

White Fragility and the Rules of Engagement

[diangelo-white fragility and the rules of engagement.pdf \(uua.org\)](https://uua.org/diangelo-white-fragility-and-the-rules-of-engagement.pdf)

BY DR. ROBIN DIANGELO

How to engage in the necessary dialogue and self-reflection that can lead to structural change.

I am white. I write and teach about what it means to be white in a society that proclaims race meaningless, yet remains deeply divided by race. A fundamental but very challenging part of my work is moving white people from an individual understanding of racism—i.e. only some people are racist and those people are bad—to a structural understanding. A structural understanding recognizes racism as a default system that institutionalizes an unequal distribution of resources and power between white people and people of color. This system is historic, taken for granted, deeply embedded, and it works to the benefit of whites.

The two most effective beliefs that prevent us (whites) from seeing racism as a system are:

1. that racists are bad people and
2. that racism is conscious dislike;

if we are well-intended and do not consciously dislike people of color, we cannot be racist. This is why it is so common for white people to cite their friends and family members as evidence of their lack of racism. However, when you understand racism as a system of structured relations into which we are all socialized, you understand that intentions are irrelevant. And when you understand how socialization works, you understand that much of racial bias is unconscious. Negative messages about people of color circulate all around us.

While having friends of color is better than not having them, it doesn't change the overall system or prevent racism from surfacing in our relationships. The societal default is white superiority and we are fed a steady diet of it 24/7. To not actively seek to interrupt racism is to internalize and accept it.

As part of my work I teach, lead and participate in affinity groups, facilitate workshops, and mentor other whites on recognizing and interrupting racism in our lives. As a facilitator, I am in a position to give white people feedback on how their unintentional racism is manifesting. This has allowed me to repeatedly observe several common patterns of response. The most common by far is outrage:

How dare you suggest that I could have said or done something racist! Given the dominant conceptualization of racism as individual acts of cruelty, it follows that only terrible people who don't like people of color can commit it. While this conceptualization is misinformed, it functions beautifully to protect racism by making it impossible to engage in the necessary dialogue and self-reflection that can lead to change.

Outrage is often followed by righteous indignation about the manner in which the feedback was given. I have discovered (as I am sure have countless people of color) that there is apparently an unspoken set of rules for how to give white people feedback on racism.

The Rules of Engagement

After years of working with my fellow whites, I have found that the only way to give feedback correctly is not to give it at all. Thus, the first rule is cardinal:

1. Do not give me feedback on my racism under any circumstances.

If you break the cardinal rule:

2. Proper tone is crucial – feedback must be given calmly. If there is any emotion in the feedback, the feedback is invalid and does not have to be considered.

3. There must be trust between us. You must trust that I am in no way racist before you can give me feedback on my racism.

4. Our relationship must be issue-free – If there are issues between us, you cannot give me feedback on racism.

5. Feedback must be given immediately, otherwise it will be discounted because it was not given sooner.

6. You must give feedback privately, regardless of whether the incident occurred in front of other people. To give feedback in front of anyone else—even those involved in the situation—is to commit a serious social transgression. The feedback is thus invalid.

7. You must be as indirect as possible. To be direct is to be insensitive and will invalidate the feedback and require repair.

8. As a white person I must feel completely safe during any discussion of race. Giving me any feedback on my racism will cause me to feel unsafe, so you will need to rebuild my trust by never giving me feedback again. Point of clarification: when I say “safe” what I really mean is “comfortable.”

9. Giving me feedback on my racial privilege invalidates the form of oppression that I experience (i.e. classism, sexism, heterosexism). We will then need to focus on how you oppressed me.

10. You must focus on my intentions, which cancel out the impact of my behavior.

11. To suggest my behavior had a racist impact is to have misunderstood me. You will need to allow me to explain until you can acknowledge that it was your misunderstanding.

These rules are rooted in white fragility.