

Chapter 5: The Good/Bad Binary

Summary:

DiAngelo starts this chapter by revisiting the popular image/concept of what we've been taught what a racist and racism looks like (as touched on in chapter 2)—the common example being the outwardly violent acts of prejudice and discrimination of the Jim Crow era South. This example gave Northerners a sense of moral superiority by pointing at Southerners as the example of who not to be, although racism exists throughout the country in many forms. Regardless, a good/bad binary became established based off racial violence during the Civil Rights movement of the 1960's. The binary is over simplistic with racist traits limited to ignorance, bigotry, prejudice, mean-spirited, older, and Southern. Not-racists traits include progressive, educated, open-minded, well-intentioned, young, and Northern (72).

With the binary set, whenever white people are told they have said or done something racist it feels like their character is being attacked. As such, white people become very defensive about their character so much so it ends any constructive dialogue. DiAngelo states, "to move beyond defensiveness, we have to let go of this common belief" in the good/bad binary (73). But white people like the binary because it makes racism easier to understand despite the binary's limitation to accurately describe structural, institutional racism. The binary limits racism to the actions of individuals and doesn't place any spotlight on institutions.

DiAngelo points out that the binary also gives white people a pass from not actually dismantling institutional racism. If you can either be a racist or not-racist, and you choose to be not-racist, there is no follow-on action required. If one is not racist, then they can go on their merry way without really challenging our social institutions.

For the second half of the chapter, DiAngelo shares a list of defenses white people have given her when their racially problematic words or behavior are called out during professional racial equity trainings. All claims are rooted in the good/bad binary, yet can be separated into two categories: color-blind excuses, and color-celebrate excuses. Here are her counter-claims to white people's defensiveness:

"I was taught to treat everyone the same" (color-blind defense): Humans aren't 100% objective because of unconscious/implicit bias due to the racial viewpoints and social messages we've received growing up. Saying "I treat everyone the same" closes any opportunity to reflect on our implicit biases.

“I marched in the ‘60s.” (color-celebrate): This statement says that racism is a matter of racial intolerance, and that racism hasn’t adapted since the Civil Rights Movement of the 60’s. People use this as if to say “my education in racism is finished for life” when there is obviously much more work to be done today [or else why would we be in another Civil Rights Movement today?].

“I was the minority at my school, so I was the one who experienced racism.” (color-celebrate): This claim follows the idea that racism is fluid in the sense that the community with more numbers will yield more power. But remember at the end of the day the institutions that run everything were created by white people, are managed by white people, and benefit white people. DiAngelo points out in this argument the school still operates in a white supremacist context (so will have a preference toward whiteness in the curriculum and policies) and the white students will benefit from all the white privilege regardless of their status in the school.

“My parents were not racist, and they taught me not to be racist.” (color-blind): A racism free up-bringing is not possible in our society due to racism being embedded into our culture and institutions. The claim relies on the good/bad binary. What parents have actually taught is how to hide, or not admit, prejudice. DiAngelo says that “ideally, we would teach our children how to recognize and challenge prejudice, rather than deny it” (84).

“Children today are so much more open.” (color-celebrate): DiAngelo cites a 2009 study of 283 white children (aged six to seven and nine to ten) where the children were asked to allocate money to white and black children, once when an adult was present and another time when an adult wasn’t present. The researchers found that the younger group discriminated against black children in both settings while the older children only discriminated when there was no adult present. The striking conclusion here is that children do not become less racially biased with age but instead learn how to hide their racism from adults as they grow. So by running with this claim we’re not actually addressing any problems. People refuse to believe that children as young as six can discriminate, and as a result of turning a blind eye we’re perpetuating our racist systems on to the next generation.

[Note: A copy of the study is available back on the main page for White Fragility. Although the study focuses on white and black children in Portugal, what’s to say our society is any better when we’re all based off the same Western European cultural fundamentals?]

“Race has nothing to do with it.” (color-blind): Falls back on the good/bad binary because “if race had anything to do with it, then the person [who was called out on racist behavior] would be racially implicated and thus no longer positioned as color-blind or outside race” (85). That is,

a person who may be guilty of doing something racist doesn't want to come to terms with their actions.

“Focusing on race is what divides us” (color-blind): So this person is saying race doesn't matter, and talking about race gives it more attention than it deserves. But from our socialization we know race does matter, so to deny that race matters is to uphold the racial imbalance that favors white people. DiAngelo emphasizes that people do not want to name the power inequity because it “exposes the reality of racial division,” that insisting “not talking about difference is necessary for unity” (86). But this claim assumes we all have the same racial experience when that's plainly false.

Analysis and Commentary:

Essentially this chapter is an examination of the consequences of having awful definitions surrounding who a racist is and what is racism. As described in previous chapters, a racist isn't simply someone who acts out on their prejudice in violent ways. Yet when we hold onto that image, it makes it damn near impossible to examine all the other ways racism exists both inside us as implicit/unconscious bias, or outside of us in larger macro systems like banking, schooling, policing, etc. We've been socialized in way where we commit racist acts without even realizing it because our society has instilled and promoted that behavior in us from a very early age.

In order to grow and become better people who will make a better society we must toss out the binary and be open to people telling us certain behaviors, ideas, or actions are racist without getting our underwear in a twist. That is, when we remove the binary it will be easier to hear someone bringing the issue up because they're not attacking our character. The good/bad binary wants you take the issue personally when in reality the person who addresses your problematic behavior is trying to educate you on an issue so that you don't do it again and become a better person. There is no guarantee your going to get the “gentle” gloves when this issue is brought to your attention, but in that moment you need to remember it's not a personal attack. Even if they directly call you a racist when it's the action that's racist. However, if you keep repeating this problem, or if you double down and don't take responsibility for your actions, then you may really be a racist.

In our quest to be better people, we have to be conscious of our actions and words. If that fails and we're called out on our actions or words, we again have to be conscious of the tendency to want to defend our character. DiAngelo gives us a list of top excuses and defenses white people have used to in avoid being held accountable for their words and actions. Maybe you've heard

some of these lines in a group setting or on tv or other media. Maybe you've even used one of these yourself.

Even though the book doesn't pose too many spots for us to sit, reflect, and do internal work, I've developed some gut-check questions based off this chapter:

--Why are we unable to take responsibility for our words and actions when someone calls us out on it?

--Why do we feel the need to defend ourselves constantly?

--What is it about our society and socialization that makes it hard for us to admit we've made a mistake?

--Why are we not willing to listen to the views and experiences of others when all they're trying to do is help make us better?

--Why do we have a tendency to stay firmly planted in one way of thought instead of learning and growing with a new way of thought?

--Why are we afraid of accepting the truth about our society?

I feel these questions relate back to one of the goals of SJ/AR Guides: to examine what exactly it means to be white, and what exactly is white culture. I think of responses to these questions and it really is a gut-check because some uncomfortable truths begin emerging.

I would love to hear what you think in response to these.