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

WHITE FRAGILITY

New York Times BESTSELLER

WHY IT'S SO HARD FOR WHITE PEOPLE TO TALK ABOUT RACISM
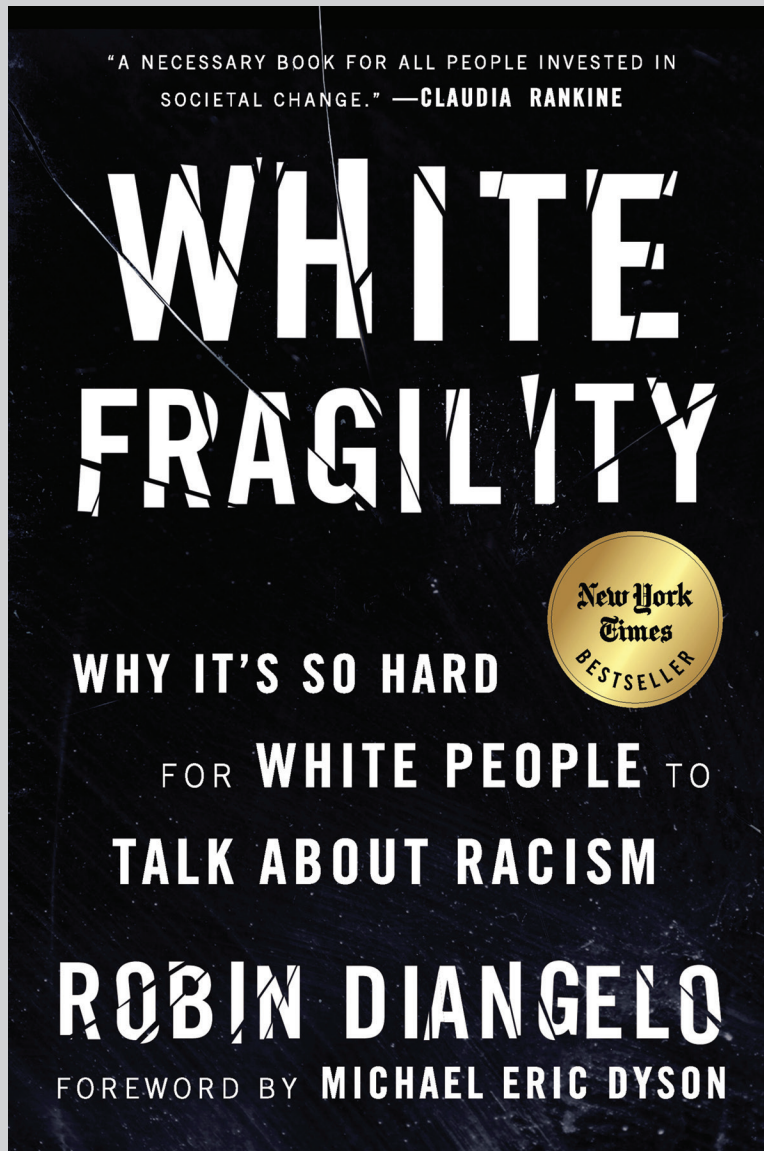
ROBIN DIANGELO
FOREWORD BY MICHAEL ERIC DYSON

Guide by
Özlem Sensoy and Robin DiAngelo

BEFORE YOU BEGIN:
SUGGESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

This reading guide is intended to support formal and informal discussions of *White Fragility*. We offer the following pedagogical tips as you organize your discussion.

On Size

Small group discussions work best when the size of the group is large enough to advance discussion, but not so large that any member of the group can avoid sharing—or conversely, wants to share, but cannot find airtime to do so. For this reason, it is recommended that groups target a size of five to seven members. If you are part of a larger study group, just organize yourselves into smaller sub groups of approximately five people.

On Composition

There can be strategic advantages to organizing yourself into what are sometimes called *affinity groups*, wherein people with a shared identity (such as cis-men, or Asian women, or Indigenous people) work through issues particular to them, in a closed group. If your group is diverse, discuss how you want to organize yourselves (in a mixed group or an affinity group for all or part of various chapter discussions).

On Monitoring the Group

If you are self-monitoring your group, discuss how you will assign a facilitator for each session. This can be a rotating responsibility if you plan to meet over multiple sessions. The task of the facilitator will include keeping the discussion on topic, ensuring shared airtime, and note-taking (if part of a formal discussion group), as well as ensuring that the group's time is monitored.

On Facilitating

Tips for facilitators of white discussion groups

Based on the following patterns, it is highly recommended that a facilitator or team of facilitators be assigned when primarily white groups discuss racism. Facilitators should think of themselves as *guides* rather than as teachers. This means the overall task of the facilitator is to keep the group focused and on track, with equitable sharing of the airtime. This will be easier to do if at the start of the discussion you tell the group that this is your task. You could even name the patterns ahead of time and ask group members to watch out for these themselves.

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?"

7. **Claiming this discussion doesn't apply to them because they are not from the US:** "I'm from Germany and we don't have these issues there." "Canada is a multicultural society." "It's completely different where I am from because everyone is the same."

> **Response techniques**: "At what age were you aware that black people existed? Where did they live? If in Africa, what were your impressions of Africa? Where did you get your information about Africa?" "Did you watch Hollywood movies? If so, what impressions did you get about African Americans from US movies? What about Disney movies and cartoons?" "What was your relationship to Asian heritage people? What were Asian people like, in your mind?" and so on.

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 _____.[2]

---

1 Adapted from Anika Nailah and Robin DiAngelo
2 Excerpted from Robin DiAngelo and Ozlem Sensoy, "Calling In: Strategies for Cultivating Humility and Critical Thinking in Antiracism Education," *Understanding & Dismantling Privilege* 4, no. 2, (2014), http://www.wpcjournal.com/article/view/12101

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.

3. For people of color, multiracial, and Indigenous peoples who are part of an informal or formal discussion group, the book and this guide will hopefully validate your lived experiences and offer some helpful insight into the challenges of trying to talk to white people about racism. Like the book, this guide is primarily focused on raising the consciousness and increasing the cross-racial skills of white people. In so doing, many of the questions will be specific to them. Yet while the work of this text is primarily focused on the role that white people play within the system of racism, people of color are exposed to the same messages and must also consider how those messages have impacted them and the resultant role they may play. This dynamic is colloquially described as "assimilation" (or "acting white") and is described in scholarship as "collusion." These terms refer to people of color upholding values and behaviors that negatively impact their own and other groups of color and ultimately support white supremacy. There are many pressures to collude, the foremost of which is that there are rewards for conformity with the system. If we behave in ways that the dominant group finds favorable, we will likely receive benefits (or at least minimize penalties) in our daily interactions with them. As you study the dynamic of white fragility, consider your role and responsibilities in relation to collusion and adapt questions accordingly and as needed.

Note for those using this guide outside of the US context

The dynamics of white fragility are familiar in all societies in which white people hold institutional power and/or have a white settler colonial history, including Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Europe, and South Africa. While the book focuses on the specific sociopolitical context of the US, it is for you to reflect on how these dynamics manifest in your specific sociopolitical context. For white people who did not grow up in the US but live in the US now, consider how US-based racial dynamics (and globally circulating US cultural stories and images) shape your current ideas about race, your life, and cross-racial relationships.

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.

———   ———