

Chapter 2: Racism and White Supremacy

Summary:

DiAngelo opens the chapter up with how race is not a function of biology but a function of geographical adaptations. That, “under the skin, there is no true biological race. The external characteristics that we use to define race are unreliable indicators of genetic variation between any two people” (15). [Note, both assertions are backed by medical research and cited in the book’s Notes section]. Despite these truths, we like to believe race is biological because it “makes it easy to believe that many of the divisions we see in society are natural” (15). To move away from this construct, DiAngelo says “we need to understand the social and economic investments that drove science to organize society and its resources along racial lines and why this organization is so enduring” (15).

When Europeans began colonizing America, they brought along their cultural conditioning of domination and submission. When the United States was established, a tension existed between equality and freedom (regardless of class and religious) versus the “cruel reality of genocide, enslavement, and colonization,” and the best way to reconcile this tension was for science to prove the existence of natural differences in race. Especially if those who weren’t white were naturally and inherently inferior, then all would be good. Thus “the idea of racial inferiority was created to justify unequal treatment,” not the other way around (16).

DiAngelo covers more history regarding the perception of race in America, specifically legal decisions from the US Supreme Court deciding who was white because there were a lot of rights and benefits at stake for those deemed white by law. This is important to know because the benefits and rights given to those deemed legally white helped ensure those who are not white did not get the rights they deserved as human beings.

Note: Other books to be covered by SJ/AR guides will go into greater depth about race-based science and law in US history. White Fragility touches on some of this history to give context but doesn’t go deeper.

DiAngelo then distinguishes the differences between prejudice (pre judgement—thoughts, feelings, stereotypes, attitudes, and generalizations based on little or no experience—about another person based on social groups to which that person belongs) and discrimination (action based on prejudice to include ignoring, exclusion, threats, intimidation, ridicule, slander, violence). Emphasis is placed on prejudice because all humans have prejudice whether they want to or not. Because society teaches us prejudice is bad and immoral, we all rush to say we don’t have prejudice. Yet by doing this we’re unable to examine the racial prejudices we’ve

involuntarily picked up through socialization. DiAngelo then implies that discrimination is proportional to the emotion we feel from prejudice. One example she gives is if one feels hatred because of their prejudice then one's discriminatory actions will be extreme such as violence. On the flip side, if one feels discomfort from prejudice then the resulting discriminatory action will be very subtle, such as clutching a purse while walking past a person of color.

Racism stands apart from prejudice and discrimination in that "when a racial group's collective prejudice is backed by the power of legal authority and institutional control, it is transformed into racism, a far reaching system that functions independently from the intentions or self-images of individual actors" (20). Further, "the system of racism begins with ideology, which refers to the big ideas that are reinforced throughout society" (21). DiAngelo goes on to explain how ideology is the backbone of racism. Ideology of white racial superiority is reinforced in society through verbal and nonverbal messaging in micro (eg, families) and macro (eg, school) settings, and how ideology is reinforced through social penalties (eg, being ostracized from a social group).

People and communities of color carry prejudices and can perform acts of discrimination, but their acts are not racist because "they lack social and institutional power that transforms prejudice and discrimination into racism; the impact of their prejudices on whites is temporary and contextual" (22). In this sense, whites are the only group that can be racist because they "have the collective social and institutional power and privilege over people of color" (22). Further, "individual whites may be 'against' racism, but they still benefit from a system that privileges whites as a group" (23). Hence the term white privilege, "advantages that are taken for granted by whites and cannot be similarly enjoyed by people of color in the same context" (24). DiAngelo states that whites do face struggles and barriers, but not the same barriers of race that communities of color face.

Because of the legal protections whites receive over others, a sense of white identity referred to as whiteness emerges. Whiteness carries this premise: "the definition of whites as the norm or standard for human, and people of color as the deviation from that norm. Whiteness is not acknowledged by white people, and the white reference point is assumed to be universal and is imposed on everyone" (25). This in turn creates white supremacy, a term "to capture the all-encompassing centrality and assumed superiority of people defined and perceived as white and the practices based on that assumption" (28). Just like how racism is not about individual people but about a system of oppression, DiAngelo points out white supremacy goes beyond individuals to describe a culture and other overarching systems of domination. Thinking of

white supremacist as only people “obscures the reality of the larger system at work and prevents us from addressing this system” (28-29).

DiAngelo lists a variety of stats to display how our society truly is controlled by white people. Some stats include (31):

Ten Richest Americans: 100% white (seven of which are the richest in the world)

US Congress: 90% white

People who decide which TV shows we see [TV executives]: 93% white

Teachers: 82% white

The chapter concludes with the introduction of the white racial frame, a term to describe “how whites circulate and reinforce racial messages that position whites as superior” (34). This frame would not exist if it wasn’t for white supremacy. It includes those verbal and nonverbal messages in our culture about whites being better than Blacks or other people and communities of color. DiAngelo creates a list of reflection questions to help readers recall these messages, some of the following include (35):

Did your parents tell you that race didn’t matter and that everyone was equal?

Did you have many friends of color? If no, why not?

If people of color did not live in your community, why didn’t they? Where did they live?

What images, sounds, and smells do you associate with these other neighborhoods?

What activities happened in these other neighborhoods? Were you encouraged to visit these neighborhoods?

What makes a school good? Who goes to good schools? Who goes to bad schools?

If your school was diverse, did kids all sit together? Were all classes equally diverse in race? Why or why not?

Did you have teachers of your same race?

DiAngelo gives a couple more examples of the white racial frame, such as white neighborhoods seem to be free of race but is actually full of the white race and the white racial frame that includes stereotypes of communities of color built on a limited view. Another example is when a small white child points out a Black man's skin color in public and the mother hushes her child. Her instinct to hush her child comes from anxiety, embarrassment, and tension because the racial frame says to be Black is not good or ideal, so for the child to point out the man's skin color is seen as a shameful act. But the reality is there's nothing to be ashamed of about being Black (37).

Analysis and Commentary:

This chapter's focus on terms and definitions is vital because our ideas of race, prejudice, discrimination, and white supremacy are very flawed. The irony is that our ideas of these terms was taught to us by our schools, families, and churches. It is ironic because these incomplete ideas actually work to keep racism and white supremacy unexamined and in power when it feels like our society set us up to go against racism and white supremacy. That's the insidious power of racism and white supremacy—those in power create incomplete terms for us to focus on so the whole institution is not exposed.

You'd likely say that this was done in innocence, that our teachers and parents didn't know any better because they're repeating what they're taught. But that should make you wonder: who controls these definitions? You'd probably say a dictionary, but the dictionary doesn't know the cultural context. Definitions taught to teachers and others in positions of authority come from a governing body. For example, a predominantly white school board chooses which textbooks get used in class, so they're going to use textbooks that reflect their values. How likely is it a white school board will approve a textbook that says the white people are the only ones who can be racist in US society, and that US society actively works to benefit white people while keeping people of color oppressed? Not very, unless there are people of color on the school board (local elections matter!).

Because of flawed definitions, we're socialized to see discrimination, racism, and white supremacy as extreme actions conducted by individuals. On one hand, it's easier to see and understand racism and white supremacy in these terms. In history classes it's "Hey, look at the white supremacists burn crosses and ride around in white costumes! Now they carry tiki torches and wear Dockers!" Easy to see because it's cut and dry. There are no moral arguments that can excuse those images. What's not easy is to point out a predominantly white

neighborhood or school and say this is an example of racism and white supremacy because our flawed definitions do not fit with these examples.

Because the definitions don't match the actual state of society, many people will dismiss the neighborhood or school as an example of racism and white supremacy with all sorts of arguments that will tie back into individuality. For example, "this neighborhood is mostly white because Black folks don't work hard enough to afford a house here." This example argument ignores the reality of racial barriers put into place by institutional power controlled by white folks. For this example, banks controlled by white executives decide who gets the better home loan and where that home loan can be applied (Re: Redlining, or Re: Subprime Mortgages).

Yes, I'm aware white people were victims of subprime mortgages, but many more people of color were sold subprime mortgages than whites were. Thus, people of color were disproportionately affected by the subprime mortgage crisis. It begs the question, why were people of color sold more subprime mortgages than white people? Hate to say it, but it's not a coincidence that banks and investment firms run by predominantly white male executives and boards created a predatory product and took advantage of those who don't qualify for safer products, especially if a requirement for a safer product is to be white.

This example shows how racism is about institutional power that serves the group who wields that power. Banks are an example of institutional power because they decide who gets to build wealth through home ownership and who doesn't. In this instance it's who gets a safe home loan. Banks are controlled by groups of white men and will work to serve the benefit of other white men. To qualify for a safe product like a conventional fixed-rate home loan you have to meet specific criteria that includes things like continuous employment, a high credit rating, and a favorable income-to-debt ratio. Also taken into consideration is level of education, criminal records, and the number of dependents one must provide care for. When we take into account other institutional powers such as policing, higher education, and employers who provide quality income and job security it becomes clearer how the game is rigged:

--Who has better access to quality education? White people: either through highly funded schools with neighborhood property taxes, or just from the fact most teachers being white will not view their white students behaviors as aggressive or threatening thereby keeping them in school (re: School-to-Prison pipeline). Regarding higher education, just Google any university's demographics.

--Who is often the target of policing? Who is likely going to jail for minor infractions? If you've been paying attention to the national protests, you know it's not white people.

--Who earns more per paycheck? Who gets the promotion more often? Who is able to climb that company ladder? Yeah, you know who. White men.

So, who is most likely to get that safe home loan based on the outlined qualification criteria? On the flip side, who is then going to qualify for a risky product?

I know this has been a lengthy example, but I use this example to highlight the point that reverse racism doesn't exist. A person of color cannot be racist to you, dear white person, because they don't sit in positions of power to create policies that actively push us out of schools and into prisons. They cannot create qualification criteria that says we can only have a subprime mortgages instead of that fixed-rate mortgage. So when somebody of color says or does something to you that's racially offensive (like a group of people of color call you a fragile cracker or a honkey or whatever) you can't say they're being racist to you. At the end of the day you're still able to experiences the privileges of being white, like being far more likely to qualify for a safe home loan.

If we're unable to see racism and white supremacy beyond the actions of individuals, then we'll never be able to call attention and demand changes to the institutions that control power. I know by doing this means to accept that our society is a system of unequal power relations built to benefit us and that we've done things support and defend these institutions wittingly or not. That's a hard pill to swallow, but no progress can be made if we don't take that step.

As far as that white racial frame goes, actually take a few minutes to think and reflect on those questions posed by DiAngelo. Think about where you heard or received these messages, and then ask yourself if you know for a fact if those messages are true—that is, do you have first hand experience or knowledge toward that message that confirms its existence. If you don't have that experience, ask yourself why did that message come to be? What purpose does this message serve?