Dr. Robin DiAngelo explains why white people implode when talking about race.

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I am white. I have spent years studying what it means to be white in a society that proclaims race meaningless, yet is deeply divided by race. This is what I have learned: Any white person living in the United States will develop opinions about race simply by swimming in the water of our culture. But mainstream sources—schools, textbooks, media—don't provide us with the multiple perspectives we need.

Yes, we will develop strong emotionally laden opinions, but they will not be informed opinions. Our socialization renders us racially illiterate. When you add a lack of humility to that illiteracy (because we don't know what we don't know), you get the break-down we so often see when trying to engage white people in meaningful conversations about race.

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Mainstream dictionary definitions reduce racism to individual racial prejudice and the intentional actions that result. The people that commit these intentional acts are deemed bad, and those that don't are good. If we are against racism and unaware of committing racist acts, we can't be racist; racism and being a good person have become mutually exclusive. But this definition does little to explain how racial hierarchies are consistently reproduced.

Social scientists understand racism as a multidimensional and highly adaptive *system*—a system that ensures an unequal distribution of resources between racial groups. Because whites built and dominate all

significant institutions, (often at the expense of and on the uncompensated labor of other groups), their interests are embedded in the foundation of U.S. society.

While individual whites may be against racism, they still benefit from the distribution of resources controlled by their group. Yes, an individual person of color can sit at the tables of power, but the overwhelming majority of decision-makers will be white. Yes, white people can have problems and face barriers, but systematic racism won't be one of them. This distinction—between individual prejudice and a system of unequal institutionalized racial power—is fundamental. One cannot understand how racism functions in the U.S. today if one ignores group power relations.

> We have organized society to reproduce and reinforce our racial interests and perspectives. Further, we are centered in all matters deemed normal, universal, benign, neutral and good.

This systemic and institutional control allows those of us who are white in North America to live in a social environment that protects and insulates us from race-based stress. We have organized society to reproduce and reinforce our racial interests and perspectives. Further, we are centered in all matters deemed normal, universal, benign, neutral and good. Thus, we move through a wholly racialized world with an unracialized identity (e.g. white people can represent all of humanity, people of color can only represent their racial selves).

Challenges to this identity become highly stressful and even intolerable. The following are examples of the kinds of challenges that trigger racial stress for white people:

> Suggesting that a white person's viewpoint comes from a racialized frame of reference (challenge to objectivity);
> People of color talking directly about their own racial perspectives (challenge to white taboos on talking openly about race);

People of color choosing not to protect the racial feelings of white people in regards to race (challenge to white racial expectations and need/entitlement to racial comfort);

People of color not being willing to tell their stories or answer questions about their racial experiences (challenge to the expectation that people of color will serve us);

A fellow white not providing agreement with one's racial perspective (challenge to white solidarity);

Receiving feedback that one's behavior had a racist impact (challenge to white racial innocence);

Suggesting that group membership is significant (challenge to individualism);

An acknowledgment that access is unequal between racial groups (challenge to meritocracy);

Being presented with a person of color in a position of leadership (challenge to white authority);

Being presented with information about other racial groups through, for example, movies in which people of color drive the action but are not in stereotypical roles, or multicultural education (challenge to white centrality).

Not often encountering these challenges, we withdraw, defend, cry, argue, minimize, ignore, and in other ways push back to regain our racial position and equilibrium. I term that push back *white fragility*.

David Shankbone/Wikimedia Commons

This concept came out of my on-going experience leading discussions on race, racism, white privilege and white supremacy with primarily white audiences. It became clear over time that white people have extremely low thresholds for enduring any discomfort associated with challenges to our racial worldviews.

We can manage the first round of challenge by ending the discussion through platitudes—usually something that starts with "People just need to," or "Race doesn't really have any meaning to me," or "Everybody's racist." Scratch any further on that surface, however, and we fall apart.

It became clear over time that white people have extremely low thresholds for enduring any discomfort associated with challenges to our racial worldviews.

Socialized into a deeply internalized sense of superiority and entitlement that we are either not consciously aware of or can never admit to ourselves, we become highly fragile in conversations about race. We experience a challenge to our racial worldview as a challenge to our very identities as good, moral people. It also challenges our sense of rightful place in the hierarchy. Thus, we perceive any attempt to connect us to the system of racism as a very unsettling and unfair moral offense. The following patterns make it difficult for white people to understand racism as a *system* and lead to the dynamics of white fragility. While they do not apply to every white person, they are well-documented overall:

Segregation: Most whites live, grow, play, learn, love, work and die primarily in social and geographic racial segregation. Yet, our society does not teach us to see this as a loss. Pause for a moment and consider the magnitude of this message: We lose nothing of value by having no cross-racial relationships. In fact, the whiter our schools and neighborhoods are, the more likely they are to be seen as "good." The implicit message is that there is no inherent value in the presence or perspectives of people of Color. This is an example of the relentless messages of white superiority that circulate all around us, shaping our identities and worldviews.

The Good/Bad Binary: The most effective adaptation of racism over time is the idea that racism is conscious bias held by mean people. If we are not aware of having negative thoughts about people of color, don't tell racist jokes, are nice people, and even have friends of color, then we cannot be racist. Thus, a person is either racist or not racist; if a person is racist, that person is bad; if a person is not racist, that person is good. Although racism does of course occur in individual acts, these acts are

part of a larger system that we all participate in. The focus on individual incidences prevents the analysis that is necessary in order to challenge this larger system. The good/bad binary is the fundamental misunderstanding driving white defensiveness about being connected to racism. We simply do not understand how socialization and implicit bias work.

Individualism: Whites are taught to see themselves as individuals, rather than as part of a racial group. Individualism enables us to deny that racism is structured into the fabric of society. This erases our history and hides the way in which wealth has accumulated over generations and benefits us, *as a group*, today. It also allows us to distance ourselves from the history and actions of our group. Thus we get very irate when we are "accused" of racism, because as individuals, we are "different" from other white people and expect to be seen as such; we find intolerable any suggestion that our behavior or perspectives are typical of our group as a whole.

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Entitlement to racial comfort: In the dominant position, whites are almost always racially comfortable and thus have developed unchallenged expectations to remain so. We have not had to build tolerance for racial discomfort and thus when racial discomfort arises, whites typically respond as if something is "wrong," and blame the person or event that triggered the discomfort (usually a person of color). This blame results in a socially-sanctioned array of responses towards the perceived source of the discomfort, including: penalization; retaliation; isolation and refusal to continue engagement. Since racism is necessarily uncomfortable in that it is oppressive, white insistence on racial comfort guarantees racism will not be faced except in the most

superficial of ways.

Racial Arrogance: Most whites have a very limited understanding of racism because we have not been trained to think in complex ways about it and because it benefits white dominance not to do so. Yet, we have no compunction about debating the knowledge of people who have thought complexly about race. Whites generally feel free to dismiss these informed perspectives rather than have the humility to acknowledge that they are unfamiliar, reflect on them further, or seek more information.

Racial Belonging: White people enjoy a deeply internalized, largely unconscious sense of racial belonging in U.S. society. In virtually any situation or image deemed valuable in dominant society, whites belong. The interruption of racial belonging is rare and thus destabilizing and frightening to whites and usually avoided.

Psychic freedom: Because race is constructed as residing in people of color, whites don't bear the social burden of race. We move easily through our society without a sense of ourselves as racialized. Race is for people of color to think about—it is what happens to "them"—they can bring it up if it is an issue for them (although if they do, we can dismiss it as a personal problem, the race card, or the reason for their problems). This allows whites much more psychological energy to devote to other issues and prevents us from developing the stamina to sustain attention on an issue as charged and uncomfortable as race.

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Constant messages that we are more valuable: Living in a white dominant context, we receive constant messages that we are better and more important than people of color. For example: our centrality in history textbooks, historical representations and perspectives; our centrality in media and advertising; our teachers, role-models, heroes

and heroines; everyday discourse on "good" neighborhoods and schools and who is in them; popular TV shows centered around friendship circles that are all white; religious iconography that depicts God, Adam and Eve, and other key figures as white. While one may explicitly reject the notion that one is inherently better than another, one cannot avoid internalizing the message of white superiority, as it is ubiquitous in mainstream culture.

These privileges and the white fragility that results prevent us from listening to or comprehending the perspectives of people of color and bridging cross-racial divides. The antidote to white fragility is on-going and life-long, and includes sustained engagement, humility, and education. We can begin by:

> Being willing to tolerate the discomfort associated with an honest appraisal and discussion of our internalized superiority and racial privilege.
> Challenging our own racial reality by acknowledging ourselves as racial beings with a particular and limited perspective on race.
> Attempting to understand the racial realities of people of color through authentic interaction rather than through the media or unequal relationships.
> Taking action to address our own racism, the racism of other whites, and the racism embedded in our institutions—e.g., get educated and act.

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"Getting it" when it comes to race and racism challenges our very identities as good white people. It's an ongoing and often painful process of seeking to uncover our socialization at its very roots. It asks

us to rebuild this identity in new and often uncomfortable ways. But I can testify that it is also the most exciting, powerful, intellectually stimulating and emotionally fulfilling journey I have ever undertaken. It has impacted every aspect of my life—personal and professional.

I have a much deeper and more complex understanding of how society works. I can challenge much more racism in my daily life, and I have developed cherished and fulfilling cross-racial friendships I did not have before.

I do not expect racism to end in my lifetime, and I know that I continue to have problematic racist patterns and perspectives. Yet, I am also confident that I do less harm to people of color than I used to. This is not a minor point of growth, for it impacts my lived experience and that of the people of color who interact with me. If you are white I urge you to take the first step—let go of your racial certitude and reach for humility.

Trust When denial of white fragility is confronted, it becomes a challenge to our rightful place, an unfair moral offense, creating defensiveness rather than reflection.

October 3, 2016 by Dr. Robin DiAngelo 18 Comments

I am a racial justice educator. On a daily basis I lead primarily white groups in discussions of race and racism.

A significant but challenging aspect of my work is giving white people feedback on our inevitable and often unaware racist patterns. This has led to my identification of what I term *white fragility* – the inability of white people to handle challenges to our racial worldviews, identities, or positions. Because we live in a society that protects and insulates us from these challenges, we have not had to build the stamina to withstand them. Mainstream culture, schools, media, institutions and ideologies center us and reinforce a racially limited (and racist) worldview, engendering a deeply internalized sense of racial superiority and

entitlement. At the same time, we are taught that to feel racially superior is bad and immoral. This dichotomy results in the need to aggressively deny our internalized superiority to ourselves and others. On the rare occasions in which this denial is confronted, it comes as a kind of shock to the system; a challenge to our rightful place in the hierarchy and an unfair moral offense, compelling us to defend rather than reflect. These are some of the dynamics racial justice educators must navigate when seeking to raise white consciousness about what racism really is and how it works.

I need to trust that you won't think I am racist before I can work on my racism.

In this piece I want to speak to one specific aspect of *white fragility*: the white need to "build trust" in a group before white participants can engage in the work of identifying and challenging racism. These groups come in several forms—sometimes a racially-mixed training or dialogue and sometimes a same-race affinity group. Many who are involved in these various aspects of racial justice work will recognize this white call for racial trust, which surfaces in a variety of ways: facilitators devoting time to exercises intended to build trust; creating ground rules to engender trust, and participant justifications for non-engagement (e.g. "I am not going to share because I don't feel trust here.") I have tried unsuccessfully to uncover just exactly what my fellow white people mean by the call for trust—what we need to trust will or won't happen. I am confident the need for trust does not relate to having your wallet stolen or being physically assaulted, although at a subconscious level that may very well be what is at play when the group is racially mixed, given the power of implicit bias and the relentless racist conditioning whites receive. Still, my observations lead me to believe that what it comes down to is this: *I need to trust that you won't think I am racist before I can work on my racism*.

Consider the following common ground rules that have "building trust" at their base:

Don't judge: This is not humanly possible, so as a ground rule it cannot be achieved or enforced, so it is functionally meaningless.

Don't make assumptions: The nature of an assumption is that you don't know you are making it so again, this ground rule cannot be achieved or enforced and is functionally meaningless.

Assume good intentions: By emphasizing intentions over impact, this ground rule privileges the intentions of the aggressor over the impact of their behavior on the target. In so doing, it protects aggressors, their feelings, and their lack of accountability; as long as there was no intention to cause harm, you need to let go of the hurt and move on. But from a frame that acknowledges social power, intentions are actually irrelevant; it is impact that matters.

Speak your truth: I have yet to understand why this seems to be a necessary guideline. I am not aware of a pattern of lying in these groups (defensiveness, distancing, not speaking at all—yes—but not speaking your truth?—no.) More importantly, what if your truth is that you are colorblind? Because no one can actually be colorblind in a racist society, this is not a "truth." Yet this guideline can function to position all perspectives as equally valid. 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. We must distinguish between sharing your beliefs so that we can identify how they may be upholding racism, and stating your beliefs as "truths" that cannot be challenged. Please click here to access additional information on this topic.

Respect: This problem with this guideline is that respect is rarely defined, and what feels respectful to white people can be exactly what does not create a respectful environment for people of color. For example, white people often define a context in which there is no conflict, no expression of strong emotion, focusing on intentions over impact, and no challenging of racist patterns as respectful, and this is exactly what creates an inauthentic, white-norm centered and thus hostile environment for people of color.

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The unexamined assumption underlying these guidelines is that they can be universally applied. But because they do not account for unequal power relations, they do not function the same way across race; they are primarily driven by *white fragility*. The very conditions that most white people insist on in order to remain comfortable are those that support the racial status quo (white centrality, dominance and professed innocence). For people of color, the racial status quo is hostile and needs to be interrupted, not reinforced. The essential message of "trust" is *be nice*. And challenging racism is not "nice" by dominant white norms.

A counter to white fragility is to build our stamina to bear witness to the pain of racism that we cause, not to impose conditions that require people of color to continually validate our denial.

Ground rules such as those above can also be turned against people of color—if you challenge my racial patterns, I can respond that you are making an assumption that what I did was rooted in racism, or you are denying my truth that race has nothing to do with my actions. Now *you* are the transgressor. These conditions reproduce the weight of racism people of color must constantly carry: holding back rage and centering white needs. A counter to white fragility is to build our stamina to bear witness to the pain of racism that we cause, not to impose conditions that require people of color to continually validate our denial.

Building our stamina also applies when in white affinity groups. Of course, ideally, we would guide each other in this work with compassion; it is much easier to look at something unwanted within ourselves if we don't feel judged or criticized. But what if someone *does* literally point their finger and boldly state, "You are racist!" (a deep fear of progressive whites)? A white person who claims to be antiracist and who positions themselves as above or beyond other whites is being a

self-righteous jerk, but *that is on them*. What is *on me* is to identify my racist patterns and work to change them. If the point being made is insightful to that goal, then regardless of *how carefully or indirectly it is being made*, that is what I need to focus on. The method of delivery cannot be used to delegitimize what is being illuminated or the excuse for not doing my work.

I recognize that to let go of the messenger and focus on the message is an advanced skill and is especially difficult to practice if someone comes at us with a "gotcha" tone. If kindness gets us there faster, I am all for it. But I do not *require* anything from someone giving me feedback before I can engage with that feedback. Part of my processing of that feedback will be to separate it from its delivery and ascertain the central point and its contribution to my growth. Many of us are not there yet but this is what we need to work towards. I have been in many white affinity groups wherein much energy was expended making sure people were kind and "compassionate" to each other and didn't "break trust." So much energy, in fact, that we could no longer help each other see our problematic patterns without breaking the norms of the group. So, unless that kindness is combined with clarity and the courage to name and challenge racism, it functions to protect *white fragility* and needs to be challenged.

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Stopping our racist patterns becomes more important than working to convince others that we don't have them. We have them and people of color already know we have them; our efforts to appear otherwise are not convincing.

White folks: its time to move forward! All white people raised in Western society are conditioned into a white supremacist worldview because it is the bedrock of our society and its institutions. Regardless of

whether a parent told you that everyone was equal, the poster in the hall of your white suburban school proclaimed to value diversity, you have traveled abroad, or have people of color in your workplace or family, the ubiquitous socializing power of white supremacy cannot be avoided. The messages circulate 24/7 and have little to nothing to do with intentions, awareness, or agreement. Entering the conversation with this understanding is incredibly liberating because it allows us to focus on *how*—rather than *if*—our racism is manifesting. When we move beyond the good/bad binary (racists are bad so good people cannot participate in racism) we can actually become *eager* to identify our racist patterns, because interrupting those patterns becomes more important than managing how we think we look to others. I repeat: *Stopping our racist patterns becomes more important than working to convince others that we don't have them*. We have them and people of color already know we have them; our efforts to appear otherwise are not convincing. Let's move on, black and brown people are *dying* as a result of our inaction!

Given the inevitability that I have unaware racist patterns in thinking and behavior, when I put myself in the hands of an antiracist facilitator the only thing I need to trust is that they have a solid analysis of how racism works and the courage to break with white solidarity and hold me accountable to identifying my collusion. When I am the facilitator, you can trust that I will strive to be in my integrity on the above point. What that means is that I will work to help you see your racism and I will work to be open and receptive to you helping me see mine so that we can divest. That is no small task given the power of white fragility and white solidarity, but it is the goal of antiracist work. (For a more in-depth discussion and alternative set of ground-rules that account for power, see http://democracyeducationjournal.org/home/vol22/iss2/1/)

White Fragility and the Rules of Engagement

June 13, 2015 by Dr. Robin DiAngelo 47 Comments

I am white. I write and teach about what it means to be white in a society that proclaims race meaningless, yet remains deeply divided by race. A fundamental but very challenging part of my work is moving white people from an individual understanding of racism—i.e. only some people are racist and those people are bad—to a structural understanding. A structural understanding recognizes racism as a default system that institutionalizes an unequal distribution of resources and power between white people and people of color. This system is historic, taken for granted, deeply embedded, and it works to the benefit of whites.

The two most effective beliefs that prevent us (whites) from seeing racism as a system are:

> that racists are bad people and
> that racism is conscious dislike;

When you understand racism as a system of structured relations into which we are all socialized, you understand that intentions are irrelevant.

if we are well-intended and do not consciously dislike people of color, we cannot be racist. This is why it is so common for white people to cite their friends and family members as evidence of their lack of racism. However, when you understand racism as a system of structured relations into which we are all socialized, you understand that intentions are irrelevant. And when you understand how socialization works, you understand that much of racial bias is unconscious. Negative messages

about people of color circulate all around us. While having friends of color is better than not having them, it doesn't change the overall system or prevent racism from surfacing in our relationships. The societal default is white superiority and we are fed a steady diet of it 24/7. To not actively seek to interrupt racism is to internalize and accept it.

As part of my work I teach, lead and participate in affinity groups, facilitate workshops, and mentor other whites on recognizing and interrupting racism in our lives. As a facilitator, I am in a position to give white people feedback on how their unintentional racism is manifesting. This has allowed me to repeatedly observe several common patterns of response. The most common by far is outrage:

How dare you suggest that I could have said or done something racist!

Given the dominant conceptualization of racism as individual acts of cruelty, it follows that only terrible people who don't like people of color can commit it. While this conceptualization is misinformed, it functions beautifully to protect racism by making it impossible to engage in the necessary dialogue and self-reflection that can lead to change.

Outrage is often followed by righteous indignation about the manner in which the feedback was given. I have discovered (as I am sure have countless people of color) that there is apparently an unspoken set of rules for how to give white people feedback on racism.

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The Rules of Engagement

After years of working with my fellow whites, I have found that the only way to give feedback correctly is not to give it at all. Thus, the first rule is cardinal:

1. Do not give me feedback on my racism under any circumstances.

If you break the cardinal rule:

2. Proper tone is crucial – feedback must be given calmly. If there is any emotion in the feedback, the feedback is invalid and does not have to be

considered.

3. There must be trust between us. You must trust that I am in no way racist before you can give me feedback on my racism.

4. Our relationship must be issue-free – If there are issues between us, you cannot give me feedback on racism.

5. Feedback must be given immediately, otherwise it will be discounted because it was not given sooner.

6. You must give feedback privately, regardless of whether the incident occurred in front of other people. To give feedback in front of anyone else—even those involved in the situation—is to commit a serious social transgression. The feedback is thus invalid.

7. You must be as indirect as possible. To be direct is to be insensitive and will invalidate the feedback and require repair.

8. As a white person I must feel completely safe during any discussion of race. Giving me any feedback on my racism will cause me to feel unsafe, so you will need to rebuild my trust by never giving me feedback again. Point of clarification: when I say "safe" what I really mean is "comfortable."

9. Giving me feedback on my racial privilege invalidates the form of oppression that I experience (i.e. classism, sexism, heterosexism). We will then need to focus on how you oppressed me.

10. You must focus on my intentions, which cancel out the impact of my behavior.

11. To suggest my behavior had a racist impact is to have misunderstood me. You will need to allow me to explain until you can acknowledge that it was your misunderstanding.

<div align="center">These rules are rooted in white fragility.</div>

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Their contradictions are irrelevant; their function is to obscure racism and protect white dominance and they do so very effectively. Yet from an understanding of racism as a system of unequal institutional power, we need to ask ourselves where these rules come from and who they serve.

White fragility works to punish the person giving feedback and essentially bully them back into silence.

Many of us actively working to interrupt racism continually hear complaints about the "gotcha" culture of white anti-racism. There is a stereotype that we are looking for every incident we can find so we can spring out, point our fingers, and shout, "You're a racist!" While certainly there are white people who arrogantly set themselves apart from other whites by acting in this way, in my experience over 20 years this is not the norm. It is far more common for sincere white people to agonize over when and how to give feedback to a fellow white person, given the ubiquitousness of white fragility. White fragility works to punish the person giving feedback and essentially bully 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. When the person giving the feedback is a person of color, the charge is "playing the race card" and the consequences of white fragility are much more penalizing.

Racism is the norm rather than an aberration. Feedback is key to our ability to recognize and repair our inevitable and often unaware collusion.

In recognition of this, I follow these guidelines:

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, it's on me to build my racial stamina.

Thank you.

The above guidelines rest on the understanding that there is no face to save and the jig is up; I know that I have blind spots and unconscious

investments in white superiority. My investments are reinforced every day in mainstream society. I did not set this system up but it does unfairly benefit me and I am responsible for interrupting it. I need to work hard to recognize it myself, but I can't do it alone. This understanding leads me to gratitude when others help me.

In my workshops, I often ask the people of color,

"How often have you given white people feedback on our unaware yet inevitable racism and had that go well for you?"

Eye-rolling, head-shaking, and outright laughter follow, along with the general consensus of never. I then ask,

"What would it be like if you could simply give us feedback, have us graciously receive it, reflect, and work to change the behavior?"

Recently a man of color sighed and said,

"It would be revolutionary."

I ask my fellow whites to consider the profundity of that response. Revolutionary that we would receive, reflect, and work to change the behavior. On the one hand, it points to how difficult and fragile we are. But on the other hand, how simple taking responsibility for our racism can be.