

CHAPTER 1

THE CHALLENGES OF TALKING TO WHITE PEOPLE ABOUT RACISM

WE DON'T SEE OURSELVES IN RACIAL TERMS

I am a white American raised in the United States. I have a white frame of reference and a white worldview, and I move through the world with a white experience. My experience is not a universal human experience. It is a particularly white experience in a society in which race matters profoundly; a society that is deeply separate and unequal by race. However, like most white people raised in the US, I was not taught to see myself in racial terms and certainly not to draw attention to my race or to behave as if it mattered in any way. Of course, I was made aware that *somebody's* race mattered, and if race was discussed, it would be theirs, not mine. Yet a critical component of cross-racial skill building is the ability to sit with the discomfort of being seen racially, of having to proceed as if our race matters (which it does). Being seen racially is a common trigger of white fragility, and thus, to build our stamina, white people must face the first challenge: naming our race.

OUR OPINIONS ARE UNINFORMED

I have never met a white person without an opinion on racism. It's not really possible to grow up in the United States or spend any significant time here—or any other culture with a history of Western

colonization—without developing opinions on racism. And white people’s opinions on racism tend to be strong. Yet race relations are profoundly complex. We must be willing to consider that unless we have devoted intentional and ongoing study, our opinions are necessarily uninformed, even ignorant. How can I say that if you are white, your opinions on racism are most likely ignorant, when I don’t even know you? I can say so because nothing in mainstream US culture gives us the information we need to have the nuanced understanding of arguably the most complex and enduring social dynamic of the last several hundred years.

For example, I can be seen as qualified to lead a major or minor organization in this country with no understanding whatsoever of the perspectives or experiences of people of color, few if any relationships with people of color, and virtually no ability to engage critically with the topic of race. I can get through graduate school without ever discussing racism. I can graduate from law school without ever discussing racism. I can get through a teacher-education program without ever discussing racism. If I am in a program considered progressive, I might have a single required “diversity” course. A handful of faculty will have fought for years to get me this course, likely having had to overcome resistance from the majority of their white colleagues, and will still be fighting to keep the course. In this diversity course, we might read “ethnic” authors and learn about heroes and heroines from various groups of color, but there’s no guarantee we’ll discuss racism.

In fact, when we try to talk openly and honestly about race, white fragility quickly emerges as we are so often met with silence, defensiveness, argumentation, certitude, and other forms of pushback. These are not natural responses; they are social forces that prevent us from attaining the racial knowledge we need to engage more productively, and they function powerfully to hold the racial hierarchy in place. These forces include the ideologies of individualism and meritocracy, narrow and repetitive media representations of people of color, segregation in schools and neighborhoods, depictions of whiteness as the human ideal, truncated history, jokes and warnings, taboos on openly talking about race, and white solidarity.

Interrupting the forces of racism is ongoing, lifelong work because the forces conditioning us into racist frameworks are always at play; our learning will never be finished. Yet our simplistic definition of racism—as intentional acts of racial discrimination committed by immoral individuals—engenders a confidence that we are not part of the problem and that our learning is thus complete. The claims we offer up as evidence are implausible. For example, perhaps you’ve heard someone say “I was taught to treat everyone the same” or “People just need to be taught to respect one another, and that begins in the home.” These statements tend to end the discussion and the learning that could come from sustained engagement. Further, they are unconvincing to most people of color and only invalidate their experiences. Many white people simply do not understand the process of socialization, and this is our next challenge.

WE DON'T UNDERSTAND SOCIALIZATION

When I talk to white people about racism, their responses are so predictable I sometimes feel as though we are all reciting lines from a shared script. And on some level, we are, because we are actors in a shared culture. A significant aspect of the white script derives from our seeing ourselves as both objective and unique. To understand white fragility, we have to begin to understand why we cannot fully be either; we must understand the forces of socialization.

We make sense of perceptions and experiences through our particular cultural lens. This lens is neither universal nor objective, and without it, a person could not function in any human society. But exploring these cultural frameworks can be particularly challenging in Western culture precisely because of two key Western ideologies: individualism and objectivity. Briefly, individualism holds that we are each unique and stand apart from others, even those within our social groups. Objectivity tells us that it is possible to be free of all bias. These ideologies make it very difficult for white people to explore the collective aspects of the white experience.

Individualism is a story line that creates, communicates, reproduces, and reinforces the concept that each of us is a unique individual and that our group memberships, such as race, class, or gender, are irrelevant to our opportunities. Individualism claims that there are no intrinsic barriers to individual success and that failure is not a consequence of social structures but comes from individual character. According to the ideology of individualism, race is irrelevant. Of course, we do occupy distinct race, gender, class, and other positions that profoundly shape our life chances in ways that are not natural, voluntary, or random; opportunity is not equally distributed across race, class, and gender. On some level, we know that Bill Gates's son was born into a set of opportunities that will benefit him throughout his life, whether he is mediocre or exceptional. Yet even though Gates's son has clearly been handed unearned advantage, we cling tightly to the ideology of individualism when asked to consider our own unearned advantages.

Regardless of our protestations that social groups don't matter and that we see everyone as equal, we know that to be a man as defined by the dominant culture is a different experience from being a woman. We know that to be viewed as old is different from being viewed as young, rich is different from poor, able-bodied different from having a disability, gay different from heterosexual, and so on. These groups matter, but they don't matter naturally, as we are often taught to believe. Rather, we are taught that they matter, and the social meaning ascribed to these groups creates a difference in lived experience. We are taught these social meanings in myriad ways, by a range of people, and through a variety of mediums. This training continues after childhood and throughout our lives. Much of it is nonverbal and is achieved through watching and comparing ourselves to others:

We are socialized into these groups collectively. In mainstream culture, we all receive the same messages about what these groups mean, why being in one group is a different experience from being in another. And we also know that it is "better" to be in one of these groups than to be in its opposite—for example, to be young rather than old, able-bodied rather than have a disability, rich rather than poor. We gain

our understanding of group meaning collectively through aspects of the society around us that are shared and unavoidable: television, movies, news items, song lyrics, magazines, textbooks, schools, religion, literature, stories, jokes, traditions and practices, history, and so on. These dimensions of our culture shape our group identities.

Our understanding of ourselves is necessarily based on our comparisons with others. The concept of pretty has no meaning without the concept of ugly, smart means little without the idea of not-smart or “stupid,” and deserving has no meaning without the concept of undeserving. We come to understand who we are by understanding who we are not. But because of our society’s emphasis on individuality, many of us are unskilled at reflecting on our group memberships. To understand race relations today, we must push against our conditioning and grapple with how and why racial group memberships matter.

In addition to challenging our sense of ourselves as individuals, tackling group identity also challenges our belief in objectivity. If group membership is relevant, then we don’t see the world from the universal human perspective but from the perspective of a particular kind of human. In this way, both ideologies are disrupted. Thus, reflecting on our racial frames is particularly challenging for many white people, because we are taught that to have a racial viewpoint is to be biased. Unfortunately, this belief protects our biases, because denying that we have them ensures that we won’t examine or change them. This will be important to remember when we consider our racial socialization, because there is a vast difference between what we verbally tell our children and all the other ways we train them into the racial norms of our culture.

For many white people, the mere title of this book will cause resistance because I am breaking a cardinal rule of individualism—I *am generalizing*. I am proceeding as if I could know anything about someone just because the person is white. Right now you may be thinking of all the ways that you are different from other white people and that if I just knew how you had come to this country, or were close to these people, grew up in this neighborhood, endured this struggle, or had

this experience, then I would know that you were different—that you were not racist. I've witnessed this common reflex countless times in my work.

For example, I recently gave a talk to a group of about two hundred employees. There were no more than five people of color in their organization, and of these five, only two were African American. Over and over, I emphasized the importance of white people having racial humility and of not exempting ourselves from the unavoidable dynamics of racism. As soon as I was done speaking, a line of white people formed—ostensibly to ask me questions—but more typically to reiterate the same opinions on race they held when they had entered the room. The first in line was a white man who explained that he was Italian American and that Italians were once considered black and discriminated against, so didn't I think that white people experience racism too? That he could be in that overwhelmingly white room of coworkers and exempt himself from an examination of his whiteness because Italians were once discriminated against is an all-too-common example of individualism. A more fruitful form of engagement (because it expands rather than protects his current worldview) would have been to consider how Italian Americans were able to become white and how that assimilation has shaped his experiences in the present *as a white man*. His claims did not illustrate that he was different from other white people when it comes to race. I can predict that many readers will make similar claims of exception precisely because we are products of our culture, not separate from it.

As a sociologist, I am quite comfortable generalizing; social life is patterned and predictable in measurable ways. But I understand that my generalizations may cause some defensiveness for the white people about whom I am generalizing, given how cherished the ideology of individualism is in our culture. There are, of course, exceptions, but patterns are recognized as such precisely because they are recurring and predictable. We cannot understand modern forms of racism if we cannot or will not explore patterns of group behavior and their effects on individuals. I ask readers to make the specific adjustments they think

are necessary to their situation, rather than reject the evidence entirely. For example, perhaps you grew up in poverty, or are an Ashkenazi Jew of European heritage, or were raised in a military family. Perhaps you grew up in Canada, Hawaii, or Germany, or had people of color in your family. None of these situations exempts you from the forces of racism, because no aspect of society is outside of these forces.

Rather than use what you see as unique about yourself as an exemption from further examination, a more fruitful approach would be to ask yourself, "I am white and I have had X experience. How did X shape me as a result of *also being white*?" Setting aside your sense of uniqueness is a critical skill that will allow you to see the big picture of the society in which we live; individualism will not. For now, try to let go of your individual narrative and grapple with the collective messages we all receive as members of a larger shared culture. Work to see how these messages have shaped your life, rather than use some aspect of your story to excuse yourself from their impact.

WE HAVE A SIMPLISTIC UNDERSTANDING OF RACISM

The final challenge we need to address is our definition of "racist." In the post-civil rights era, we have been taught that racists are mean people who intentionally dislike others because of their race; racists are immoral. Therefore, if I am saying that my readers are racist or, even worse, that all white people are racist, I am saying something deeply offensive; I am questioning my readers' very moral character. How can I make this claim when I don't even know my readers? Many of you have friends and loved ones of color, so how can you be racist? In fact, since it's racist to generalize about people according to race, I am the one being racist! So let me be clear: If your definition of a racist is someone who holds conscious dislike of people because of race, then I agree that it is offensive for me to suggest that you are racist when I don't know you. I also agree that if this is your definition of racism, and you are against racism, then you are not racist. Now breathe. I am not using this definition of racism, and I am not saying that you are immoral. If

you can remain open as I lay out my argument, it should soon begin to make sense.

In light of the challenges raised here, I expect that white readers will have moments of discomfort reading this book. This feeling may be a sign that I've managed to unsettle the racial status quo, which is my goal. The racial status quo is comfortable for white people, and we will not move forward in race relations if we remain comfortable. The key to moving forward is what we do with our discomfort. We can use it as a door out—blame the messenger and disregard the message. Or we can use it as a door in by asking, 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 the unexamined assumptions I have been making? Is it possible that because I am white, there are some racial dynamics that I can't see? Am I willing to consider that possibility? If I am not willing to do so, then why not?

If you are reading this and are still making your case for why you are different from other white people and why none of this applies to you, stop and take a breath. Now return to the questions above, and keep working through them. To interrupt white fragility, we need to build our capacity to sustain the discomfort of not knowing, the discomfort of being racially unmoored, the discomfort of racial humility. Our next task is to understand how the forces of racial socialization are constantly at play. The inability to acknowledge these forces inevitably leads to the resistance and defensiveness of white fragility. To increase the racial stamina that counters white fragility, we must reflect on the whole of our identities—and our racial group identity in particular. For white people, this means first struggling with what it means to be white.