

White Fragility – Diangelo, Robin

Identity politics: Focus on the barriers specific group face in their struggle for equality.

Identity politics is what forms change. For example: Women's suffrage. Women could not grant their own right to vote. It required men to establish this justice. Naming who has access and who doesn't guide our efforts in challenging injustice. (xiv)

Racial stamina is weak, because there hasn't been an opportunity to experience the other side. White fragility isn't a weakness, because it is actually a powerful means of white racial control and protection of white advantage. (2)

Racism is often taught as discrete acts committed by individual people, rather than as a complex, interconnected system. We are taught that only bad people are racist. (3)

The way we are taught to define racism makes it virtually impossible for white people to understand it. Given our racial insulation, coupled with misinformation, any suggestion that we are complicit in racism is a kind of welcome and insulting shock to the system. If, however, I understand racism as a system into which I was socialized, I can receive feedback on my problematic racial patterns as a helpful way to support my learning and growth. (4)

The author believes white progressives cause the most daily damage to people of color. These are the people who think they are not racist, because the degree that we think we have arrived, we will put our energy into making sure that others see us as having arrived. None of our energy will go into what we need to be doing for the rest of our lives: engaging in ongoing self-awareness, continuing education, relationship building, and actual practice. (5)

Race is discussed as theirs, not mine. Being seen racially is a common trigger for white fragility, and thus to our stamina. Therefore, the first challenge: naming our race. (7)

Western Ideology

Two key Western ideologies: individualism and objectivity. Individualism holds that we are each unique and stand apart from others, even those within our social group. Objectivity tells us that it is possible to be free of all bias. Individualism states that each of us is a unique individual and that our group memberships are irrelevant to our opportunities; there are no intrinsic barriers to individual success. (10)

We come to understand who we are by understanding who we are not. Because of the emphasis on individuality, we become unskilled at reflecting upon group membership. We are taught that to have a racial viewpoint is to be biased. Unfortunately, this belief protects our biases, because denying that we have them ensures we won't examine or change them. (11) Consider this examination: I am white, and I have had X experience. How did X shape me as a result of also being white? (13)

The idea of race as a biological construct makes it easy to believe that many of the divisions, we see in society are natural. Race, like gender, is socially constructed. (15)

Racism vs. Prejudice vs. Discrimination

Prejudice: Pre-judgement about another person based on social groups to which that person belongs. All humans have prejudice, and to state otherwise demonstrates a lack of self-awareness. However, there is a prevailing message that prejudice is bad, so we try to deny its unavoidable reality. (19)

Discrimination: An action based on prejudice. Prejudice always manifests itself in action because the way I see the world drives my actions in the world. Everyone has prejudice, and everyone discriminates. (20)

Racism: A structure, not an event. Racism, like other ‘isms’, occurs when prejudice is backed by legal authority and institutional control. This authority and control transform individual prejudices into a far-reaching system that no longer depends on the good intentions of individuals; it becomes the default of the society and is reproduced automatically. (21)

Think of whiteness as all the aspects of being white – aspects beyond physicality, those related to material advantage as the result of being defined as white in society. (25)

There is no White History Month, because white history is implied in the absence of its acknowledgement; white history is the norm for history. (27)

White supremacy vs. White nationalism

White supremacy refers not to individual white people and their individual intentions/actions, but to an overarching political, economic, and social system of domination. (28) We name socialism, capitalism, and fascism as political systems to be identified and studied, but white supremacy is rendered invisible within political systems. (29) White supremacy is more pervasive and subtle, because it describes a culture we live in where whiteness is ideal.

White nationalists are actions of explicit individuals or defined groups.

Racism

The full weight of responsibility rests with those who control the institutions. (33)

Race is encoded in geography. (e.g. A neighborhood going up with more whiteness, where a neighborhood going down will have less whiteness.) (36)

Racism can still exist because it is highly adaptable, as all systems of oppression are adaptive. Therefore, we must identify how it changes over time. (40)

A common response in the name of color blindness is to declare that an individual who says that race matters is the one who is racist. In other words, it is racist to acknowledge race. (41)

Racial defensiveness is rooted in the false belief that discrimination can only be intentional. Our lack of understanding implicit bias leads to aversive racism.

Aversive racism is a manifestation of racism that well-intentioned people who see themselves as educated and progressive are more likely to exhibit. It exists under the surface of consciousness because it conflicts with consciously held beliefs of racial equality and justice, and it allows maintenance of positive self-image (e.g. I have lots of friends of color.) (43)

Perceptions of criminal activity are influenced by race. (45)

Frontstage settings (behaviors demonstrated in front of people of color) are different than backstage performances (behaviors without people of color present). Frontstage: Acting overly nice; Mimicking speech from the outside group; Being careful to avoid racial terms/labels. Backstage: Humor at the expense of another group. Backstage behavior is often perpetuated through peer pressure to “be a good sport” and “not be so sensitive.” (49)

White Racial freedom

White people do not have to worry about others feel about our race. We are free to move in virtually any space seen as normal, neutral, or valuable. Our race is rarely ever named, because whites are “just people.”

White solidarity is silence about anything that exposes the advantages of whiteness. To break white solidarity is to break rank. There are very real consequences for breaking white solidarity, which helps maintain white supremacy. To keep quiet about racism gets rewarded with social capital (e.g. you’re not being the difficult one). (59)

It has not been African Americans who resist integration efforts; it has always been whites. (61)

People of color are expected to speak to issues of race – and in white terms – and this allows white people to sit back and let people of color take very real risks of invalidation and retaliation as they share experiences. We are not required to take similar cross-racial risks. (62)

The criminal behaviors of white juveniles are often seen as caused by external factors, whereas when black and Latinx youth commit the same crimes, it is attributed as something internal to the person. Our race alone establishes our innocence. (63)

Upward mobility is the great class goal in the United States, and the social environment gets tangibly whiter the higher up you climb. Whiter environments are seen as the most desirable. (66)

The most profound message of racial segregation may be that the absence of people of color from our lives is no real loss. (67) The focus on intentions over impact is a critical facet of white fragility.

Race Binarism

Racist = Bad Not Racist = Good

Color-blind statements insist that people do not see race. (I treat everyone the same). Color-celebration statements insist that people embrace racial differences (I work in a diverse environment).

Instead of asking, “Is this claim true/false?” ask “How does this claim function in this conversation/environment?” The answer to the second question demonstrates how color-blind and color-celebration statements take race off the table by exempting the person from responsibility. (78)

It is impossible to teach someone to treat everyone the same, because people are not objective. Further, we shouldn’t want to treat everyone the same as we all have unique needs and relationships. (79)

For most whites, being the minority is usually temporary. (83)

It is useful to think of yourself on the continuum instead of viewing ourselves within a racist/bad v not racist/ good binary. (87)

Unracialized Identities

We as white people must suspend our perception of ourselves as unique and/or outside race. Exploring our collective racial identity interrupts a key privilege of dominance – the ability to see oneself only as an individual. We must discuss white people as a group in order to disrupt our unracialized identities. (89)

Racially coded language such as “urban”, “inner city” and “disadvantaged” but rarely using “white”, “over-advantaged” or “privileged” is part of the norm. (100)

Habitus: the repetitive practices of actors within their environments. Repetition leads to reproduced thoughts, perceptions, expressions, and actions.

Bourdieu's theory applied to white fragility: Field, Habitus, Capital. Field is the specific social context the person is in. Capital is the social value people hold in a particular field. Habitus includes a person's internalized awareness of their status, as well as responses to the status of others. We don't respond consciously to disequilibrium in the habitus; we respond unconsciously. White fragility is a state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress in the habitus becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves. (103) This is often why it becomes difficult to separate intentions from impact. (105)

White people's moral objection to racism increases their resistance to acknowledging their complicity with it. (108)

White fragility functions as a form of bullying: I am going to make it so miserable for you to confront me that you will back off, give up, and never raise the issue again. (112)

White Fragility in Action

Feelings: Insulted; Scared; Shamed; Angry; Judged

Behaviors: Crying; Arguing; Leaving; Avoiding

Claims: Presenting what exempts the person (You are judging me; I know people of color.)

Assumptions: The basis by which claims rest (Racism is conscious bias. I have none, so I am not racist.)

Functions: Trivialize, Silence, Protect, Maintain, Hijack. (122)

Instead – Allow feedback; Build racial stamina; Thank the provider of feedback. Foundations of trust – Don't judge; Don't make assumptions; Assume good intentions; Speak your truth; Respect. Let go of the messenger and focus on the message. (128)

Emotions are political in two keyways: They are shaped by our biases, beliefs, and cultural framework; They are not natural as they are result of creating meaning among relationships. Social relationships are political, so emotions are also political because they are often externalized, and they drive behaviors that impact others. (132)

When a white woman cries over some aspect of racism, the attention immediately goes to her, demanding time, energy, and attention from everyone else when they should be focus on ameliorating racism. (134) Tears driven by white guilt are self-indulgent. Instead, reflect on when we cry and when we don't, and why. What does it take to move us? Consider if your emotional response is taking up space for someone else. Grief must lead to sustained and transformative action, because our emotions are indicators of our internal framework.

Next Steps

Ask: What has enabled you to be a full, educated, professional adult and not know what to do about racism?

Then: Do whatever it takes for you to internalize the above assumptions.

Finally: Take the initiative and find out on your own.

During repairs, don't focus on your intention but rather on the impact of behaviors. Apologize for the impact, and do not be passive with it (If you were offended...). Ask the offended what you missed and make a commitment to doing better.

Strive to be "less white" which is to be less racially oppressive. This requires more racial awareness, better education, and the willingness to challenge racial certitude and arrogance. Be interested and stop privileging the comfort of white people over the pain of racism. Strive for a less white identity for self-liberation, not to save people of color. Try to affirm a person's perspective before sharing your own and try to point the finger inward and not outward. (150)

Niceness is not courageous.