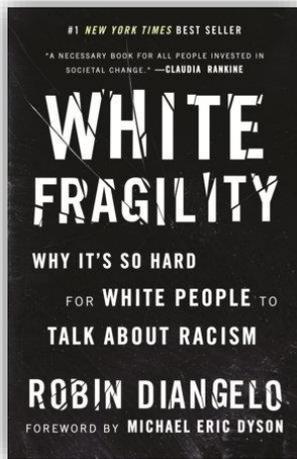


BOOK REVIEW

White Fragility: Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk about Racism

By Robin DiAngelo

Reviewed by Dena Loder-Hurley



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Robin DiAngelo pulls no punches in her book, *White Fragility: Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk about Racism*. She identifies her intended audience, white progressives, and states her purpose, “to make visible how one aspect of white sensibility continues to hold racism in place: white fragility” (5). Formidable concepts infuse this purpose statement. DiAngelo’s premise assumes a “white sensibility,” itself a foreign concept to many white people, before introducing the new—and potentially insulting—concept of “white fragility.”

DiAngelo draws on her expertise as a professional educator from the beginning, arguing that it is a failure to fully understand the forces of socialization that cripples white people from the outset. The Enlightenment values of individualism and objectivity serve as an unquestioned aspect of culture and a key aspect of those forces. If individualism tells us all are “unique and stand apart from others, even those within our social groups,” then the suggestion of a collective,

group identity of white people is rendered irrelevant if not completely untenable (9). Furthermore, if objectivity deems it possible “to be free of all bias,” then to have a group identity, particularly a racial one, is to admit a biased perspective. She later identifies Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of habitus as the result of socialization, the process by which “thoughts, perceptions, expressions, and actions” are produced and reproduced by the interplay of individuals and the societal structures in which they live and develop (101). It is the unspoken and unquestioned parts of a culture that ultimately shape the lens through which all things are perceived and interpreted by the people within that culture.

DiAngelo takes aim at a simplistic understanding of a racist as “someone who holds conscious dislike of people because of race” (13) and dedicates chapter two to differentiating between prejudice, discrimination, and racism. Prejudice refers to people’s pre-judgments based on their own preferences and biases, which exist throughout humanity and are not inherently good or bad. Discrimination describes actions taken based on those prejudices. For example, I may be prejudiced that all responsible adults own a car; that prejudice becomes discrimination if I refuse to hire someone *because* they do not own a car. All people have prejudices, and everyone discriminates. Racism occurs when “a racial group’s collective prejudice is backed by the power of legal authority and institutional control” (20). It follows, then, that racism occurs separate from and without regard for the feelings, motivations, or intentions of any individual within the collective group. For many white people, this definition requires a complete paradigm shift. DiAngelo challenges two major pillars of Western culture within the span of twenty-one pages before seemingly redefining a term most people are both familiar with and have an opinion on.

One of the more common critiques of *White Fragility* is that any criticism affirms the author's premise and adds to her pile of evidence. DiAngelo lists examples of subtle yet insidious racism, including coded language and the rationalization of choices that perpetuate segregation in the name of a more noble goal, such as accessing "good schools." Many readers will protest that example, arguing that a competitive college admissions environment based mainly on test scores demands parents seek out a school that produces high test scores. While coded language and covert motivations are most certainly a reality, readers may stumble on a rigid either/or dichotomy and miss the larger point within the bigger picture, which is that understandable—and even "noble"—choices still perpetuate segregation. Which, unfortunately, reinforces DiAngelo's premise about white fragility.

Rather than focus attention on the form of the argument, readers will benefit most from giving serious consideration to the substance, the difficulties for white people to engage in hard conversations about ongoing racial disparities and inequities. DiAngelo makes her case in a mere 160 pages, a manageable volume for any reader given enough time. White readers may feel anger, shame, or any other range of emotions. Tolerating uncomfortable feelings and considering initially off-putting or offensive ideas and arguments can lead to new levels of understanding. After all, meaningful growth seldom occurs without significant discomfort.

While I believe DiAngelo's premise, argument, and conclusion deserve a fair hearing and serious consideration, I find her proposed solution problematic. DiAngelo argues that because the formation of whiteness as an identity draws heavily, if not exclusively, on white supremacy, it is, therefore, impossible to develop a positive white identity (149). She does not advocate for white people to deny their whiteness, but she does encourage them to be "less white" (150). But having or developing a personal sense of a cultural, racial identity is foundational to engaging meaningfully with racism and our participation in it. Expecting a person to hold on to part of their identity while simultaneously rejecting it seems to be asking someone to internalize shame as a hallmark of who they are. I believe that expectation is both unrealistic and untenable. Jesus himself said that he did not come into the world to condemn the world but to save it and to give his life as a ransom for many. The cross offers forgiveness, reconciliation, redemption,

and a way forward, and I believe ameliorating racism requires the same.

However, in a careful reading, Christian anthropologists will recognize a familiar, recurring theme in DiAngelo's work: a call for humility. DiAngelo repeatedly advocates for white people to cultivate racial humility. Rather than expecting people of color to assume the burden for educating whites, along with the responsibility to comfort whites in their grief, distress, or shame, she advocates for whites to have the humility to accept that responsibility as their own. When missteps occur, she calls for whites to have the humility to receive the feedback, to own the actions, intentional or unintentional, and then to repair the damage.

Perhaps a willingness to receive feedback is the greatest reason to fully engage with DiAngelo's book. The form of an argument may be critiqued, and the substance of an argument may be refuted. Winning an argument does not necessarily translate to being correct. Our goal, as the people of God, is not to win the argument. Our goal is to affirm the inherent dignity of all people, to understand the lines drawn to separate humanity from humanity, and to embody the cruciform gospel, valuing others above ourselves and looking to the interests of others. We may freely engage with DiAngelo's work from a place of humility, seeking first to understand, and asking the question, "What if she's right?"



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