

Chapter 4: How Does Race Shape the Lives of White People

Summary:

DiAngelo starts the chapter off by saying in order to understand why white people have a hard time talking about race we need to look at how being white has shaped our lives (including perspectives, experiences, and responses). When discussing belonging, DiAngelo uses the example of her upbringing to describe how she has always been surrounded by whiteness—from the hospital she was born in with its caregivers (and how they treat white people) and maternal resources illustrated to show other white people within it. At the same time the janitors and maintenance personnel were likely people of color. As she grows up, DiAngelo sees products and media designed for her in stores and on tv. The school she attends has others who look and act like her, so she feels belonging and comfort. Whiteness has surrounded her, so later as an adult whenever she's in a situation where she may be the only white person in a group raises anxiety because she "might have to experience not belonging racially" (53).

Growing up white people are socialized not to see themselves or others who look like them as racially white. As a result, white people don't have the burden of worrying about how others feel about their race or if their race will be held against them. If there are any moments where we feel uncomfortable about being white from people of color who are, for example, our coworkers, we have the ability to go to our other white coworkers for reassurance that you're not the problem, it's them. Then as we move through the world and see racist acts against people of color, we're taught that we have no personal responsibility toward the problem; we're not the one performing that example of racism, so we're good. DiAngelo says this freedom of responsibility gives "a level of racial relaxation and emotional and intellectual space that people of color are not afforded as they move through their day" (55).

Given our overwhelming sense of belonging and removal of responsibility from racism, white people benefit from a level of movement throughout various spaces in the country that people of color cannot take advantage of. The example DiAngelo gives is how she suggested her and a Black friend go take a vacation in the Idaho panhandle. Her friend wasn't cool with the idea because of the area's ties to white nationalist groups and compounds and the lack of residents of color in that area. All of that equals isolation in an all-white area with people who've likely never met a person of color. DiAngelo, as a white person, never has had to consider these aspects when planning travel.

Another aspect of growing up surrounded by whiteness is how we don't refer each other as whites, that rather we're just people. This contrasts when we mention our friends of color in conversation. Often it's "my Black friend" or "my Asian coworker." This also happens with

people of color who are professionals in their given field, such as Toni Morrison always being referred to as a Black writer instead of just a writer. We never call Charles Dickens a white writer. When we take a step back and see all the examples of human out there—Adam and Eve, Jesus and Mary, anatomical models in biology textbooks, the “scientifically perfect face.” All of these depictions are white. Moving beyond visual representations and toward scientific models like child development, these models only take into account the development of white children because children of color do not develop the same way as white children do in the United States. This is due to white supremacy—white children will receive more resources and security during their development than children of color.

Within whiteness is a standard of white solidarity, the “unspoken agreement among whites to protect white advantage and not cause another white person to feel racial discomfort by confronting them when they say or do something racially problematic” (57). Further, “white solidarity requires both silence about anything that exposes the advantages of the white position and the tacit agreement to remain racially united in the protection of white supremacy” (57-58). Social consequences of breaking white solidarity also exists through accusations of being politically correct, lacking a sense of humor, or combative. To not challenge someone’s racially problematic behavior and maintain white solidarity, people will be rewarded as being seen as fun, cooperative, and a team player. This pushes people who know better to remain silent if they are to keep their good standing within the group.

DiAngelo then transitions to how a good number of white people lament the current state of our society by reminiscing about “the good old days.” She says this is a function of white privilege because it allows the person to remain oblivious to our racial history—how can there ever have been a good time in our nation’s history when Black Americans were subjected to slavery, limited mobility under Jim Crow era laws, and are now the targets of an aggressive police state? How can there have been good times when the US government actively committed genocide against Native Americans, passed the Chinese Exclusion Act, interred Japanese Americans in concentration camps during WW2 and now do the same to Central American asylum seekers? [NOTE: This is just the tip of the iceberg, more specifics to come in other books and resources]

DiAngelo describes the danger of people pushing for the “good old days” as a racially coded way of saying “that any advancement for people of color is an encroachment on this [white] entitlement” toward being superior (59). She makes the connection to how white men in power often push this message to the white working class in order to make people of color the scapegoat for why the white working class is no longer progressing when in reality the decisions to outsource and globalize has contributed toward the wage gap.

Because we're raised in white bubbles away from communities of color, DiAngelo states that white people will often declare themselves as "innocent of race," or that they were sheltered from race. So to learn about race white people will turn to people of color to teach us since we don't see them innocent or sheltered from race, even though people of color could be viewed as innocent of race too since they grew up in segregated neighborhoods. Yet white people don't view people of color as racially innocent and demand they teach us whites about race in terms we will understand in the face of invalidations and retaliations as they share their experiences (62). Worse, this expectation whites have toward people of color "implies that racism is something that happens to people of color and has nothing to do with us and that we consequently cannot be expected to have any knowledge of it" (64). DiAngelo points out that this expectation "denies that racism is a relationship in which both groups are involved," "reinforces unequal power relations by asking people of color to do our work" in uncovering and dismantling racism and white supremacy, and "disregards how often people of color have indeed tried to tell us what racism is like for them and how often they have been dismissed" (64).

DiAngelo begins to close the chapter by describing how white people prefer to live segregated lives because "growing up in segregation (our schools, workplaces, neighborhoods, shopping districts, places of worship, entertainment, social gatherings, and elsewhere) reinforces the message that our experiences and perspectives are the only ones that matter" (65). This is reinforced by the fact that any school or neighborhood that has diversity will be regarded as bad, especially as that number of people of color increases and white decreases. DiAngelo emphasizes the worst part of this segregation is how nobody says segregation has deprived our culture and lives of anything of value (67). That is, we are better because of segregation. That if parents really valued cross-racial relationships for their children they would go the same distance others take to get their kids into the best schools to ensure their kids would have friends of color.

In all, growing up with these pillars of whiteness is what serves as the foundation of white fragility. DiAngelo summarizes with the following list (68-69) [NOTE: Paraphrased]:

--Preference for racial segregation

--Lack of understanding about what racism is

--Seeing ourselves as individuals exempt from the forces of racial segregation

- Failure to understand we carry white history, and this history matters
- Assuming everyone is having or can have our white experience
- Lack of humility, and an unwillingness (and authentic interest) to listen to people of color share their experiences
- Dismissing what we don't understand
- Wanting to bypass doing hard person racial work to get to an easy/incomplete solution
- Confusing disagreement with not understanding
- The need to maintain white solidarity
- Guilt that paralyzes or allows inaction
- Defensiveness about any suggestion we're tied to racism
- Focus on intention over impact

Analysis & Commentary:

DiAngelo sharing her upbringing surrounded by whiteness is a good exercise for all of us to practice. An effective way to reflect on this is to recall the first time you became aware of your own race (especially if you, dear reader, are white). Don't confuse this with the first time you realized somebody else was a different color/race than you, or the first time you know someone of color had this realization about themselves. I'm talking about you—when did you realize that you are white and this whiteness carries certain burdens and privileges?

For me the moment of awareness happened in two points. The first was when I lived in Hawaii as a child (I grew up as a Navy brat and moved often). So somewhere between 7-9 years old I became aware that I was white and this wasn't necessarily a good thing. My white family (mom and three of us kids) went with our white neighbors (another mother and her 4 kids) to the McDonald's that sat outside of base housing in the general public. I loved going there because the place had one of the nicer play areas for kids (like, I never had memories of encountering syringes or dirty diapers being in the ball pit there), and we always played with other local

Hawaiian kids there no problem because we're just young kids who hadn't been totally corrupted yet.

So on this day we're all out there at the McDonald's one of our neighbor's kids got into an altercation with a Hawaiian kid and supposedly spit on them. What I remember as a child was a loud shouting match and sparring between these two kids and then a lot of Hawaiian parents emerging from inside. My mom, while carrying my infant brother, got my sister and I out of the play area while our neighbor had to save face with the Hawaiian community, but as my family is leaving I'm seeing a lot of the locals glaring at us. And as we're pulling out of the parking lot I ask what all the fuss is about and my mom says something to the extent that "the Hawaiians are about to kick our asses because we're white!" We never ate inside that McDonald's, or any other outside of a military base on Hawaii, ever again. Even as a kid, that awareness of being white and knowing the locals didn't exactly like us "haoles" (even without knowing the full history of white colonization) was enough to bring a slight level of anxiety toward walking around in public spaces that weren't frequented by tourists.

As for the second time, it came when George Zimmerman was acquitted from murdering Trayvon Martin in the early 2010's. The man was clearly guilty, Trayvon was clearly innocent, and no amount of apology toward Florida's laws obscured the fact that something profoundly wrong just happened. And the basis of that was that a white man got away of murdering a Black boy. It was the wake up call I needed to see being white was a loaded, complex, and possibly problematic. I was 23 when that happened. From conversations I've had with other white people, it's not uncommon to realize your race at an "older" age. I say older because it's not uncommon for people of color to have this realization at a very young age (there are many heartbreaking stories out there if you search for them).

Getting back to the book, since we're surrounded by so much whiteness it's easy to take for granted that we are white and have a long list of privileges (aka unearned advantages, a more realistic term social justice authors have pointed out) we get to enjoy such as the freedom to travel wherever we want in this country. I know you're going to say, "well I can't travel into inner-city neighborhoods because that's where people of color live and it's dangerous to go there as a white person" when in reality you can still travel there regardless of the actual level of crime that exists. The matter of whether you should travel into a community of color comes down to intent, I feel. Like if you're going there to support local businesses, have a bite to eat at a mom & pop restaurant, and gain some cultural appreciation that we never got at school because of segregation and white supremacist educational policies then right on! But if you're going into a community of color to gawk from inside your car, find a "bargain" house to renovate and gentrify, or go just because you can then you should just stay home.

White solidarity is a vicious game we play and don't even realize it because so much of it is the subconscious of social capital. Much like the backstage/all-white company interactions described in the previous chapter, there are real consequences involved in speaking out against racist behaviors (even when it's something as seemingly innocuous as a joke...jokes lead to negative associations and attitudes that then lead to negative actions). DiAngelo mentioned being called out as being politically correct or seen as combative while those who play along or silent are then seen as cooperative team players. Coming off a short career in a work culture that was very toxic (and very white), the consequences were even more extreme like being ostracized from social and professional circles, being cut off from professional development opportunities, and even being seen as undermining the organization and its leaders (I got a gut feeling that at least 80% of my colleagues would straight up deny this existing and would base it off performance--yet our performance wasn't objectively measured). All of this keeps racism and white supremacy alive and well. If you choose to stay silent and not disrupt it you'll have to live with the moral repercussions, a clear violation of our integrity and moral values if we truly are opposed to racism and white supremacy.

As far as those "good old days," those days only have existed for whites (especially white men). In fact, as long as there are systemic inequities keeping people and communities of color down, the present will always be the "good old days," even if Uncle Donald (or any of those old white bastards) cry to the contrary. The main emphasis to focus on here is how this phrase is the denial of the entirety of US history, of all the blood shed out of white racial terrorism. Sure, some white people did some good things here and there as we've been taught in schools, but just you wait until we uncover our bloody history later on here at SJ/AR Guides. For the majority of people that live in North America throughout the ages, there never really was a good old time to be alive.

Going into the idea of whites declaring racial innocence seems to relate to how we feel like we're not contributing to racist systems. Yet, as eluded to from other chapters, we do perpetuate and uphold racist institutions often without really realizing it. So while we have never felt the affects of racism personally as white people, we're far from innocent since we keep that engine running. I feel that the need for people of color to teach us about racism comes from a place of "Shit, where the hell do we even begin?! We have never felt racism because we're white, and I haven't committed racism because I'm not one of those crazies carrying a tiki torch!" Funny how it goes back to those incomplete definitions about what is racist and what is white supremacist, isn't it?

Fear not, fellow white person: we've been handed many lists of social justice and anti-racist resources written by authors who have lived and survived oppression from communities of color who want to see us do and be better than who we are now. With these lists in hand (and SJ/AR Guides here to help you process the resources listed) don't go forcing people of color to personally instruct and enlighten you about racism. If you have friends of color they'll make it known if they want to have these discussions with you. If they do, it's in your best interest to be humble and not invalidate the experiences they share with you, even if it's them pointing out how much you've sucked in the past. Even if you didn't mean it.

The last big takeaway comes from how most whites prefer a segregated society. That they prefer stuffy white bubbles filled with scenes from Crate & Barrel and William Sonoma catalogs, whether out of fear or superiority, or some kind of messed up combination of the two. When DiAngelo emphasizes how we have actually missed out on cultural enrichment because of segregation she's not making it up. For example: think about aspects of pop culture you like. Chances are that there's some link to another culture in its foundation. Like I'm a fan of rock music, and there would've been no rock and roll if it wasn't for rhythm and blues.

There are entire universes of knowledge, customs, and art (just to name a few) that can enhance and enrich our lives, but because of white supremacy we believe the white way of doing things is actually the right way. Everything else is inferior and primitive. This is akin to the saying "work smarter, not harder," but often times the white way of doing things is actually "work harder." Hold on to that idea for now—that analysis will be saved for a later day.