

Week 2 - White Fragility

Is it always the job of Black and Brown people to educate us about race? Aren't white people shaped by their race too? If white people are often the perpetrators of racism, how come we don't tend to look at this racial group when we are talking about race?

This is what Robin Diangelo drills down into in her book 'White Fragility'.

Here are extracts which communicate some of the key points from the book 'White Fragility'.

As you read through this sheet ask yourself:

- How does my body feel? Is this changing as I read on?
- What emotions am I feeling?
- How am I feeling about Robin Diangelo and the points she is making?
- What thoughts am I thinking?

In 'White Fragility,' Robin Diangelo writes about how working as a diversity trainer with large numbers of people helped her to start to discern patterns in people's attitudes to race and racism:

'I began to see what I think of as the pillars of whiteness - the unexamined beliefs that prop up our racial responses. I could see the power of the belief that only bad people were racist, as well as how individualism allowed white people to exempt themselves from the forces of socialization. I could see how we are taught to think about racism only as discrete acts committed by individual people, rather than as a complex, interconnected system.

And in the light of so many white expressions of resentment towards people of colour, I realised that we see ourselves as entitled to, and deserving of, more than people of colour deserve; I saw our investment in a system that serves us. I also saw how hard we worked to deny all this and how defensive we became when these dynamics were named. In turn, I saw how our defensiveness maintained the status quo.'
(p. 3-4)

'But I don't see colour' is a common attitude of those who identify as not racist. Diangelo writes:

Consider colour-blind ideology from the perspective of a person of colour. An example I often share occurred when I was co-leading a workshop with an African-American man. A white participant said to him, "I don't see race; I don't see you as black". My co-trainer's response was, "Then how will you see racism?" He then explained to her that he was black, he was confident that she could see this, and that his race meant that he had a very different experience in life than she did. If she were ever going to understand or challenge racism, she would need to acknowledge this difference.

Pretending that she did not notice that he was black was not helpful to him in any way, as it denied his reality - indeed, it refused his reality - and kept hers insular and unchallenged. This pretence that she did

not notice his race assumed that he was “just like her”, and in so doing, she projected her reality onto him. For example, I feel welcome at work and so you must too; I have never felt that my race mattered, so you must feel that yours doesn't either. But of course, we do see the race of other people, and race holds deep social meaning for us.

We might think of conscious racial awareness as the tip of an iceberg, the superficial aspects of our racial socialisation: our intention (always good!) and what we are supposed to acknowledge seeing (nothing!). Meanwhile, under the surface is the massive depth of racist socialisation: messages, beliefs, images, associations, internalised superiority and entitlement, perceptions, and emotions. Colour-blind ideology makes it difficult for us to address these unconscious beliefs. While the idea of colour blindness may have started out as a well-intentioned strategy for interrupting racism, in practice it has served to deny the reality of racism and hold it in place.

Racial bias is largely unconscious, and herein lies the deepest challenge- the defensiveness that ensues upon any suggestion of racial bias. This defensiveness is classic white fragility because it protects our racial bias while simultaneously affirming our identities as open minded. Yes, it's uncomfortable to be confronted with an aspect of ourselves that we don't like, but we can't change what we refuse to see.' (p.41-42)

But, if the problem with unconscious bias is that it is unconscious, how do you move forwards? Diangelo suggests at the heart of this is being open to feedback:

Racism is the norm rather than an aberration. Feedback is key to our ability to recognise and repair our inevitable and often unaware collusion. In recognition of this, I try to follow these guidelines:

1. How, where and when you give me feedback is irrelevant - it is the feedback I want and need. Understanding that it is hard to give, I will take it any way I can get it. From my position of social, cultural and institutional white power and privilege, I am perfectly safe and I can handle it. If I cannot handle it, its on me to build my racial stamina.
2. Thank you.

The above guidelines rest on the understanding that there is no face to save and the game is up; I know that I have blind spots and unconscious investments in racism. My investments are reinforced every day in mainstream society. I did not set this system up, but it does unfairly benefit me, I do use it to my advantage, and I am responsible for interrupting it. I need to work hard to change my role in this system, but I can't do it alone. This understanding leads me to gratitude when others help. (p. 125-6)

A final thought:

'Stopping our racist patterns must be more important than working to convince others that we don't have them. We do have them, and people of colour already know that we have them; our efforts to prove otherwise are not convincing.' (p.129)

Once everyone in your group has had time to read through the sheet and reflect individually discuss in your group:

- Have you ever thought of yourself as the racial identity you are? Is this a key component of your self-identity?
 - Have you ever had cause to suspect that the treatment you are receiving is as a result of your racial identity?
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