

WHITE FRAGILITY

Caltech Center for Inclusion and Diversity Summer Campuswide Book Read

Community Guidelines:

- **Recognize:** We recognize that we must strive to overcome historical and divisive biases, such as anti-blackness, racism and sexism, in our society.
- **Acknowledge:** We acknowledge that we are all systematically taught misinformation about our own group(s) and about members of other groups. This is true for everyone, regardless of our group(s).
- **No Blame:** We agree not to blame ourselves or others for the misinformation we have learned, but to accept responsibility for not repeating misinformation after we have learned otherwise.
- **Calling-In vs Calling-out:** Both approaches are valid and can be done with care and respect, with the goal of helping each other learn. We acknowledge that we may be at different stages of learning on the content and discussion topic.
- **Individual Experience:** We agree that no one should be required or expected to speak for their whole race or gender. We can't, even if we wanted to.
- **Make Mistakes:** We all make mistakes and have bad days; when these occur, let's challenge and encourage each other to do better. We acknowledge once again that we may be at different stages of learning on the topic.
- **Make Space & Take Space:** Share responsibility for including all voices in the discussion. If you have a tendency to dominate discussions, take a step back and help the group invite others to speak. If you tend to stay quiet, challenge yourself to share ideas so others can learn from you. If you are exceedingly quiet, do expect that the facilitator will call on you in meetings to participate. Make sure everyone gets a chance to speak; assigning a time keeper may be a good idea. Allow people to "pass" on questions they aren't ready to answer.
- **Listen to Understand & Learn Together:** Everyone in the group is here to learn. We also recognize that everyone has an opinion. Opinions, however, are not the same as informed knowledge backed up by research. Depending on the topic and context, both are valid to share but it's important to know the difference. To engage in deep learning, we will want to lean more toward informed knowledge and gain practice reflecting and speaking thoughtfully on difficult topics. Avoid the need to "teach" anyone in the group. Speak from "I" e.g., I feel uncomfortable when... I don't understand this concept... etc.
- **Ask for help:** It's okay not to know. Keep in mind that we are all still learning and are bound to make mistakes when approaching a complex task or exploring new ideas. Be open to changing your mind, and make space for others to do so as well. Write down questions that come up and have each person volunteer to find a few answers for the next meet up.

(adapted from: Iowa State University <https://instr.iastate.libguides.com/c.php?g=869437&p=6240385>)

June 25, 2020

Intro Meeting:

- Introductions: Names, Pronouns, Why did you sign up for this book club?
- What is your comfort level with discussing issues of race?
- Where and with whom do you currently talk about issues of race? (i.e., on-campus, off-campus, with family, with friends, online, which social media platforms?)
- What do you hope to gain from reading this book and talking about it with the group?
- Logistics: Write down: names, email addresses, and general availabilities for three dates you'll follow up for your meetings.
- Please email the CCID: diversity@caltech.edu with the above information.
- Optional: Write down common fears/themes that come up from the comfort level of each person around discussing race. This will be helpful to reflect on throughout your meetings.

We recommend 3 meetings:

1) Week of July 6th: Introduction, Chapters 1-4

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

Key Concepts: Race, Socialization, Individualism, Objectivity, Social Construct

Suggested Questions:

- What is most uncomfortable to you when discussing race?
- When was the first time you discussed race?
- When was the first time you were able to identify within a racial category?
- What was it like to read about the role of American scientists in creating the constructs of racial inferiority and superiority?
- Some general processing questions to ask yourself from Chapter 1:
 - Why does this unsettle me?
 - What would it mean for me if this were true?
 - How does this lens change my understanding of racial dynamics?
 - How can my unease help reveal unexamined assumptions I have been making?
 - Is it possible that because I am white there are some racial dynamics I cannot see?
 - Am I willing to consider that possibility? If not, why not?

Chapter 2: Racism and White Supremacy

Key Concepts: Prejudice, Discrimination, Racism, Ideology, White privilege, Whiteness, White supremacy, assimilation, power

Suggested Questions:

- “All humans have prejudice; we cannot avoid it.” What prejudices have you held on to? What prejudices have you been able to change over time?
- When have you experienced and/or observed discrimination?
- Reflect and discuss your feelings on: “When I say that only whites can be racist, I mean that in the United States, only whites have the collective social and institutional power and privilege over people of color. People of color do not have this power and privilege over white people” How does power play into these quotes?
- In what ways is your lab/dept/Caltech complicit in the myth of meritocracy? How are you (your dept/lab/Caltech) complicit in contributing white supremacy and how do you (your dept/lab/Caltech) benefit?
- Comment on your own concept of racial identity:

- If you are white, how has whiteness played a role in your experiences and opportunities?
- If you are non-white, how has your non-white identity interplayed with the valued Whiteness in your experiences and opportunities?

Chapter 3: Racism After the Civil Rights Movement

Key Concepts: new racism, color-blind racism, aversive racism, casual race talk, cultural racism, backstage, front-stage

Suggested Questions:

- What is aversive racism and how does aversive racism show up in our institution of higher education?
- How is it advantageous to adopt a color-blind argument/policy? And, how do we use coded language like this to create “new racism”? What code words have you been using to avoid talking about race?
- “All systems of oppression are adaptive; they can withstand and adjust to challenges and still maintain inequality.” What are some examples of this?
- *Front Stage* and *Back Stage* are two concepts DiAngelo brings up for how people respond to when people of color are around or when they are not. How have you witnessed and/or participated in “front staging” and “back staging?” “Front stage settings in which people of color were present and displayed a range of racially conscious behaviors... Backstage settings, where people of color were not present, white students often used humor to reinforce racial stereotypes about people of color, particularly blacks.”

2) Week of July 13th: Chapters 4-7

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

Key Concepts: white solidarity, white racial innocence

Suggested Questions:

- When we make assumptions about what is “normal” and/or who are we envisioning when we are talking about the Caltech/scientific community? When we refer to Caltech students, Caltech faculty, Caltech leadership?
- Why is it problematic to expect people of color to teach white people about racism?
- Reflect and discuss the following quote: “[A]s long as I personally haven’t done anything I’m aware of, racism is a nonissue. This Freedom from responsibility give me a level of racial relaxation and emotional and intellectual space that people of color are not afforded as they move through their day.”
- Have you ever interrupted racism? If not, why not? If you did, how were you rewarded or punished?
- Why speaking up about racism would ruin the ambiance or threaten our career advancement is something we might want to talk about.

Chapter 5: The Good/Bad Binary

Key Concepts: Binary

Suggested Questions:

- Have you thought about racism as being good/bad? How can that binary framework be challenged?
- Do you have friends that identify as different races than you? If so, how have you seen racism manifest within these cross-racial friendships?
- Describe your childhood and who you thought your parents to be. What values did they espouse as it relates to race and do you find yourself questioning and/or challenging these values?

Chapter 6: Anti-Blackness

Key Concepts: Anti-blackness

Suggested Questions:

- Why is blackness and all the attributes of blackness the ultimate antithesis to whiteness? How does that manifest in culture, groups, etc.? (e.g., whitening creams, lighter is better, straight hair, and other colorism examples.)
- What is your understanding of affirmative action and do you think it’s effective?

- What are examples of how we perpetuate the idea that “White people are saviors of black people?”

Chapter 7: Racial Triggers for White People

Key Concepts: Habitus, field, capital

Suggested Questions:

- How have you reacted to stress/discomfort in situations that dealt with race? Do you consider yourself to be “fragile?” Why or why not?
- When you are presented with situations that “interrupt” the white racial status quo, do you stay engaged in that moment? How do you respond? Defensive? Humble? Angry? What are strategies that may be more effective?

3) Week of July 20th: Chapters 8-12

Chapter 8: The Result: White Fragility

Key Concepts: Sociology of dominance, white equilibrium

Suggested Questions:

- How would you respond to Karen? Would the response look different if you were a person of color?
- Have you observed white racial innocence?
- Have you ever engaged in the “discourse of self defense”?
- How can white fragility function as a form of bullying? As a form of White control?

Chapter 9: White Fragility in Action

Key Concepts: White fragility functions

Suggested Questions:

- Reading through the common emotional reactions, behaviors, and claims that white people have on page 119-120 what would you add or which do you identify with?
- What assumptions do you hold? What assumptions do we have in our policies and practices as an institution?

Chapter 10: White Fragility and the Rules of Engagement

Key Concepts: Feedback

Suggested Questions:

- When have you seen white fragility in action? How did you respond? What role did you play?
- When have you compromised to manage the good/bad dynamic instead of interrupting a behavior?
- Which of the rules of engagement at the beginning of the chapter do you feel closely tied to or which can you identify that you have been complicit in?
- Practice how you might respond to when someone gives you feedback in your own words.
- If you have never received feedback, what about your life has prevented that? What steps can you take that will allow for you to receive feedback?
- What do you think white people mean when they say they need to “build trust” before engaging in a conversation about race? How many of you have challenged that perceived need?

Chapter 11: White Women's Tears

Key Concepts: White tears

Suggested Questions:

- "When a white woman cries, a black man gets hurt." Not knowing or being sensitive to history is another example of white centrality, individualism, and lack of racial humility. How do you feel about this?
- When have you allowed your guilt to be an excuse not to act?
- Where have you witnessed/observed "white women tears"? (e.g., Amy Cooper) What are your initial reactions to these events?
- "White people do need to feel grief about the brutality of white supremacy and our role in it. In fact, our numbness to the racial injustice that occurs daily is key to holding it in place." How and who do you/will you process your feelings with?
- What will be your "sustained and transformative actions?"

Chapter 12: Where Do We Go from Here?

Key Concepts: Reconciliation

Suggested Questions:

- What happens when a conversation doesn't go as planned? Talk through any points that resonate from her list on pages 140-141?
- She describes striving to be "less white," what do you think of this and what would this require of you? Are there other identities that are associated with power/privilege that you can be "less" of?
- What is the most significant realization that you experienced reading this book?
- Addressing racism is not without effort, what efforts will you take next?
- What are your action items? Who will hold you accountable to them?

Additional Ideas

Meditation on Messing Up (15m) (<https://www.afsc.org/story/csco-white-caucus-facilitation-guide>)

We're going to start today with a meditation on messing up.

One of the characteristics of white supremacy culture identified by Kenneth Jones and Tema Okun is perfectionism which makes us see mistakes as personal reflections on the quality of person we are, rather than an inevitable part of life.

That means there is little to no time given to learning from our mistakes because if we admit we made one in the first place, then we just said we are a bad person.

So one of the first things we need to do to become better accomplices and allies in this work is to start breaking down that belief in ourselves.

That's where our meditation comes in. Please ground yourself wherever you are and get into a comfortable position.

Close your eyes if you feel comfortable and if not, soften your gaze.

Let's take three deep breaths together like this. One...Two...Three

Now, I am going to say something that is 100% true, and I want you to notice what emotions come up for you and notice how your body reacts when I say it.

You have, while doing your justice work, harmed a person of color...

Take a minute and name the emotions that you are feeling right now. Notice where in your body you had physical reactions as well. Take one minute to write down your reactions so you can refer back to them later.

Now we are going to ask you to be vulnerable by sharing which of the common reactions below you had during this exercise. Raise your hand if you experienced any of the following [facilitator list the following]

- My muscles tensed up
- My stomach dropped or got fluttery
- Tears came to my eyes
- I felt flushed/overly warm
- I immediately shook my head without thinking
- I felt angry
- My immediate thought was "no I haven't"
- My first reaction was to think "of course I have"