

## **Author's Note & Introduction**

### **Summary:**

In her Author's Note, DiAngelo establishes that identity politics "refers to the focus on the barriers specific groups face in their struggle for equality" (p. xiii). DiAngelo frames this using the examples of women receiving the right to vote in 1920 while Black women didn't get the same freedom until 1964. This contrasts with the identity the group who made the decision to allow women to vote: middle- and upper-class white, able-bodied men. DiAngelo emphasizes that identity politics has been and still is the driving force behind the fight for civil rights. To challenge injustice, DiAngelo stresses that by naming who does and does not have access to civil rights guides where energy and effort must be placed. Not naming groups who don't get full civil rights benefits the ones with power because those in power make the assumption that civil rights are granted to everyone. As such, the book is rooted in identity politics, specifically the examination of the white identity, so that white people can understand their role in our society's racial hierarchy.

In the introduction, DiAngelo discusses how our society is separated by race where white people are the beneficiaries of this design. As a result, we are insulated from racial stress since we're all together in a white bubble. And because we have no racial stress we thus have zero racial stamina. Within our white bubble we're socialized into believing we're the best of our society, so when someone points out that we've done something racially insensitive or have contributed toward a system that benefits us while keeping others down makes us freak out. That freak out moment is called white fragility. White fragility then is a mechanism that stops learning moments and maintains this racial hierarchy that keeps whites on top.

### **Analysis and Commentary:**

I think a lot of people have this idea that identity politics is about political correctness and the need to be respectful of people's identities. But when DiAngelo connects identity politics to the driving force behind the civil rights movements it's easier to understand that marginalized people and communities bring their identities forward in order to highlight how they do not have equal access to the civil rights that the white community has. We as whites assume that everyone has access to civil rights because we're socialized to believe that everyone is treated equally. Since the fight for civil rights has not stopped, we need to stop and examine what it is about our identity and culture that continues to keep others down.

Then, as we go to examine our white identity and our culture, we are confronted with some real hard facts that trigger a wide range of defensive emotions. In our lives we've never had to

address what it means to be white because there's been no need when we're constantly around other people who look like us. That, and all of us whites benefit from a system designed for us (though we're led to believe it benefits everyone). Our lack of experience and knowledge causes us to be aggressively defensive so much so we miss any opportunity to learn, grow, and change ourselves and our society. We get stuck trying to prove how innocent we are from contributing to a system of oppression, or coming up with flawed counterarguments, because we don't want to see or admit we did something wrong (often unintentionally). Humility and grace are going to play important roles going forward, but a key thing to remember is that this is not about us on an individual level.

## **Chapter 1, The Challenges of Talking to White People About Racism**

### **Summary:**

Building off of the introduction, specifically how we're raised not to see ourselves in terms of race, DiAngelo states that we are raised and made aware that "somebody's race mattered, and if race was discussed, it would be theirs, not mine" (7). However, in order to learn cross-racial skills we as white people need to learn how to be uncomfortable with being seen in terms of race. While white people have thoughts and opinions on what racism is in our society, DiAngelo says that our opinions are uninformed since "nothing in mainstream US culture gives us the information we need to have the nuanced understanding of arguably the most complex and enduring social dynamic of the last several hundred years" (8). As an example, she explains how many educational and career paths don't require a certification or knowledge of racism as a prerequisite for qualification. That whenever issues of race do arise in social circles, too often people enact white fragility to shut down the discussion.

To understand white fragility, DiAngelo says we need to first understand the way we were raised and socialized. She points out two key elements of our Western European culture that works against our ability to see ourselves as a racial collective:

--Individualism: each of us is unique and stand apart from others, and that different aspects of our identities (race, gender, class, etc.) do not determine what opportunities we have access to. That is, all opportunities are available to all because America is built on equality. There are no barriers, and failure in different endeavors (career promotion, home buying, etc) is due to the individual (10)

--Objectivity: to be free of bias. Specifically, we do not look at life through a specific viewpoint or perspective—we see the world through a universal human perspective (11)

However, due to socialization, we are taught that membership into certain identities/groups does matter. DiAngelo uses examples such as being young versus old, able versus disabled, rich versus poor. Social meanings are tied to these groups, and as a result there are differences in lived experiences. We are taught these meanings through in a wide variety of ways, explicitly (verbal) or implicitly (nonverbal) through people (parents, extended family, friends), media (tv, films, music, advertisements, the news), or institutions (teachers, textbooks, preachers, rules/policies, and punishments for not following rules).

Building from this, we grow to understand our individual selves by understanding others who are different from us. Yet, due to society's emphasis on individuality, DiAngelo states "many of us are unskilled at reflecting on our group memberships" (11). That is, we do a really good job of examining others but not ourselves, both on individual and group levels.

What makes examining our white group membership even harder is that to examine this membership "challenges our belief in objectivity," because to have a racial viewpoint is to be biased, so examining our membership is to say we are biased (11).

DiAngelo then addresses how the title, *White Fragility*, goes against our sense of individuality because it generalizes white people. However, DiAngelo argues as a sociologist that social groups are "patterned and predictable in measurable ways" (12). She stresses we need to overcome the defensiveness that arises when we are grouped together because we will not be able to "explore patterns of group behavior and their effects on individuals" in terms of modern racism in today's society (12). None of our individual qualities makes us immune from the bias and racism inherent in white culture.

DiAngelo wraps up the chapter by explaining our common definition of racism (that racists are people who intentionally dislike others because of their race, and thus racists are immoral) is very simplistic and doesn't capture the real scope of racism. She says to the reader "I am not using this definition of racism, and I am not saying you are immoral" (13).

### **Analysis and Commentary:**

There's a lot to break down in this chapter.

First, we as white people think we know what race and racism is but in reality we don't. We know race matters because race determines what kind of experience one will have in our society (for a blunt example, watch this 1 minute video of Jane Elliot asking a room of white folks if they'd be willing to receive the same treatment Black Americans get in our society: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4yrg7vV4a5o> ). Despite knowing this, we only know about other races and not our own (and even then we don't really know about those races and their respective cultures because all we have to go on are stereotypes and other assumptions and messages fed to us). Like DiAngelo was getting at, we as white people can go through life without having true experiences in racism (experiences that keep us from progressing in society because of presumptuous associations made about our skin color) or taking courses in race and racism in order to be qualified for careers or certifications.

We are socialized to not to see ourselves as white (and all that entails about being white) because of individualism and objectivity. Individualism is best compared to that notion of "pulling yourself up by your boot-straps"—that you are what you make yourself, especially in America where there is endless opportunity to everyone free of barriers. Unfortunately, the boot-strapping story is just a myth because identity determines who has access to opportunities. We know this to be true because we are socialized/have received verbal and nonverbal messages about who is favored in society (able bodied over the disabled, young over old, men over women, and white over everyone else). Most of these messages have been transmitted in nonverbal ways.

Deep down inside, you know you have received these messages, even if you know they are immoral. The neurological structures and connections have already been permanently made in our heads (re: unconscious bias).

It's hard to think of ourselves as white and having a white viewpoint/perspective on life and on the world because to acknowledge that fact is to say we have a biased way of viewing the world. This goes against that objectivity we are supposedly raised with having. Again, when we're raised with messages about who and what is favored in society, do we really have an unbiased perspective then?

The end of the chapter serves as a sort of disclaimer that will be explained in detail in other chapters. While DiAngelo is generalizing about us whites being aggressively defensive, the generalization is warranted and accurate because our socialization makes us all the same, especially in how we see the world and react to it. The next chapter explores what really is racism, and it's not "people who intentionally and outwardly dislike people of other races."