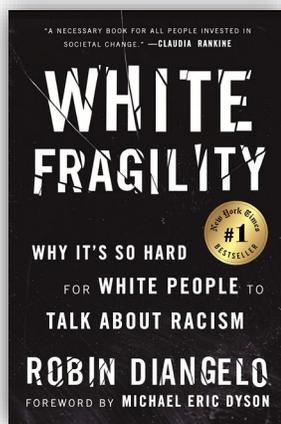


BOOK REVIEW

White Fragility: Why It's So Hard For White People To Talk About Racism

By Robin DiAngelo

Reviewed by Nakia Vongvirath



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Robin DiAngelo's book, *White Fragility*, was written with white readers in mind. DiAngelo wrote this book to try and help white people realize how their dependence on white supremacy shapes the social norms of American society. She goes into detail on the pitfalls of racism and how subtle racism can be. DiAngelo also discusses her personal experiences as a race sensitivity trainer and how her groups react to her direct way of teaching. She is not afraid to call white people out on their racism and to show how it affects people of color. She also self reflects, pointing out examples of her own racism in hopes she can teach white people how to respond to direct criticism of racist behavior. It is DiAngelo's goal to shake white readers and make them reflect on their own racist behavior. In this review I will discuss the main points of her argument that white fragility is a defense mechanism that white people use to support their

belief that they are not racist, and to convince others that they are not racist as well.

"Though white fragility is triggered by discomfort and anxiety, it is born of superiority and entitlement. White fragility is not weakness per se. In fact, it is a powerful means of white racial control and the protection of white advantage" (2). This quote summarizes the main discussion of the book. White supremacy, according to DiAngelo, is the reason why people of color (mainly African Americans) cannot achieve racial equality in America. White Americans benefit from being white, and whether they acknowledge that privilege or not, it is the way our society operates. In DiAngelo's discussion on the difference between white prejudice and the prejudice of people of color she mentions an obvious fact. People of color can be prejudiced of white people, but they lack the ability to work their prejudice into laws and legislation to inhibit white people in any way. That is because white people have privilege and power over social, cultural, and legal systems and processes, something people of color do not have.

DiAngelo believes white people have triggers for their white fragility, such as: whenever their racial integrity is threatened. Once someone white says or does something that would be considered racist, the white person becomes either angry or defensive if challenged. Then, they deny being or saying anything racist, and/or leave the situation. They accuse the person of color offended of being too sensitive, and in doing so ignore the feelings of the person who was offended. "In fact, when we try to talk openly and honestly about race, white fragility quickly emerges as we are so often met with silence, defensiveness, argumentation, certitude, and other forms of pushback. These are not natural responses; they are social forces that prevent us from attaining the racial knowledge we need to engage more productively, and

they function powerfully to hold the racial hierarchy in place” (8). The purpose of white fragility is to disrupt the passing on of knowledge about race and racism. According to DiAngelo the interruption of the force called racism is a lifelong commitment because the mental conditioning produced by the current race framework is a constant in our society. DiAngelo stated in the book that her conversations with white people about race were so predictable she likened them to a shared script. Through the white cultural lens white people mistakenly see themselves as objective and unique individuals. But in point of fact, white people are responding with a collective mindset that enforces white supremacy.

DiAngelo discusses an adaptation of racism called “the good/bad binary” and describes how it was derived from white people seeing the atrocities committed in the civil rights movement of the 1960s. northern whites labeled southern whites as racist, and racism meant extreme prejudice and malicious acts of violence towards people of color. In doing that northern whites were able to see themselves as not racist because they believed themselves to be incapable of committing such acts. So now to call someone racist is to attack their very character, and such an attack must be defended. But in doing so, all attention is on the charge and not the behavior. The good/bad binary is a way for white people to be comfortable in their own race worldview. According to DiAngelo, if a white person is safe in their understanding that they are on the “not racist” side then there is nothing for them to do. But this way of thinking hinders them from expanding their knowledge on racism or acting productively to end racial inequality.

DiAngelo discusses a form of white fragility called “white tears”, specifically “white woman’s tears” and how this one act has been and continues to be one of the most destructive acts of white fragility. She discusses how throughout our history, black men have been tortured or killed because of the distress of white women, using the death of Emmett Till as an example. In one of DiAngelo’s classes a black man stood up, but was having problems expressing himself. So a female black co-facilitator stood up to help and encourage him. It wasn’t long before a white woman stood and tried to speak for the black man. When she was corrected by the black woman, the white woman began to cry. At that moment all attention was directed at her in an attempt to console her, which completely negated what the black man was trying to say. No one was

interested in him anymore. The only thing that mattered was regaining the white woman’s self-worth.

DiAngelo’s book on white fragility was enlightening for me. She wrote this book from a white person’s perspective, but made it relevant for all readers. I could tell she did a great deal of research and self-reflection before she wrote this book. Her insight on how white supremacy has been imbedded in the social norms of our society is a wakeup call for our nation. DiAngelo does not mind exposing her own racism in this book. I find her refreshingly honest since it puts her in a very vulnerable position to admit there are times that she can be racist. And at the same time, she is trying to offer other white people the tools to acknowledge their own racism. This book is strong medicine for white people who do not want to admit that white supremacy is profoundly present in our society. If white people could accept that being white comes with privilege, I believe they could have a greater understanding of how it feels to live without that privilege. That would be a good beginning for real change in this nation. DiAngelo stated in her book that white fragility can be a means of bullying because it takes advantage of white power and control. This bullying is understated, but ever-present. Reading this section, I believe DiAngelo understood (probably by observation) how people of color have to censor ourselves and curb our behaviors to accommodate white people. As a black woman I know it is a daily habit that is done unconsciously and consciously. It is nice to see that a white person noticed this behavior and deemed it unnecessary and wrong. This book was written to help white people understand what white supremacy truly is, in the hope that understanding it will help prevent it in the future. I would recommend this book to anyone who wants to learn that lesson.



Nakia Vongvirath graduated from Eastern University in 2021 with a master’s degree in Theological and

Cultural Anthropology. Her research interests are in social anthropology and linguistics. She wants to study what society's reactions are to social issues and the language used to communicate those reactions. She wants to be able to pursue these interests with a Christian frame of mind so as to show a Christian's perspective in her research.

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