

White Fragility Reading Guide

It may be beneficial to devote a notebook to this book as there are discussion questions designed to engage you in the reading. These questions are complex and you may want to reflect on them at a later time.

Some helpful points to keep in mind before reading and our discussion, these have been created by the author and will assist in your digestion of the material.

1. This book and its arguments build on antiracism scholarship and activism that people of color have written for generations. That scholarship has been fundamental to the ability of the author to explicate white fragility. Use this text as the starting point—rather than the ending point—to educate yourself on racism. There are many suggestions for engaging with the work of people of color in the Resources for Continuing Education section of the book.
2. The primary goal for white people working to understand racism is not to learn how racism impacts people of color. The primary goal is to recognize how the system of racism shapes our lives, how we uphold that system, and how we might interrupt it.
3. A strong opinion is not the same as an informed opinion
4. There is a difference between agreement and understanding. When discussing complex social and institutional dynamics such as racism, consider whether “I don’t agree” may actually mean “I don’t understand.”
5. We have a deep interest in denying the forms of oppression that benefit us. We may also have an interest in denying forms of oppression that harm us. For example, people of color can deny the existence of racism and even support its structures. This denial may keep them from feeling overwhelmed by the daily slights or protect them from the

penalties of confronting white people on racism. However, regardless of the reason, this denial still benefits whites at the group level, not people of color.

6. Racism goes beyond individual intentions to collective group patterns.
7. We don't have to be aware of racism in order for it to exist.
8. Our racial position (whether we identify as white, a person of color, or multiracial) will greatly affect our ability to see racism. For example, if we swim against the "current" of racial privilege, it's often easier to recognize, while it's harder to recognize if we swim with the current.
9. Putting our effort into protecting rather than expanding our current worldview prevents our intellectual and emotional growth.

Chapter 1: The Challenges of Talking to White People About Racism

Reflect on each question in your mind, select one or two to write about or that you would like to discuss.

1. Identify a passage from chapter 1 that invokes any sense of discomfort. Highlight this passage and return to reading it periodically as you work through the book. What does this passage reveal about your socialization into the white racial frame? Does your discomfort shift over time? If so, what supported that shift?
2. If you are working through these questions as part of a white discussion group, how will you keep the discussion on track (focused on ourselves and our own participation)? How will you ensure that when common white patterns surface (distancing, intellectualizing, rationalizing), you will work to identify and challenge them rather than ignore or avoid them?

3. How do so many white people feel so confident in their opinions on racism, even as they live their lives in segregation?
4. How can we make generalizations about what it means to be white when we don't know each person's individual story?
5. What are some constructive ways to use your emotional reactions when your opinions on racism are challenged?
6. Explain in your own words the author's critique of the ideology of individualism.

Chapter 2: Racism and White Supremacy

Reflect on each question in your mind, select one or two to write about or that you would like to discuss.

1. What does it mean to say that race is "socially constructed"?
2. What is the difference between racial prejudice, racial discrimination, and racism?
3. What does the author mean when she says that there is no such thing as reverse racism?
4. How does the birdcage metaphor illustrate oppression?
5. What is scientific racism? Give some examples of how scientific racism is conveyed today.
6. What does Cheryl Harris mean when describing whiteness as a form of property?
7. What is problematic about the idea of the U.S. as a great "melting pot"? How did the melting pot actually work?
8. Discuss Coates's statement that race is the child of racism, not the father.
9. The author cites Ruth Frankenberg's description of whiteness as "a location of structural advantage, a standpoint from which white people look at ourselves, at others, and at

society, and a set of cultural practices that are not named or acknowledged.” Explain each of these dimensions in your own words.

10. How is the author using the term “white supremacy”?

Chapter 3: Racism After The Civil Rights Movement

Reflect on each question in your mind, select one or two to write about or that you would like to discuss.

1. What is the impact of white people not knowing our racial history?
2. What is color-blind racism and why is it problematic?
3. How did racism change and adapt after the civil rights era? Consider attitudes as well as behaviors.
4. Why does the author say that white progressives cause the most daily harm to people of color?
5. Why does the author consider young white people today to be no less racist than white people in the past?
6. How would you respond to someone who says, “Doesn’t it all come down to what your parents taught you?”

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

Reflect on each question in your mind, select one or two to write about or that you would like to discuss.

1. The author traces some of the specific ways that her life has been shaped by racism. Consider your own socialization. In what specific ways has your life been shaped by racism? (If you are white, try to answer this question without mentioning people of color).

2. Identify at least three ways that white racial belonging has been conveyed to you in the last week (you might start by opening your wallet and looking at the bills there).
3. What are the earliest racial messages you can recall? Try to move beyond what you were openly told and work to identify implicit messages.
4. In what settings have you experienced the expectation of white solidarity/racial silence? How has that expectation been communicated to you? How have you responded? What consequences have you faced or fear you will face by breaking with white solidarity? 8
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5. The author describes the power of segregation. She argues that this segregation is “active.” What does this mean?
6. Discuss how various patterns of segregation across your lifespan shape your racial frame.
7. If you are white, which of the patterns discussed in this chapter have you seen in yourself? Which of the patterns challenge you the most? Why?
8. Consider some aspects of your identity other than race (i.e., gender, sexuality, religion, class, ability, nationality, age). How does race shape how you experience these identities? For example, how might being white shape how you experience disability? Poverty? Gender identity and expression?
9. If you are a person of color, how have you witnessed white people enacting white solidarity?
10. The author states that white ignorance is not simply a matter of not knowing; it is a highly effective response that protects white investments in racism and thus is actively maintained. Discuss this statement.

11. What does the author mean when she says that white people are not, in fact, racially innocent? How can we know much about race if we have lived separately?

Chapter 5: The Good/Bad Binary

Reflect on each question in your mind, select one or two to write about or that you would like to discuss.

1. What does it mean to say that racism is “a structure, not an event”?
2. The author suggests that one of the most effective barriers to talking about racism with white people is the good/bad binary. How have you seen this binary underlying common white responses to charges of racism? How might you respond when the binary surfaces in discussions about racism?
3. If you are white, share some examples of the good/bad binary in your own responses to suggestions that you are complicit with racism.
4. When the author challenges the idea that we are all unique and therefore cannot be generalized about, what thoughts and feelings come up for you? How might these thoughts and feelings function?
5. The author lists two types of narratives that are commonly used by white people to deny complicity with racism: color-blind and color-celebrate (p. 77). Which narratives have you used yourself, or still use? If you could speak back to yourself with the voice of the author, how would you counter the narrative?
6. How can a white person still enact racism in a close relationship with a person of color? Doesn't the close relationship itself prove that the person is not racist? Explain how and

why enacting racism in a close relationship with a person of color is not only possible but inevitable.

7. If you are white, when was the last time someone challenged you to look at an aspect of yourself related to racism? How did you feel? How did you respond? What insights did/can you gain from the exchange? If no one has ever challenged you (or not in a very long time), what might that tell you about how whiteness shapes your life?

Chapter 6: Anti-Blackness

Reflect on each question in your mind, select one or two to write about or that you would like to discuss.

1. The author claims that in the white mind, black people are the ultimate racial other. What does this mean?
2. What does it mean to say that anti-blackness is present across all communities of color, even within black communities?
3. How does the author make the case that the construction of white identity and white superiority was in fact dependent upon the simultaneous creation of a particular idea of blackness? How are these ideas sustained?
4. What are some of the misunderstandings about affirmative action and what do these misunderstandings reveal about anti-blackness?
5. Why haven't affirmative action programs changed our racial outcomes?
6. What does the author mean when she suggests that causing pain and suffering for black people rests on a sense of white righteousness?

7. Return to the reflection questions on the white racial frame on pp. 34-36 and answer them while replacing the term “people of color” with the term “black people.” What do you notice?
8. The author states that the film *The Blind Side* is “insidiously anti-black.” Using the framework of the book, explain how a viewer can not notice the anti-black messages yet still be shaped by them.
9. Consider the bulleted list following the author’s analysis of *The Blind Side*. In which other films have you seen these racial scripts?

Chapter 7: Racial Triggers for White People

Reflect on each question in your mind, select one or two to write about or that you would like to discuss.

1. Discuss the social taboos mentioned on p. 100. Give examples of each from your own life.
2. Explain the triggers listed in this chapter in your own words and share examples of each in daily life.
3. The author writes that white people have limited information about what racism is and how it works, while at the same time they have very strong opinions about racism. Explain how both of these can be true at the same time. In your own words, practice stating the difference between having information about what racism is and having opinions about what racism is.
4. The author shares the story of Mr. Roberts and lists the ways that the two teachers in the story dismissed what they did not understand. Discuss this example. How have you seen or participated in these forms of dismissal?

5. How does the author challenge the idea that our intentions are “what count”?
6. Discuss Bourdieu’s concept of habitus as a way to understand the racial disequilibrium that leads to white fragility. In what ways is this concept helpful in explaining how racial disequilibrium works?

Chapter 8: The Result: White Fragility

Reflect on each question in your mind, select one or two to write about or that you would like to discuss.

1. What is the “discourse of self-defense”? Have you ever used it yourself? If so, thinking about it now, how did it function in the interaction?
2. Share a time that you experienced your own white fragility or witnessed another white person’s.
3. What strategies do white people use to reset white racial equilibrium?
4. As a white colleague, how would you explain to Karen (p. 107) what is problematic about her response? If you are a person of color, what strategies could you use to address Karen’s white fragility?
5. Why are questions such as “What is the right thing to say?” or “What am I supposed to say?” the wrong questions? How might you respond the next time you hear these questions?
6. The author claims that white fragility functions as a form of bullying. How so?
7. What is meant by the statement that white fragility is “white racial control.” How does white fragility function as racial control?
8. The author ends this chapter by sharing an interaction with a man of color who, when asked what it would be like for white people to be open to feedback, replied, “It would be

revolutionary.” She asks white readers to consider the profundity of this man’s reply.

What feelings did you have when you read that response?

9. How might this man’s reply inform how you respond to feedback from people of color, going forward?

Chapter 9: White Fragility in Action

Reflect on each question in your mind, select one or two to write about or that you would like to discuss.

1. Why are white people more receptive to other white people (rather than people of color) educating them on race? What does this say about the role white people must play in addressing systemic racism in society broadly and specifically in our homes, with our friends and family members, and in our workplaces with our colleagues?
2. What are the opportunities and dilemmas of white people educating each other on racism?
3. Discuss the claims on pp. 119-120. Have you ever made any of these claims yourself?
4. Now consider the assumptions underlying those claims on p. 121. Which ones have you held? Do you still hold some of these? If so, how do they function for you and what would it mean to you to shift them (what do you see yourself as having to “give up”)?
5. What is the language of self-defense and why is it problematic?

Chapter 10: White Fragility and the Rules of Engagement

Reflect on each question in your mind, select one or two to write about or that you would like to discuss.

1. The author presents a set of eleven “cardinal rules” (pp. 123-24) when giving feedback to white people regarding racist assumptions and patterns. For each rule of engagement, provide an example of the rule in action.
2. What assumptions do these rules rest on?
3. DiAngelo presents these rules in a language of critique in order to reveal how they function. Of course the “rules” are rarely explicitly expressed this way. Consider what you hear white people say 12 White Fragility Reading Group Guide Find it online at beacon.org/whitefragility that communicates “do not give me feedback under any circumstances” etc.? Go through each of the eleven rules and share how you have heard these rules expressed in practice.
4. How would you rewrite these rules from an antiracist framework? (A worksheet for rewriting the rules of engagement can be downloaded from robindiangelo.com/resources.)
5. In your own words, what is problematic about common guidelines for building trust in discussions about racism (e.g., “don’t judge”)? How do these guidelines function? Who are they for? Whose comfort do they protect?
6. The rules of engagement around white fragility have at least three parts: those giving feedback, those receiving feedback, and those witnessing these exchanges. Practice some language for each by preparing your own “sentence starters” such as the silence breakers above. How might you begin to give feedback? How might you respond to feedback given to you? What might you say as you witness an exchange of feedback?

Chapter 11: White Women's Tears

Reflect on each question in your mind, select one or two to write about or that you would like to discuss.

1. The author opens this chapter with the story of a woman of color in a multiracial group stating that she did not want to be subjected to white women's tears. Why were white women asked not to cry in the group?
2. The author argues that emotions are political. How are emotions political?
3. There have been social media critiques of "white feminism." What are some examples of white feminism?
4. What does it mean to take an "intersectional" approach? Provide some examples.
5. Throughout the book the author reinforces the idea that we "bring our histories with us." What does this mean and why is it so important?
6. White women often assume a shared sisterhood with women of color. What is problematic about this assumption?
7. Discuss some of the ways in which white men's fragility manifests. What is important for white men to understand about the impact of each of these behaviors?
8. The author writes, "Since many of us have not learned how racism works and our role in it, our tears may come from shock and distress about what we didn't know or recognize. For people of color, our tears demonstrate our racial insulation and privilege" (pp. 135-36). Discuss this passage and the ways that white emotional distress and shock (tears, defensiveness, anger, grief) shape conversations on racism. What do these dynamics reveal about the sociopolitical function of emotions? Find it online at beacon.org/whitefragility White Fragility Reading Group Guide 13

9. Consider how emotions function in public space. For instance, how do white people often read the emotions of women of color, and peoples of color generally? Consider how emotions are read racially by white people with cultural figures such as Serena Williams, Nicki Minaj, Cory Booker, Maxine Waters, and Mazie Hirono, as well as the way that institutions (like media) respond to emotions in racialized ways. Conversely, how are the emotions of white people read (and the intersections between race and gender in all readings)? Consider cultural figures such as Christine Blasey Ford, Elizabeth Warren, Brett Kavanaugh, Lindsey Graham, and Donald Trump

Chapter 12: Where Do We Go From Here?

Reflect on each question in your mind, select one or two to write about or that you would like to discuss.

1. Using an antiracist framework, how would you respond to a white person who said, “You just want me to feel bad and guilty about something that I had nothing to do with”?
2. Very little if anything in society at large supports us to persist in the work of antiracism. In fact, much pressures us not to continue the work. Because of this, we need to set up support for ourselves to continue. How will you set up support for yourself to stay on the journey? How will you resist complacency? Consider both in-group support and racially mixed group support networks. How will both settings be important in different ways?
3. The author states that it isn’t enough for white people to be nice and that, in fact, racism depends on white people simply being nice. Discuss this statement. How does niceness alone uphold the racial status quo?

4. If we accept that racism is always operating, the question becomes not “Is racism taking place?” but rather “How is racism taking place in this specific context?” How does awareness of that change how we think about our lives and our actions?
5. Why must white people resist cynicism and remain hopeful? At the same time, what are the pitfalls of hopefulness? What is the difference between hope and denial?
6. The author shares a time that she perpetrated racism toward a coworker and the steps she took to repair the damage. Identify the underlying antiracist assumptions listed on pp. 142-143 that are demonstrated in these steps.
7. Discuss the suggestions for continuing the work of antiracism. Which are the most challenging? How can you meet those challenges?