

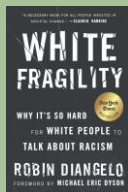
A S C A W E B I N A R S E R I E S



AMERICAN
SCHOOL
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Engage Staff on Issues of Race Through Book Study

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A S C A W E B I N A R S E R I E S

My Story

I cannot let my fear of making
a mistake or doing it
incorrectly stop me. It can't
stop any of us.



Learning outcomes:

- Explain why it is important for white educators to examine their racial identity and to know that it affects their students and colleagues.
- Develop, implement and facilitate a book study on the topic of race for the staff in your school.



School counselors doing this work...

Even if you are afraid of making a mistake, please go forward anyway. I've seen the positive momentum changing things in my building and I encourage you to take action.



How do you choose a book?

- Assess yourself and your staff
- Build a foundation
- Have a long-range plan



What else can you offer to show the institutional importance of this work?

- Talk to administrators
- Offer Clock hours
- Count for professional development hours



How do you determine the length and number of sessions?

- Time of school year
- More sessions is better
- 1 to 1.5 hour sessions
- Meet weekly or every other week



How do you get participants?

- Initial email invitation with sign up form
- Leverage relationships
- Personal invitations
- Reach out to ALL staff
- Be persistent



How do you determine the size of groups?

- How many total participants?
- Refer to [White Fragility Reading Guide](#)
- Ideal size: 5-7



Should you have affinity groups?

- Affinity group is....
 - People who are alike
 - People who have a shared purpose/interest
- Consider your goals
- Ask for input



How should you mix the groups?

- Departments/grades
- Ages/genders
- Personalities
- Assign a strong model in addition to the facilitator



How should you choose facilitators?

- Open/have the right motives
- Doing their own racial identity work
- Humble
- Willing to be uncomfortable
- Willing to press colleagues



How do you structure the sessions?

- First session: Whole group opening/small groups
- [Robin DiAngelo Video](#)
- Go over Tools for Group Discussion
 - Silence Breakers/Call Ins (see handouts)
- Final session: Small groups/whole group closing



Can you do the book study virtually?

- Yes
- Consider distractions
- Allow for more wait time
- Preferred Zoom over Google Meet
- Encourage participants to have video on



What norms do you choose?

- *White Fragility* passage, p. 126
- Traditional norms can keep white fragility in place
- Simple norms (see handouts)



How do you choose prompts and discussion topics?

- Develop your own
- Use [educator specific discussion guide](#)
- Passage sharing
- Stay on topic
- Closing/wrap-up: commit to specific actions



What is the plan for staff members not participating in the book study?

- Be aware of differences
- Encourage all to read the book, including admin
- Push district to provide mandatory ongoing racial equity training for ALL



Will this be difficult?

- Be ready to use what you are learning
- Speak up
- Negative impact of white silence (see handouts)
- Challenge yourself to learn more, do better and be better



Who can initiate and facilitate a book study?

- **YOU!**
- School counselors as leaders and advocates
- OK not to be an expert
- Be willing to consult
- Sustained identity and anti-racism work
- Do it for your own growth too



How do I facilitate a small group?

- Know discomfort will exist
- Prepare to use the provided tools
- Use scripts
- Willingness important - Preparedness critical



What are Tools for Group Discussions?

- Norms*

"Approach this work with humility, as a learner, and focused on your own growth."

- Silence Breakers*

"I'm really nervous/scared/uncomfortable saying this and/but..."

- Call-ins*

"Can we stop and explore what is happening now?"

*See handouts



Are affinity groups important?

- Why affinity groups
- Safe space
- Support
- Tips for facilitating



What do you need to know about doing this work?

Racial identity work is a process and practice, not an event.

Check this out for action ideas:

[21-Day Racial Equity Challenge — America & Moore](#)



Questions and Answers

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Excerpts from DiAngelo, R. (2012). Nothing to add: The role of white silence in cross-racial discussions. Journal of Understanding and Dismantling Privilege, 2(2), 1-17. (For references see full paper)

Abstract: This paper analyzes a common dynamic in interracial discussions on race: white silence. Using whiteness theory as the frame, I explicate the common white rationales for silence in discussions of race, and challenge each of these rationales from an anti-racist framework. I argue that regardless of the rationale for white silence in discussions of race, if it is not strategically enacted from an anti-racist framework, it functions to maintain white power and privilege and must be challenged.

Rationales for white silence and an anti-racist challenge

“It’s just my personality; I rarely talk in groups”

Our personalities are not separate from the society in which we were raised. Seeing one’s patterns of engagement as merely a function of a unique personality rather than as socio-political and co-produced in relation with social others is a privilege only afforded to white people (McIntosh, 1988). By focusing on ourselves as individuals, whites are able to conceptualize the patterns in our behavior that have a racist impact as “just our personality” and not connected to inter-group dynamics. For example, I might be an extrovert and talk over people when I am engaged in a discussion. I can say, “that is just my personality, I do that to everyone. That is how we talked at the dinner table in my family. And because I do it to everyone, it can’t be racism.” However, when I talk over a person of color, the impact of that behavior is different because we bring the racial history of our groups with us (DiAngelo, 2006). While white people tend to see themselves as individuals, people of color tend to see us as *white* individuals, thus the *meaning* of cutting off or talking over a person of color is very different. Conversely, remaining silent in an inter-racial dialogue also has a cross-racial impact. Anti-racist action requires us to challenge our patterns and respond differently than we normally would (Thompson, 2001). The freedom to remain oblivious to that fact, with no sense that this obliviousness has any consequences of importance, is a form of white privilege. In effect, we are saying, “I will not adapt to you or this context, I will continue to act the way I always act and you will have to adapt to me.”

“Everyone has already said what I was thinking” or “I don’t have much to add.”

Perhaps others have expressed our sentiments, but no one will express them the way that we will. It’s essential to the discussion to hear everyone’s voice, and even vocalizing one or two sentences makes a difference. Further, it is important to support those who have voiced our perspective - to validate it and give people of color a read of the room; they cannot assume everyone has already said what we are thinking. In fact, given the history of harm between white people and people of color, people of color may assume whites haven’t spoken because they are not aligned with what has been said and don’t want to reveal that misalignment. It is important for us to contribute our thoughts in order to demonstrate to people of color that what they have shared has made a difference in terms of helping increase our understanding. Sharing what we are thinking, whether “right” or “wrong,” articulate or clumsy, is important in terms of building trust, conveying empathy, or validating a story or perspective.

“I am trying to be careful not to dominate the discussion”

While it is important not to dominate discussions in general and as a white person, not to dominate an inter-racial discussion in particular, the problem with this strategy is that it is inflexible. Anti-racist practice asks us to think strategically – to be *racially* attentive to who is talking, when, how much and for how long. As a white person in the discussion, we need to ask ourselves when it is a constructive time to speak up, and when is it most constructive to just listen. The more practiced we become in racial discussions, the more easily we will be able to make sound strategic judgments about where and when to enter. When we remain silent we leave the weight of the dialogue on either people of color or other, more dominant whites. If these dominant whites are expressing hostility, we aren’t challenging them; if they are taking

risks, we aren't supporting them. When one is trying not to dominate the discussion and so never joins in, one errs on the opposite side of domination – ineffective passivity.

“I feel intimidated by people in this group who have power over me”

Complex socio-political power relations circulate in all groups, and there are other identities besides race at play in any discussion. While one is in a power position as a white person, there are other identities that may obscure that sense of that power because they position us in a subordinated (or “target”) position – i.e. gender or class. Because we “swim against the current” in our target identities, they are generally more salient to us. However, not being salient does not mean inoperative; indeed, much of the power we derive from our dominant identities is in its unremarkable, taken for granted status. In a setting in which I feel intimidated because my target identities are more salient to me, this feeling of intimidation may indeed be coming from a place of internalized inferiority, but in practice my silence colludes with racism and ultimately benefits me by protecting my white privilege and maintaining racial solidarity with other white people. This solidarity connects and realigns me with white people across other lines of difference that separate us, such as gender or class. When I work to keep my race privilege salient and speak up in this context, I not only break white solidarity, I simultaneously interrupt (and thus work to heal the “lie” of) my internalized inferiority where I am also in a target position.

In situations in which we may share key identities such as race and gender with someone but fear there may be repercussions because they hold more power in the specific *context* than we do –i.e. I am a staff worker and my supervisor is in the room, or the professor who is grading me is in the group, a different kind of courage is needed. This is the courage to put our integrity to do the right thing above the *possibility* of repercussions. Ultimately, we have to make a decision. Do I protect myself and maintain white solidarity and power, or do I authentically engage in anti-racist practice?

“I don't know much about race so I will just listen”

The white claim that one does not know much about race is particularly problematic because while it positions whiteness as “innocence”, it simultaneously reinforces the projection of race onto people of color – they have race, not us, and thus are the holders of racial knowledge. In so doing, we position ourselves as standing outside of hierarchical social relations – as if the oppression of people of color occurs in a vacuum. White obliviousness is not benign; it has material consequences because it allows us to ignore the impact of racism on people of color while enjoying its benefits at their expense.

Many whites have not thought about race in the way that anti-racist education conceptualizes it, but once we are introduced, it's important to share our thoughts. If I have never thought about these issues before, what am I thinking about them now as a result of the discussion? What specifically is new to me? What questions do I have? What insights am I having? What emotions am I feeling? Why might I have never thought about these things before, and what role might this play in keeping racism in place? In other words, how might racism depend on white people not thinking about these issues? And finally, ***what about my life has allowed me not to know much about racism?*** Being new to the concepts is not an end point or a pass to only listen and not speak; it is a key entry point into the discussion and into furthering self-knowledge.

“I already know all this”

This rationale positions the listener as so sophisticated as to be *beyond* the discussion. This claim gives the message to the people of color in the group that there is nothing to be gained from what they might share - their stories, experiences, perspectives, or feelings. This claim is particularly problematic because it conveys superiority; reinscribing the historical invalidation of people of color as not having any knowledge of value to white people, elevating oneself above other whites in the group and the potential to work together with them against racism, and accomplishing all of this by presenting oneself as “too advanced” for the discussion.

The anti-racist framework under-girding these discussions holds that racism is a deeply embedded, complex system that will not end in our lifetimes, and certainly not end through our complacency. If one sincerely believes their understanding of racism is more advanced than the

discussion allows for (which can happen when the majority of the white participants are very new to the concepts and the facilitators assess that they must move at a slower pace), then the anti-racist way to engage is to make strategic points that will help guide the other white people. Whites who have more knowledge than the majority of the group are in an excellent position to “mentor from the sidelines.” They can share their process and how they came to their current understanding, validate the struggle while reinforcing its worthiness, take the discussion deeper, and back up the facilitators and participants of color. Being “advanced” is not a reason for us to disengage; the disengagement itself makes the claim unconvincing.

“I need time to process.”

We may indeed need time to process, but taking the time we need is still a privilege not everyone can afford. At the minimum, we can try articulating what we are hearing that we need to process, and then let the group know that these are new ideas, that we are feeling overwhelmed, and we want to let things settle in. At the minimum, we can let the group know why we need the time to process and what we will be processing, rather than remain silent and leave others to wonder. When we have had time to process, we can share the results with the group.

It’s also helpful to distinguish between the need to process and the need to sound controlled, correct and coherent. If composure is what we are waiting for, we are working at cross-purposes to the discussion. Emotions, confusion, inner conflict, and inarticulation are all usually welcome in racial discussions. Vulnerability and openness build trust, and while thoughtfulness and respect are critical, control and composure are not necessary and can be counterproductive.

“I don’t want to be misunderstood.”

To not speak up in case we are misunderstood is to protect our perspective from deepening or expanding. It is not possible, given the embeddedness of racism in the culture, for white people not to have problematic racial assumptions and blind spots. Of course it is uncomfortable and even embarrassing to see that we lack certain forms of knowledge, but we can’t gain the knowledge we lack if we don’t take risks. It is imperative that we enter the discussion with a willingness (even enthusiasm) to have our assumptions uncovered so we can increase our knowledge and cross-racial skills, for how will we realize that we have misconceptions and only a partial view if we don’t share our views and open them up to exploration?

“I don’t feel safe.” Sub-discourses: “I don’t want to be attacked.” “I don’t want to be judged.”

While the feelings may be real for white people struggling with a sense of safety, one might ask what safety means from a position of social, cultural, historical and institutional power. If one does not fear that they are in actual *physical* harm, then some reflection on what one fears is actually at risk can offer much insight. Often, it is our self-image; because we have been taught that only bad people participate in racism, we often fear that if it is somehow revealed that we participate in racism, we will lose face and be judged. Indeed, many white people feel very uncomfortable in racial discussions, but this discomfort is actually a positive sign, for it indicates that the status quo (unnamed and unexamined racism) is being challenged. It is therefore critical that we feel uncomfortable, and not confuse discomfort with danger. As for being judged, there is no human objectivity –all people judge and we cannot protect ourselves from judgments in any context. Further, by employing terms that connote physical threat, we tap into the classic discourse of people of color (particularly African Americans) as dangerous and violent. This discourse twists the actual direction of danger that exists between whites and people of color.

Fear of judgment is a powerful tool of oppression because it keeps people complicit through silence. We cannot fully control how others see us. All people judge, in every moment and interaction; humans are not and cannot be free of judgment. People who fear others’ judgment are themselves - of course - judging. At some point we have to be brave and recognize that our fear of judgment and all the tactics we might use to avoid it cannot actually prevent judgment. We might also consider that those who are hurt by our silence may also judge us for that silence.

“I don’t want to offend anybody”

Similar to “I don’t want to be misunderstood,” this rationale allows one to protect themselves against alternative perspectives, responses, constructive conflict, or taking the risks that could potentially expand one’s awareness. This rationale is unfair to people of color because if we fear offending, it can only be assumed that is because we are having offensive thoughts or are hostile toward what is being said. If this is the case, to not put our disagreement into the room is to deny the group knowledge of where we are coming from and the ability for others to make any adjustments they might need in response to our hostility. If we are not hostile to what is being said but just worried that we may inadvertently offend someone, how will we learn that what we think or say is offensive if we don’t share it and open ourselves up to feedback? In effect, by not taking this intentional opportunity to discover which ideas we hold are offensive, we protect these ideas and enable them to surface at a later date and offend someone else. In the unique and often rare learning environment of racial discussions, to remain silent so as not to offend is to offend twice – once through our silence and again in our unwillingness to discover and change racially problematic dimensions in our thinking. If unsure, we can simply offer our thoughts with openness and humility rather than as declarations of certainty or truth – i.e. “Please let me know if something is off in my thinking, but here is how I am responding to this... Can you help me understand why...?” “I have often heard ... what are your thoughts on that?”

A note on the silence of People of Color in cross-racial discussions

Although this analysis is limited to a white person addressing white silence in racial discussions, I would be remiss if I did not at least raise the issue of the silence of people of color and offer some preliminary thoughts. First, as should be clear via my argument thus far, the silence of whites has a very different foundation and impact than the silence of people of color, based on the unequal positioning of the two groups in society; these silences are not equivalent. There are several key reasons why people of color may at times choose silence in a cross-racial discussion, including: in response to resistance or hostility expressed (consciously or not) by white participants (this unconscious expression of hostility could include silence based on many of the reasons discussed above); a lack of trust based on well-founded experience that one will be penalized for challenging white perspectives; a sense of hopelessness in the face of white denial; taking risks and being vulnerable about one’s racial experiences and perspectives and being met with silence, argumentation, explanation, or guilt, all of which function as forms of invalidation; being outnumbered in ratio to white people and assessing that there are no allies present for support were one to challenge white privilege; being acutely aware of the power differentials and choosing to protect oneself in the face of inevitable hurt...

In a recent exchange on the issue of white silence, Anika Nailah, a Native and African American woman and anti-racist educator, writes:

“The clearest way I can communicate to you what can be going on when people of color are silent in these discussions is to say that we experience white silence in a cross-racial space as: 1.) collusion with whatever racist views have been stated or implied; 2) an affirmation that when things get hard, white solidarity wins; 3) a clear message that the views that we have stated are not important enough to white people to risk the most minimal vulnerability to respond to --- the message is that we are not important enough to communicate with beyond the most superficial of levels. When I am met by white silence I have to decide if I am going to break the silence by sharing my perspectives. This decision will be based, in part, on whether I am invested enough in the white people to take the risk. Because of institutional white power, which most white people are unaware of, this is a very difficult, anxiety-producing, and energy draining decision to have to make, and yet again puts me in the one-down position, laying the burden and the risk for challenging racism on me. Bottom line –no matter how scared the white people might be, or how well-intended their silence is, I experience it as unsupportive and in collusion with racism. Given that, some days I am going to choose to play it safe too” (Anika Nailah, personal communication, July 25th, 2009).

Tools for Group Discussions

What to do when conflict arises, or you feel uncomfortable or offended

The discussions we have will likely surface a lot of emotions, and perhaps some disagreement. It is important for us to think about the ways in which we might do this in a way that moves us all forward. Here are a few tools to consider.

Countering Common Patterns via Silence Breakers (from *White Fragility* Reading Group Guide by Sensoy and Di'Angelo, beacon.org/whitefragility)

These sentence starters, termed “silence breakers,” are suggested openings intended to address two common challenges for white people in cross-racial discussions: First, the fear of losing face, making a mistake, or not being able to manage impressions that often prevent white people from authentic engagement. Second, the lack of humility we often have when discussing racism. The silence breakers can help engender a stance of curiosity and humility that counters the certitude many white people have regarding our racial perspectives. In doing so, they tend to open, rather than close, discussion and connection.

Silence Breakers

1. I'm really nervous/scared/uncomfortable saying this and/but ...
2. From my experience/perspective as [identity] ...
3. I'm afraid I may offend someone, and please let me know if I do, but ...
4. I'm not sure if this will make any sense, and/but ...
5. I just felt something shift in the room. I'm wondering if anyone else did.
6. It seems like some people may have had a reaction to that. Can you help me understand why?
7. Can you help me understand whether what I'm thinking right now might be problematic?
8. This is what I understand you to be saying: ____ Is that accurate?
9. I'm having a “yeah but.” Can you help me work through it?
10. I'm engaged but just needing time to process this. What I am working on processing is ____.

Call-ins

(from “Speaking Up Without Tearing Down” by Loretta J. Ross in *Teaching Tolerance*, Issue 61, Spring 2019)

Calling in is not a guarantee that everyone will joyfully work together. It is simply the extension of grace, the opportunity to grow and to share learning and responsibility for each other.

How to Start a Call-in Conversation

- “I’m having a reaction to that comment. Let’s go back for a minute.”
- “I don’t think I understand what you’re saying, so can we talk some more?”
- “Can we stop and explore what is happening now?”
- “Do you think you would say that if someone from that group was with us in the room?”
- “There’s some history behind that expression you used that you might not know about.”
- “In this group, we hold each other accountable. So we need to talk about why that joke isn’t funny.”

Tools for Group Discussions

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To Review in Small Groups:

Norms

1. Avoid use of electronics. Step out if needed.
2. What is said in the room, stays in the room.
3. Approach this work with humility, as a learner, and focused on your own growth.
4. Use Silence Breakers and Calling In (from Tools sheet) to keep discussion open and productive.
5. Take space/Make space - equitable sharing of talk time

Keep the following principles in mind. (from *White Fragility* Reading Group Guide by Sensoy and Di'Angelo, beacon.org/whitefragility)

1. A strong opinion is not the same as informed knowledge.
2. 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."
3. 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.
4. Racism goes beyond individual intentions to collective group patterns.
5. We don't have to be aware of racism in order for it to exist.
6. 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.
7. Putting our effort into protecting rather than expanding our current worldview prevents our intellectual and emotional growth.