

Summary of Diversity and Inclusion Book & Film Club 25.05.21

Summary of *White Fragility* by Robin DiAngelo



Chapter 1: The Challenges of Talking to White People about Racism

When discussing the emotions that can be displayed “the mere suggestions that being white has meaning often triggers a range of defensive responses...” the Author states that “these responses work to reinstate white equilibrium as they repel the challenge, return the racial comfort, and maintain our dominance within the racial hierarchy. I conceptualize this process as *white fragility*.”

1. The Author also highlighted that “our personal narratives vary, we are all swimming in the same racial water” and also made reference to the term “racial insulation.”
2. The Author mentioned “the pillars of whiteness – the unexamined beliefs that prop up our racial responses.”

Capture 2: Racism and White Supremacy

1. Historian Ibram Kendi states that “if we truly believe that all humans are equal, then disparity in condition can only be the result of systemic racism.”
2. The Author highlights that “Race is an evolving social idea that was created to legitimize racial inequality and protect white advantage. The term “White” first appeared in colonial law in the late 1600s” and that “Race is a social construction.”
3. In order to understand Racism, one must distinguish this from prejudice and discrimination “prejudice is pre-judgement about another person based on the social groups to which that person belongs.”

4. The Author states that “Discrimination is *action* based on prejudice”, “Racism is a structure, not an event”, “Racism is a system” and that “Racism is deeply embedded in the fabric of our society.”
5. The Author states in the context of sociologists and current racial justice movements white supremacy refers to “an overarching political, economic and social system of domination.”
6. Reference was made on page 23 to the birdcage metaphor that Scholar Marilyn Frye uses to describe “the interlocking forces of oppression”, which includes the image - if you turn your head to only look at 1 wire of the cage, you will then not see the other wires. Therefore, if your “understanding of this cage is based on this myopic view, you may not understand why the bird just doesn’t go round the single wire and fly away.”

Chapter 3: Racism after the Civil Rights Movement

1. The Author makes reference to colour-blind racism and Dr. Martin Luther King’s “I Have a Dream” Speech particularly the line where Dr. King states that one day he may be judged by the content of his character and not by the colour of his skin. This line was seen “to provide a simple and immediate solution to racial tensions.”
2. The Author states that “Racial bias is largely unconscious” and that “Our lack of understanding about implicit bias leads to aversive racism.”
3. The Author also highlights that “we can’t challenge our racial filters if we can’t consider the possibility that we have them.”

Staff member feedback about Chapters 2 & 3 were as follows:

- Displays of behaviour that do not change – try to use prejudicial thoughts, which then become the default position, part of the automatic system.
- When people use their prejudice, they get validation from the organisation, which then becomes systemic.
- People can use their prejudice to achieve their end goal.

White people are taught to feel superior – it becomes an ideology, which gives rise to supremacy.

Capture 4: How Does Race Shape the Lives of White People?

1. The Author starts of the chapter by discussing being born into a culture where she belonged racially. There was reference made on page 52 to the Singer Rhianna who introduced a make-up line in 2017 for Women of all skin colours. Appreciation from women of colour “poured in. Many of their tweets included the exclamation “finally!” “
2. The Author highlights that “while I am aware that race has been used unfairly against people of color, I haven’t been taught to see this problem as any responsibility of mine” “the freedom from responsibility gives me a level of racial relaxation and emotional intellectual space that people of color are not afforded as they move through their day.” “People of color lack these benefits because they are radicalized within a culture of white supremacy.”
3. “Virtually any representation of *human* is based on white people’s norms and images – “flesh coloured” makeup, standard emoji” – the author discusses the concept of the “white racial frame, whiteness as the human norm”.
4. “White solidarity is the unspoken agreement among whites to protect white advantage and not cause another white person to feel racial discomfort by confronting them when they say or do something racially problematic.” “Educational researcher Christine Sleeter describes this solidarity as “racial bonding”... “each uninterrupted joke furthers the circulation of racism through the culture.”

Chapter 5: The Good/Bad Binary

1. "This chapter explores what is perhaps the most effective adaptation of racism in recent history: the good/bad binary" – racist = bad, not racist = good.
2. African American scholar and film maker, Omowale Akintunde says "Racism is a systemic, societal, institutional, omnipresent, and epistemologically embedded phenomenon that pervades every vestige of our reality."
3. There was a discussion about colour-blind statements which insists "that people do not see race" and the term "colour-celebrate" – e.g. "I work in a very diverse environment."
4. The following imagery is used on page 78-79 "imagine a pier stretching out over the water. Viewed from above, the pier appears to simply float there. The top of the pier – the part that we can see- signifies the surface aspect of these claims. Yet while the pier seems to float effortlessly, it is, of course, not floating at all; it is propped up by a structure submerged under the water. The pier rests on pillars embedded in the ocean floor. In the same way that a pier sits on submerged pillars that are not immediately visible, the beliefs supporting our racial claims are hidden from our view. To topple the pier, we need to access and uproot the pillars."
5. "If racism is not a topic of discussion between a white person and a person of color who are friends, this absence of conversation may indicate a lack of cross-racial trust."
6. "We don't see through clear objective eyes- we see through racial lenses."
7. "Refusing to engage in an authentic exploration of racial realities erases (and denies) alternate racial experiences. If we block out other realities by not discussing them, we can pretend that they don't exist, thereby assuming a shared racial experience."
8. "Racism is so deeply woven into the fabric of our society."

Capture 6: Anti-Blackness

5. The Author states that "we live in a culture that circulates relentless messages of white superiority. These messages exist simultaneously with relentless messages of black inferiority."
6. "There was no concept of race or a white race before the need to justify the enslavement of Africans. Creating a separate and inferior black race simultaneously created the "superior" white race."
7. "Anti-blackness is rooted in misinformation, fables, perversions, projections, and lies. It is also rooted in a lack of historical knowledge and an inability or unwillingness to trace the effects of history into the present."
8. "White is a false identify, an identity of false superiority."
9. "Anti-blackness is a complex and confusing stew of resentment and benevolence." – reference was made to the film *The Blind Side*.
10. "White racial socialization engenders many conflicting feelings toward African Americans: benevolence, resentment, superiority, hatred, and guilt roil barely below the surface and erupt at the slightest breach, yet can never be explicitly acknowledged. Our need to deny the bewildering manifestations of anti-blackness that reside so close to the surface makes us irrational, and that irrationality is at the heart of white fragility and the pain it causes people of color."

Chapter 7: Racial Triggers for White People

9. The Author mentions "white racial insulation" and that "Whiteness accrues privilege and status; gets itself surrounded by protective pillows of resources and/or benefits of the doubt" and "white people seldom find themselves without this protection" but "within their insulated environment of racial privilege, whites both expect racial comfort and become less tolerant of racial stress."

10. “Most white people have limited information about what racism is and how it works” and “this racially coded language reproduces racist images and perspectives while simultaneously reproducing the comfortable illusion that race and its problems are what “they” have, not us.”
11. “White fragility may be conceptualized as a response or “condition” produced and reproduced by the continual social and material advantages of whiteness.”

Capture 8: The Result: White Fragility

11. The Author states that “..a sense of white superiority and knowledge of power codes appear to develop as early as preschool.”
12. “White people’s moral objection to racism increases their resistance to acknowledging their complicity with it.”
13. “...pointing out white advantage will often trigger patterns of confusion, defensiveness and righteous indignation.”
14. “One way that whites protect their positions when challenged on race is to invoke the discourse of self-defense.”
15. “The continual retreat from the discomfort of authentic racial engagement in a culture in which racial disparity is infused limits white people’s ability to form authentic connections across racial lines and perpetuates a cycle that keeps racism in place.”
16. Professor Rich Vodde states, “If privilege is defined as a legitimization of one’s entitlement to resources, it can also be defined as permission to escape or avoid any challenges to this entitlement.”
17. “White equilibrium is a cocoon of racial comfort, centrality, superiority , entitlement, racial apathy, and obliviousness, all rooted in an identity of being good people free of racism. Challenging this cocoon throws off our racial balance. Because being racially off balance is so rare, we have not had build the capacity to sustain the discomfort. Thus, whites find these challenges unbearable and want them to stop.”
18. “White fragility functions as a form of bullying.”

Chapter 9: White Fragility in Action

12. The Author mentions explores and discusses “the common emotional reactions that white people have...” when these assumptions and behaviours are then challenged these include – feelings, behaviours, claims and assumptions.
13. The author on identifying the underlying assumptions then explores how they function as follows:

“Functions of White Fragility

 - Maintain white solidarity
 - Close off self-reflection
 - Trivialize the reality of racism
 - Silence the discussion
 - Make white people the victims
 - Hijack the conversation
 - Protect a limited worldview
 - Take race off the table
 - Protect white privilege
 - Focus on the messenger, not the message
 - Rally more resources to white people.”
14. The author states “In Summary, the prevailing white racial assumptions and the behaviors they engender protect racism.”

There was a discussion regarding the reaction of defensiveness when the subject of racism and white privilege is mentioned.

Chapter 10: White Fragility and the Rules of Engagement

The author discusses “a set of unspoken rules for how to give white people feedback”

1. “White fragility punishes the person giving feedback and presses them back into silence. It also maintains white solidarity – the tacit agreement that we will protect white privilege and not hold each other accountable for our racism.”
2. “Racism is the norm rather than the aberration. Feedback is key to our ability to recognize and repair our inevitable and often unaware collusion.”
3. “Given that the goal of antiracist work is to identify and challenge racism and *the misinformation that supports it*, all perspectives are *not* equally valid: some are rooted in racist ideology and need to be uncovered and challenged.”
4. “For people of color, the racial status quo is hostile and needs to be interrupted, not reinforced.”
5. The author states “As I have tried to show throughout this book, white people raised in Western society are conditioned into a white supremacist worldview because it is the bedrock of our society and its institutions.”
6. “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 color already know that we have them: our efforts to prove otherwise are not convincing. An honest accounting of these patterns is no small task given the power of white fragility and white solidarity but it is necessary.”

Chapter 11: White Women’s Tears

1. The Author states that “The term *white tears* refers to all the ways, both literally and metaphorically, that white fragility manifests itself through white people’s laments on how hard racism is on *us*.”
2. “there is a long historical backdrop of black men being tortured and murdered because of a white woman’s distress.” Reference was made to the murder of Emmett Till, a fourteen year old boy who died in 1955.
3. “The murder of Emmett Till is just one example of the history that informs an oft-repeated warning from my African American colleagues: “when a white woman cries, a black man gets hurt.”” “Not knowing or being sensitive to this history is another example of white centrality, individualism, and lack of racial humility.”
4. “Whether intended or not, when a white woman cries over some aspect of racism, all the attention immediately goes to her, demanding time, energy, and attention from everyone in the room when they should be focused on ameliorating racism.”
5. “Because racism does not rely solely on individual actors, the racist system is reproduced automatically. To interrupt it, we need to recognize and challenge the norms, structures, and institutions in place.”
6. “Tears that are driven by white guilt are self-indulgent.”
7. “For people of color, our tears demonstrate our racial insulation and privilege.”

Chapter 12: Where Do We Go from Here?

Part of this chapter includes a section on **The Question of Guilt**. The Author states that:

1. “Audre Lorde eloquently addressed her thoughts on white guilt at the National Women’s Studies Association Conference in 1981:”

“I cannot hide my anger to spare you guilt, nor hurt feelings, nor answering anger: for to do so insults and trivializes all our efforts. Guilt is not a response to anger; it is a response to one’s own actions or lack of actions. If it leads to change then it can be useful, since it is then no longer guilt but the beginning of knowledge. Yet all too often, guilt is just another name for impotence, for defensiveness destructive of communication; it becomes a device to protect ignorance and the continuation of things the way they are, the ultimate protection for changelessness.”

In the Conclusion section, the Author states that:

- 2. “Interrupting racism takes courage and intentionality.”**