent black men. She also insists that crying or any display of guilt by whites is selfish and racist, as it serves to take away the attention in the room from people of color, so that a white person can receive comfort.

DiAngelo also unsettles white people by redefining what they may traditionally regard as racism. She states that racial prejudice and racial discrimination are not in fact racism. They may result from racism, but they are not in and of themselves racism. For her, racism is the system that supports racial prejudice and discrimination in favor of white people and against non-whites. It consists of culture, laws, policies, institutions, and economic systems that are designed by white supremacists for white supremacist purposes. She also makes clear in her book that for white people, blacks represent the epitome of the “other,” and the group that white people have the most difficult time relating to in any meaningful way. In this formulation, people of color, especially black people,

cannot be truly or actually racist, because by definition, they are not the beneficiaries of white supremacy. The only kind of racism is white racism. In fact, all white people are racist because they exist in this system. To call a non-white person racist is pointless because they do not benefit from the racist system. A person of color may demonstrate prejudice or racial discrimination, but this is not racism by definition because it cannot benefit them.

DiAngelo is unapologetic. She calls whites who believe they are not racist “uneducated” (page 107), and those who make claims of reverse-racism “petty and delusional” (page 54). She also castigates white faces that insist they must always be in a situation in which they can TRUST that they will not be personally attacked. To call me a racist is to call me a bad person. I am not a bad person, therefore, I am not a racist. She wants white people to realize that to be a racist was not an intentional act, but something that happened to them. It was woven into the fabric of our being, and to deny it is to deny reality. For DiAngelo, a white person’s intentions are entirely independent of whether or not one is racist. Additionally, white people are ignorant of just how racist we are. We even used coded language to hide our racism from ourselves. Using excuses such as “bad neighborhoods” or “under-performing” schools is a way to convince ourselves we didn’t move somewhere because of a factor other than the proportion of people of color on the block. We are swimming in a racist ocean.

DiAngelo points out that because whites are so intentionally separate from people of color, we have engineered our own ignorance. Therefore, unintentionally offensive comments are racist whether we meant them to be or not. She goes so far as to say, “[N]othing in mainstream US culture gives us the information we need to have the nuanced understanding of arguably the most complex and enduring social dynamic of the last several hundred years.” She feels uniquely qualified to fill that void. Her books and workshops are not designed to be nice places where people can talk about their feelings. They are meant to be battlefields where she ferrets out unwitting racists with the hope that they will walk away a good deal more aware of their role in perpetuating a racist system.

To support this move from defining racism as something we believe or do toward something we are and participate in, she also attacks the ideas of individualism, universalism, and merit. According to DiAngelo, we are not UNIQUE INDIVIDUALS, insulated from our context. We cannot be color blind. We see with white eyes, and the world around us is mostly white. According to DiAngelo, there is no individual white experience that could possibly make someone unique enough to not at least unintentionally benefit from the racist system. All white people have a white identity, whether they chose it or not. This white identity causes us to depend on a view of UNIVERSAL humanity as representing the values of white people. When we imagine an archetypal human, we imagine a white human. Therefore, any plea to universal values, is a plea to white values. We also are not beneficiaries of our own individual merit within a system of universal values that apply equally to everyone. Our worth and merit are judged according to white values in a sorely limited puddle amongst an ocean of possible values.

By convincing white people of their fragility, DiAngelo's stated aim is to "increase racial stamina." She wants white people to abandon their racial narratives, and to spend more time and more quality time discussing racial issues with people of color. She wants us to do this without defensiveness, without outrage, without disengaging. She admits during her book that she is not proposing any systemic solutions to racism. She is proposing only that white people recognize their privilege and their fragility and by doing this become true allies in the antiracism struggle.

Maybe stop and re-listen to the first part of this podcast. There was a lot to digest there and a lot of emotionally charged rhetoric. When you feel comfortable moving on, I'll discuss some of the criticisms of DiAngelo and a few examples of how other antiracist thinkers have formulated things a little differently.

DiAngelo is not without her critics.

On Thursday, June 28, 2018 at the Seattle Central library, DiAngelo made this statement to a packed audience. “[I]f you are white and you have not devoted years of sustained study, struggle, and focus on this topic, your opinions are necessarily very limited.”

 **Dr. Robin DiAngelo discusses 'White Fragility'** One can wonder, then, what can her workshop actually accomplish? Daniel Bergner in a New York Times article asks this very question. After following DiAngelo on tour attending speech after speech and workshop after workshop, he wonders if antiracist training has any impact at all. He quotes Frank Dobbin, a Harvard sociologist, whose research has shown that antiracist training does not result in greater equity or inclusion in the institutions where it is practiced. In fact, Dobbin has more recent data suggesting that it might backfire. He suspects this because it activates rather than disintegrates racial stereotypes. He believes this is especially true if employees feel forced into the training. Maybe the white fragility that DiAngelo sees activated in her antiracism training is not only shielding white people, but making the outcome of her training contrary to its purpose.

Anti-capitalist

Some suggest that her arguments are not actually structured to deconstruct racism itself, but capitalism specifically. Implicit in DiAngelo's and other's work is that to be antiracist, you must also be anti-capitalist. She avoids attacking capitalism directly in her writings, but instead attacks some of the ideas that people use to defend or criticize capitalism. Remember her attacks on individualism, universalism, and meritocracy? These criticisms are well within the wheelhouse of socialist intellectuals arguing that capitalism must go. When pressed in an interview by Daniel Bergner in the NY Times, Di Angelo admits that she intentionally avoids exposing her anti-capitalist narrative, “Capitalism is so bound up with racism. I avoid critiquing capitalism — I don't need to give people reasons to dismiss me.” But by redefining racism as the system, she implicitly equates capitalism and racism. She goes a long way in her book trying to fight the perceived dichotomy between being a racist and being a bad person. She does this by telling me it was not my fault that I am a racist. The system that tried to convince me of my unique individuality, the universal worth of my values, and that I will be rewarded for my merit made me this way. This original sin

doesn't apply to the system itself because the system is the Creator. If the system is what racism is and the system is capitalist, then capitalism is racism.

A different definition of racism.

This segues nicely into the next criticism. It is that DiAngelo's definition of racism is far too limited. One may argue that racism is not the system itself, but a quality of some aspects of the system, because it was built by racists, in the same way that our right handed builders made a right handed system. To be capitalist is not to be right handed. One could go farther and say, to merely be a white person part of the white system is not to be a racist, but to support racist ideas, speak racists thoughts, deny you have racist thoughts, do racist deeds, and support racist policies is what racism really is.

Ibrahim X. Kendi, author of *How to Be an Antiracist*, has a more broad definition of racism and what it means to be antiracist than DiAngelo. In his TED Talk on June 17, 2020 he stated, "A 'not racist' is a racist who is in denial. And an antiracist is someone who is willing to admit the times in which they are being racist and who is willing to recognize the inequities and problems, racial problems, of our society and who is willing to challenge those racial inequities by challenging policy."

 The difference between being "not racist" and antiracist | Ibram X. Kendi

This is more than slightly different from DiAngelo's formulation, because Kendi is stating that everyone can in fact be a racist. In her book, DiAngelo argues that a person such as Kendi, because he is black and does not benefit from white supremacy, could not really be a racist, though he might say racially prejudicial things, even about other black people. Kendi includes himself in the group of racists and hopes to show us how to become an antiracist. In the first chapter of his book, Kendi recounts giving a racist speech in highschool during which he perpetuates black male stereotypes in order to receive applause and an award.

Kendi goes on in his TED Talk to define racism more clearly. He states, “Racist is a descriptive term. It describes what a person is saying or doing at any given moment. And so when a person in one moment is expressing a racist idea, in that moment they are being racist, when they are saying, ‘Black people are lazy.’ If in the very next moment, they are appreciating the cultures of native people, they are being antiracist.”

▶ The difference between being "not racist" and antiracist | Ibram X. Kendi

He goes on, “To be antiracist is to make mistakes... is to recognize when we make a mistake... for us what’s critical is to have those very clear definitions, so that we can assess our words; we can assess our deeds, and when we make a mistake, we just own up to it and say, ‘You know what? That was a racist idea... that was supporting a racist policy, but I’m going to change.’” In short, Kendi does not reserve racism for white people or for systems, but for all things.

▶ The difference between being "not racist" and antiracist | Ibram X. Kendi

Regardless of some differences in defining racism, Kendi has been quoted as admiring the “unapologetic critique” of DiAngelo’s style. It is her unapologetic nature that gives others pause.

John McWhorter and “The Dehumanizing Condescension of *White Fragility*.”

Another black writer would disagree that DiAngelo is in fact antiracist. To John McWhorter, DiAngelo’s work represents “the prayer book for what can only be described as a cult.” John McWhorter is a professor of linguistics at Columbia University, a self described liberal Democrat, and the author of many books. In a contributing piece to the Atlantic, he argues that DiAngelo’s book is not an answer to racism, but doubles down on racial stereotypes of blacks as needing to be treated like children and harms all people of color. He goes so far as to say, “Few books about race have more openly infantilized Black people than this supposedly authoritative tome.” He references her admonitions for white people not to openly display guilt or suffering around black people in her groups and her advice that white people should not ask their black friends about how racism affects them, but instead look it up on the internet. In another section of her book, DiAngelo orders me as a white person who thinks that I have offended a black person unintentionally to avoid talking to

that black person until I first have sought advice from another white person who I trust to challenge me. Only after gaining a sympathetic white person's perspective, should I approach my black colleague and ask if it is ok to apologize. McWhorter states, "DiAngelo's outlook rests upon a depiction of Black people as endlessly delicate poster children within this self-gratifying fantasy about how white America needs to think—or, better, stop thinking. Her answer to white fragility, in other words, entails an elaborate and pitilessly dehumanizing condescension toward Black people." Ouch! I wonder what white person DiAngelo would go seeking advice for how to respond to that last comment?

Personal Statement

Aside from being SNARKY, and my last comment was immensely SNARKY, I will end with some of my own thoughts, and remind you that this representation of DiAngelo is my own formulation, and you should make your own by actually engaging the material.

I also identify some additional weaknesses I think are worth sharing. For one, multi-racial people are effectively excluded from her discussion and people of color other than black people are marginalized in her analysis. She states in her introduction that she does this intentionally because she believes that anti-black sentiment is the most severe aspect of white supremacy. Blacks are the ultimate other. In ethics classes, I remember being taught to try to take the most extreme example of a situation in which an ethical principle can be applied and see if the principle still works. Just because it doesn't work, doesn't mean that it is not useful in less extreme cases, but it exposes its limits. DiAngelo's logic is almost the opposite. She tries to get her reader to see her principles as they function well in the most extreme circumstances and then tries to get us to assume that they work as well in the less extreme. It is either that, or she is trying to convince me that things are so bad that there are no less extreme circumstances out there. I believe the greatest weakness in DiAngelo's arguments may be that she extrapolates her experiences as a diversity trainer to society at large. In science this is called the problem of external validity.

Her classroom is her experimental space. Are the results she gets there really able to explain or affect racism on a larger scale?

I can personally attest to witnessing intense racial reactions from myself, among my friends and my family throughout my life. I was taught in one of my Sunday school classes that the mark given to Cain after killing his brother Abel in the Bible's creation story was to make him black, and that is why black people are forced to suffer. This explicit racism was just one part of the racist ocean in which I swam. Probably the most common deflection of serious discussion of racial and ethnic issues I have used in the past is some form of intellectual argumentation. I know that I have, along with other American whites, been guilty of trying to argue for a "universal" human experience, applying the values, behaviors, and other norms that I developed within white culture as objective standards. I doubt, had my youth been less angsty and full of rejecting-as-much-of-what-I-had-previously-been-taught as it was, that I would have had any reason to question those beliefs. Without any intrinsic struggle pre-existing, it is hard to get people to question this stuff.

Defensive whites like me are masters of using our individual experiences to deflect personal responsibility for racial injustice by asserting our own innocence for the sins of our fathers and mothers. Common reactions to challenging this idea include intense anger, defensiveness, and rejection. A good friend of mine and late night debate partner of many years has threatened to cut me out of his life if I dare mention "White Privilege" in the presence of his children. His argument was that even if white children are relatively privileged by history, to see themselves as privileged and to see others as not would inculcate ideas of racism into them that were not already present. And this is the big difference between how my friend sees his children and how DiAngelo sees them. My friend sees them as innocents, untainted by racist thoughts, whereas DiAngelo sees them as little white supremacists who just don't know it yet. She might say that mine or my friend's "moral objection to racism increases white resistance to acknowledging complicity with it."

But most people are not at the extremes. They exist in a fluctuating stream of emotions, thoughts, and behaviors that are very context dependent. The purpose of this discussion is not to sell you that the concept of White Fragility will somehow change the way that society approaches racial issues or even to convince you that it will not. The purpose is to expose you to a concept that may help you understand why so many people, white or not, find it hard to engage in racial discussions and maybe give some clues as to some of the ways the progress of ideas, values, and policies relating to race can be unintentionally halted by the power brokers in society who incorrectly already view themselves as sympathetic.