

## White Fragility and Resilience

As for the last two weeks, this class is led by Aja Riggs, the lead trainer of the course Exploring Whiteness: Unlearning Racism and Understanding Privilege. The course helps white people (and others who benefit from white skin privilege) to see, understand and counter racism—within ourselves, our organizations, and the structures of our society.

### *Class Assignments*

- **Deconstructing White Privilege with Dr. Robin DiAngelo**, 22 minute video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dwlx3KQer54&t=11s>
- **How 'white fragility' reinforces racism**, 5:16 minute video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YvIO2GU8yTU>
- **Why It's So Hard to Talk to White People About Racism**, Robin DiAngelo, <https://m.huffpost.com/us/entry/7183710>
- **Identifying Patterns**, written exercise, attached.

### *Goal for Class*

The overall goal of these three sessions is to expand our awareness of what it means to be white in a racist society.

The goal of this class is to understand the meaning of the term white fragility, explore how it operates, and what anti-racist white resilience looks like.

### *Questions for Discussion*

- If you are white, take a moment to think about a time when white fragility showed up in yourself, in your thoughts and/or actions. If you had the chance to go back and handle that situation differently, what would you do now instead? What would you like to do in the future?
- If you are not white, consider sharing what it would mean to you if white people were open and curious about our unintended racism.

### *Additional Resources*

- **Getting Smart about Race: An American Conversation** by Margaret L. Anderson, sociologist. The author discusses why racial healing should be an integral element of our everyday

discussions surrounding race and how to move the conversation in a positive direction.

<https://www.amazon.com/Getting-Serious-about-Race-Conversation/dp/1538129493>

- **Reviews of *White Fragility*.** Since its publication in 2018, *White Fragility* by Robin DiAngelo has drawn much praise and criticism. Below are some examples of each (offered by the church class facilitators without opinion):
  - “A Sociologist Examines the ‘White Fragility’ That Prevents White Americans from Confronting Racism” by *The New Yorker*. <https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/a-sociologist-examines-the-white-fragility-that-prevents-white-americans-from-confronting-racism>
  - Recommendation of *White Fragility* by The Presbyterian Outlook. <https://pres-outlook.org/2020/08/white-fragility/>
  - “The Intellectual Fraud of White Fragility” by David Edward Burke, The Logical Liberal. <https://thelogicalliberal.com/2020/06/13/white-fragility/> (submitted by a member of our class)
  - “White fragility is real. But ‘White Fragility’ is flawed.” Review by *The Washington Post*. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2020/06/18/white-fragility-is-real-white-fragility-is-flawed/>

## Identifying Patterns Exercise

All text, except that related to the exercise which appears in italics, is from “Why It’s So Hard to Talk to White People About Racism,” by Dr. Robin DiAngelo,

[https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/why-its-so-hard-to-talk-to-white-people-about-racism\\_b\\_7183710](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/why-its-so-hard-to-talk-to-white-people-about-racism_b_7183710) as of 9-1-2020

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:

***Exercise** - To help us identify these patterns, see how many of these you can briefly note an example of from your current life, along with an idea about how to counteract it.*

**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.

*1. How I see this in my current life is ...*

*2. I can counteract this by ...*

**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.

*1. How I see this in my current life is ...*

*2. I can counteract this by ...*

**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.

*1. How I see this in my current life is ...*

*2. I can counteract this by ...*

**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.

*1. How I see this in my current life is ...*

*2. I can counteract this by ...*

**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.

*1. How I see this in my current life is ...*

*2. I can counteract this by ...*

**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.

*1. How I see this in my current life is ...*

*2. I can counteract this by ...*

**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.

*1. How I see this in my current life is ...*

*2. I can counteract this by ...*

**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.

*1. How I see this in my current life is ...*

*2. I can counteract this by ...*

*(Note that this exercise is oriented towards the individual level, but could also be used to identify these patterns on the institutional and systemic levels.)*