

EXPLORING OUR REACTIONS: DEEPENING LEARNING FROM DIANGELO'S WHITE FRAGILITY

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OBJECTIVE

Students will reflect on white privilege and how they may have felt defensiveness and responded in unhelpful ways when that privilege or their own learned racism was identified. This activity will help students to reframe their understanding of racism to instead feel gratitude and motivation to change in these moments of confronting bias or larger structural inequities.

MATERIALS

None.

NOTES (PLEASE READ)

1. This activity is primarily intended for use in white affinity groups (groups of white people committed to discussing race and white privilege and doing the work to challenge their racism).
2. This activity is intended to be used in groups that already have established relationships and developed trust. Refer to the "Building Relationships" section of www.RestorativeTeachingTools.com for games and activities that will aid in building the trust and relationships necessary for this activity to be successful.
3. You will be asking learners to take a significant amount of risk to participate in this activity. Please read Chapter 5 from *The Little Book of Restorative Teaching Tools* to prepare for facilitating if you are new to working with this kind of material. If possible, consider asking a trusted associate to help you co-facilitate so that you can debrief the activity together and shed light on each other's blind spots.

INSTRUCTIONS

Start by introducing one of the central ideas of *White Fragility: Why it's so Hard for White People to Talk about Racism* by Robin DiAngelo: the reframe of how we ought to understand racism. You can use the quote below as a starting point for a description of this reframe or you can show your students this short video: <https://www.gcorr.org/video/vital-conversations-racism-dr-robin-diangelo/>

“If I believe that only bad people are racist, I will feel hurt, offended, and shamed when an unaware racist assumption of mine is pointed out. If I instead believe that having racist assumptions is inevitable (but possible to change), I will feel gratitude when an unaware racist assumption is pointed out; now I am aware of and can change that assumption. In this way, emotions are not natural; they are the result of the frameworks we are using to make sense of social relations.”

(DiAngelo, 132)

According to DiAngelo, because we think only “bad people” are racist, we often feel anger or defensiveness when our racist assumptions or white privilege is pointed out. This is what DiAngelo calls “white fragility” and it manifests in the following behaviors:

- Crying (especially white women)
- Controlling the conversation by speaking first, last, and most often
- Invalidating of racial inequality via “just playing the devil’s advocate”
- Simplistic and presumptuous proclamations of “the answer” to racism (“People just need to...”)
- Playing the outraged victim of “reverse racism”
- Accusations that the legendary “race card” is being played
- Silence and withdraw
- Hostile body language
- Channel-switching (“The true oppression is class!”)
- Intellectualizing and distancing (“I recommend this book...”)
- “Correcting” the racial analysis of people of color
- Explaining away racism and the experiences of people of color

White people exhibit these behaviors because they are feeling defensiveness, anger, or self-pity.

If white people can instead realize that racism is not an individual moral failing, but rather is inevitable because of our socialization, then the emotional reaction to realizations of our own racist thoughts and behaviors changes. Instead, these realizations are met with gratitude because they present us the opportunity to change.

Ask your learners to reflect on a time they may have exhibited one or more of the behaviors on DiAngelo’s list.

As facilitator, at this point it is helpful to model how this reframe works by reflecting on an experience from your own life. This demonstration of vulnerability paves the way for your learners to be similarly vulnerable and self-reflective. We will share our examples of modeling the reframe below, but make sure that when you are facilitating, you are sharing a true experience from your life and reflecting honestly.

Lindsey's Example:

"I attended a diversity training for restorative justice facilitators in 2014 and we did an activity based on Peggy McIntosh's *White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack*. In this activity, each training participant completed a quiz where we were instructed to mark each of the 50 effects of white privilege that McIntosh identifies that we had experienced. As a white person, I had experienced all 50, so marked all 50. We were then instructed to line up based on how many of the effects we had marked. I was the only person in the training who had marked all 50, so was at the very end of the line.

The facilitators then initiated a reflection conversation on the activity with us still standing in the line. As I was at the end of the line and thus represented the full manifestation of white privilege, many of the reflections about the racism of society at large were directed at me as an individual. I felt defensive, feeling that I had been misunderstood by the group, and began to cry. I also experienced some desire to channel-switch, wanting to share with the other training participants that I hadn't experienced socio-economic privilege (deflecting from the topic at hand, which was white privilege). Even after the training, I felt angry, expressing to friends and my partner that I thought the training was poorly run and that the facilitators did a bad job of creating a safe space.

Now, viewing this incident through DiAngelo's reframe, I see that my defensiveness was coming from a space of thinking that in having my white privilege and socialized racism pointed out, I was somehow being called a "bad person." I now understand that this could have been (and now thankfully is as I reflect back on it) an opportunity to truly see the extent of my white privilege and racist assumptions, some of which were previously invisible to me, and thus build my understanding and my ability to change myself. The feelings then shift from defensiveness, anger, and self-pity to gratitude for the opportunity to change."

Kathleen's Example:

"At a Theater of the Oppressed training a few years ago with a group of social justice activists, my friend and I found ourselves to be in the minority in that we were two white people in a very racially diverse group, and we were quite possibly the least well-versed in anti-racism and anti-oppression work. During a large group debrief following an activity, my friend pointed out concern that if the young woman of color actually went back to her white male boss and said some of the things she had just role-played in the activity, it might backfire and work against her goals of being recognized and valued at work. Other participants immediately began to call out my friend for the internalized dominance expressed through his lens and comments. He tried to defend and explain himself, which only made matters worse. I felt my chest tighten as I sat and watched things escalate, my emotions oscillating between anger, embarrassment, and fear, until I eventually settled in an intense longing to shrink and disappear. My friend had been more courageous than I to actually speak, but I shared his concern. Now, from my perspective, he was getting attacked and shamed just for trying to be helpful.

That debrief fortunately led to a mini-training in anti-oppression. But as soon as we had a break, my friend and I isolated ourselves from the group and walked off to the woods to vent to each other and sort through our confusion and frustration. Throughout the remainder of the training, I was terrified that no matter what my intentions were, whatever I said would land poorly and be held against me in a group setting. I was so scared of speaking up for fear of being cast into what I perceived as the "shame den." I remained quiet and withdrawn until I had the chance to sheepishly approach one of the anti-oppression trainers one-on-one to ask for more resources.

This is not the only time that I have felt paralyzed by shame in a training that seeks to address power, privilege, and racism. When I reconsider this and other experiences through DiAngelo's reframe, I realize that the opportunity was there for me to reach down deep to find my own resilience and capacity to learn and grow. I have continued work to do to set aside my own sense of righteousness and perfectionism and embrace these moments of intense discomfort for the ripeness of opportunity they present to become more aware, more honest, and humble."

The rest of this activity is in a Think-Pair-Share model.

Think:

Give these instructions to the group: Reflect on a time that you exhibited one or more of the behaviors on DiAngelo's list in relation to a conversation about race. Reflect on the following questions. What were you feeling at the time? Was there defensiveness? Why did you feel that way? How did you define racism at the time? (Consider writing these questions where everyone can see. Learners can choose to write their answers, or just reflect silently.)

Next, consider the same incident through the lens of DiAngelo's definition of racism as an outcome of our socialization. Notice any changes in your feelings about the event. How do you see the incident now. (Again, learners can write or just think about this.)

Pair:

Ask learners to get into groups of two. In your pair, each person will share what they just reflected on: the behavior that they exhibited, and what it was like to reframe that behavior. Please share with your partner as much as you are willing and do your best to take a risk and be vulnerable as you share. Partners should listen, then help each other go deeper by reflecting what they've heard and applying DiAngelo's lens. Please avoid judging or evaluating each other's stories, and please try not to alleviate each other's pain by justifying or excusing behaviors. Practice allowing discomfort- yours and theirs.

Give the pairs at least 10 minutes to share.

Share:

Come back to the large group. Invite everyone to take a couple deep breaths, or stand up and move/shake their bodies. Ask learners to share their experiences. Keep in mind that people may not be ready to share their full story with the larger group. Invite them to share key learnings and takeaways from this activity.

DEBRIEF

What was it like to look at a past incident through this lens?

What are things that will help you to make this reframe in the future?

LESSON

When we view racism as a moral failing or think that only “bad people” can be racist, then we can easily become defensive or angry when our own racism is brought to our attention. If we can instead learn to see racism as an inevitable (but possible to change) outcome of our socialization, then we will start to respond to these moments of awareness with appreciation. It is only through seeing our racism that we have the opportunity to change it. It is our responsibility as humans, and especially as restorative practitioners, to do this work.

ONLINE ADAPTATION

This activity can be facilitated online via Zoom. Simply send learners into breakout rooms of two people each when it is time to Pair. Let them know how much time they will have in the breakout rooms and give “five more minutes” and “one more minute” warnings via the broadcast feature before bringing them back together. After everyone is back together, invite the pairs to share about their experience and any key takeaways with the larger group.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- *White Fragility: Why it's so Hard for White People to Talk about Racism* by Robin DiAngelo
- A short video by Robin DiAngelo: <https://www.gcorr.org/video/vital-conversations-racism-dr-robin-diangelo/>
- Robin DiAngelo interview on White Fragility and Anti-Racism <https://www.npr.org/2020/06/17/879136931/interrupt-the-systems-robin-diangelo-on-white-fragility-and-anti-racism>
- Information on White Affinity Groups: <https://www.racialequitytools.org/act/strategies/caucus-affinity-groups>