

My White Perceptions, Silence, and Fragility

A Charlottesville Discussion Group

Participant's Guide

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SESSION 1: From My White Perspective

This document describes what to do before, during, and after this session.

Reading (before the session)

- [A History of White Delusion](#)
- [Racism as a Zero Sum Game](#)

Objectives:

- We will learn each other's names and begin to build connections.
- We will work together to establish community norms that enable authentic dialogue.
- We will recognize that the way the majority of white people view the implications of race is different from the way the majority of people of color view the implications of race.
- We will be able to list information and experiences white people might be missing from their schema that leads them to perceive racial equity, reverse racism, and the myth of meritocracy.

Agenda

- Introductions *10 min.*
 - Purpose *5 min.*
 - Norms *10 min.*
 - Trajectory *5 min.*
 - Discussion *50 min.*
 - Continue the Work *10 min.*
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Discuss (during the session)

1. Did anything surprise you in either of the articles we read for this week?
2. What is the self-deception the author refers to in “A History of White Delusion”?
 - a. What are historic examples of white self-deception?
 - b. What are current examples of white self-deception?
 - c. What are important advances we have made in achieving racial equity? How do these achievement mask inequity?
3. What information and experiences might lead white people to believe in reverse racism, the myth of meritocracy, or that we have achieved racial equity? What experiences and information might white people be missing, that if they had it, might cause their views to be more aligned with the views of people of color (POC)?
4. Why do you think POC and white people view race and its implications so differently? What are the implications of these differing perspectives, from daily interactions to larger policy decisions?

Continue the Work (after the session)

Find a partner in your group. Over the next week, email your partner to describe *at least* one instance when you noticed that you benefitted from being white or you noticed a difference in the way a person of color and a white person were treated.

If you don't notice any instances of this, write your partner a paragraph about why you think that might be.

We'll open Session 2 with a discussion of the events you document.

SESSION 2: Racism 101

Reading

- [Self-segregation: Why it's So Hard for Whites to Understand Ferguson](#)
- [Racism 101](#)
- Optional: [Racism 101 PowerPoint](#) (includes substantially more detail)

Objectives

- We will be able to define and provide examples of white supremacy and racism at different levels.
- We will reflect on the extent to which we, and those we love, live in segregated communities.
- We will reflect on the way social segregation is both a product of and likely to uphold each level of racism.

Agenda

- Community *15 min.*
 - Discussion *70 min.*
 - Continue the Work *5 min.*
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Discuss

1. Was there anything you read that challenged your previous conception of racism and white supremacy? Which type of racism are you most familiar with? Why do you think most of us have heard of and can easily identify examples of some types of racism but not others types?
2. Ask participants to, in pairs, come up with an example of each of the pillars of white supremacy: interpersonal racism, institutional racism, cultural racism, and structural racism. Ask them to incorporate examples they documented as part of the “continue the work” exercise from last week. Direct them to the non-required reading powerpoint if they get stuck. Have the group come back together and together list one example of each type of racism.
3. In “Racism 101” the authors write, “One of the ways our culture keeps racism in place is by continuing to focus only on individual acts of racism.” How are we harmed when we only focus on interpersonal racism?
4. In “Racism 101” the authors write, “In fact, prejudice, ignorance, and stereotypes are the result of racism, not the cause.”
 - a. How does this quote relate to the events in Charlottesville on July 8th (KKK rally) and August 11-12 (Unite the Right)?
 - b. At a workshop, I recently heard a woman of color say that she fears “average” white people more than than groups like those that attended the “Unite the Right Rally” in Charlottesville. What might lead someone to say that?

Continue the work

Complete the following sentence stems to describe ways in which being read as white gave you an unfair advantage over peers of color at each of the following levels of racism:

Examples of potential responses at the interpersonal level:

- Interpersonal: I had an unfair advantage when in all my years of schooling I was never once mocked or belittled for the color of my skin, nor was it ever suggested to me that I had been recognized or admitted somewhere *because* of my skin color. This meant I did not carry traumatic experiences associated with school. It meant that my energy was devoted only to navigating academic and social challenges, not to self preservation or wondering whether or not I deserved to be there.
- Interpersonal: I had an unfair advantage on August 12 when I had the option to stay home and “ignore” the rally. I did not have to worry that my home, place of work, community, or people that I love would be targeted for hate crimes. I did not have to process my anger and grief, at the same time as assessing and planning for my personal safety.

1. **Interpersonal:** I had an unfair advantage when...
2. **Institutional:** I had an unfair advantage when...
3. **Cultural:** I had an unfair advantage when...
4. **Structural:** I had an unfair advantage when...

At which of these levels have you been most blind to your advantage? Why do you think this is? What methods can you use to ensure this blindness does not continue?

SESSION 3: Civility is Overrated

Reading

- [No, We Won't Calm Down – Tone Policing Is Just Another Way to Protect Privilege](#)
- [Sometimes, There are More Important Goals than Civility](#)

Objectives

- We will be able to identify ways in which we, and those in our social networks, have engaged in tone policing or promoting civility as a way to avoid antiracist engagement.
- We will reflect on what has and will continue to contribute to our desires for civility or our propensity to tone police.
- We will plan and practice ways in which we can engage in a disruption of civility or tone policing in the following week.

Agenda

- Community *10 min.*
 - Discussion *45 min.*
 - Plan and Practice *30 min.*
 - Continue the Work *5 min.*
-

Discuss

1. What are examples of tone policing that you have witnessed?
 - a. Who did the policing?
 - b. Who was policed?
 - c. How did this impact who had power in the interaction?
2. How can a desire for civility work to uphold white supremacy?
3. Where does the desire for civility come from? Consider both present day and historical influences.
4. When have you called for civility or engaged in tone policing? What motivated you? What was the impact of your behavior?
5. How has the concept of civility played out in discussions of recent events in Charlottesville?

Continue the work

Email your accountability partner the answer to the following questions. You'll have an opportunity to plan and practice during the session.

- 1.** What was your disruption?
- 2.** Why did you choose this?
- 3.** Where and when did you engage in it?
- 4.** How did it go?
 - a.** Did it go as planned?
 - b.** How did you feel before, during, and after?
 - c.** How did other people react?
 - d.** Would you do it again? Why or why not?

SESSION 4: I'm Racist, Too

Reading

- [I, Racist](#)
- [White Boy Privilege](#)

Objectives

- We will identify some of our knowledge gaps in understanding our white privilege and develop a plan for how to address these gaps.
- We will explain the importance of speaking to other white people about race and racism.

Agenda

- Community *10 min.*
 - Discussion *45 min.*
 - Plan and Practice *30 min.*
 - Continue the Work *5 min.*
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Discuss

1. One of the articles we read this week is called “I, racist.”
 - a. What are some of the major reasons this author listed that have turned him off to speaking to white people about race? How did you feel when reading about these?
 - b. Have you ever witnessed people behave (or behaved yourself) in the way he describes in conversations about race or racism? Describe the incident.
 - c. What makes it so difficult for white people to say the words, “I, racist?”
 - d. Describe a way in which you are racist. Explain which type of racism this thought, action, or emotion represents and how it upholds, rather than dismantles, white supremacy.
 - e. The author writes, “Black people think in terms of *we* because we live in a society where the social and political structures interact with us as *Black people* (emphasis added).”
 - i. What is meant by this quote?
 - ii. How is this different from how the author describes how white people conceive of themselves and are treated by social and political structures?
 - iii. What reasons does he provide for this difference?
 - iv. To what extent does this resonate with you? Can you think of additional examples of people of color being treated as a group and white people being treated as individuals? Try to find examples at the individual, institutional, cultural, and structural level.
 - v. How does this disconnect (white people seeing themselves as “I” and yet seeing people of color as a group) impact communication about race and racism?

1. Amongst white people?
 2. Across lines of difference?
2. Both the reading and the video this week focus on the many different types of privilege white people have.
- a. Take a moment and turn to a partner and talk about the privilege you have due to various aspects of your identity.
 - b. After reading Peggy McIntosh's seminal "White Privilege: Unpacking the invisible knapsack" people created [this checklist](#) based on topics in her article. Take a moment to read through it (if necessary, participants can google it on their phones) and determine:
 - i. How many of the statements apply to you?
 - ii. How many of the statements were you already aware of? How many were you thinking of as a privilege for the first time?
 - iii. With your partner, see how many more items you could generate that could be added to the list.
 - c. Why is it critical that white people see and understand their privilege?
-

Continue the Work

- **Disrupt white silence.** Find a way to incorporate something you have learned since starting this discussion group in conversation with a white person that you know does not normally engage in dialogue about race.
- **Cultivate independence.** Practice identifying gaps in your schema, finding resources, and making time to engage with them on your own.
- Email your accountability partner answers to the following questions.
 - RE: Disrupting white silence:
 - What was your disruption?
 - Why did you choose this?
 - Where and when did you engage in it?
 - How did it go?
 - Did it go as planned?
 - How did you feel before, during, and after?
 - How did the other person/people react?
 - Would you do it again? Why or why not?
 - RE: Cultivating independence.

- What is the knowledge or experience gap that you want to focus on developing independently?
- What action did you take this week as a first step to independently address it?
 - What made this easy?
 - What made this difficult?
 - How can you proactively plan to minimize this difficulty so that you can continue to independently develop your critical lens after this discussion group is over?
 - Did you find this experience valuable enough to continue, despite any difficulties you may have encountered?

SESSION 5: Silence Preserves Power

Reading

- [“I don’t want to hear that!”: Legitimizing Whiteness Through Silence in Schools](#)
- [Paying Attention to White Culture and Privilege: A Missing Link to Advancing Racial Equity](#)

Objectives

- We will name the ways in which we and those around us engage in colormuteness, silence, and silencing and explain the ways in which these behaviors uphold white supremacy.
- We will be able to explain the importance of a simultaneous “top down” and “bottom up” approach to antiracist work.

Agenda

- Community *15 min.*
 - Discussion *60 min.*
 - Plan and Practice *10 min.*
 - Continue the Work *5 min.*
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Discuss

1. The first article, “I Don’t Want to Hear That,” discussed the implications of white silence.
 - a. What does the author suggest motivates white silence? Would you add anything to what they wrote?
 - b. What does silence or silencing imply? What are the ramifications of silence/silencing?
 - c. This week we are closing our second unit of study: Action/Inaction. Is silence better understood as action or inaction?
2. The author of “I Don’t Want to Hear That” listed three categories of behaviors that uphold white supremacy: colormuteness, silence, and silencing.
 - a. What is colormuteness and what is an example?
 1. How did colormuteness work in this example to uphold white supremacy?
 2. How could the teachers in this article have engaged differently in a way that would have disrupted white supremacy?
 - b. Consider the same three questions for silence and silencing.
3. The author of “I Don’t Want to Hear That” notes that white people are often characterized by an “allegiance to colorblindness and belief in meritocracy.”
 - a. What are these constructs and why are they problematic?

- b.** If they are problematic, why do many people continue to espouse these beliefs?
- 4.** In “Paying Attention to White Culture and Privilege,” we read about the way whiteness is often as presented as “best practice.”
 - a.** List examples of the way “whiteness” is often legitimized as “professionalism” or normalized as “the way things are.”
 - b.** Are these behaviors the only way to work together, live together, or get things done? What are some alternative paradigms?
 - c.** How did you react to when you read about the behaviors that were grouped together under the label of “whiteness”?
- 5.** The authors of “Paying Attention to White Culture and Privilege” write, “intense emotions and conflict are predictable companions to racial equity work.”
 - a.** In the article, how did they frame “intense emotions and conflict”?
 - b.** How is this different from how intense emotion and conflict would be framed under white supremacy?
- 6.** One of the suggestions in this article was to create intentional racial caucuses.
 - a.** What is a racial caucus? How is it different from these “formations [which] occur all the time – though usually without intentionality or consciousness”?
 - b.** Why have the authors found intentional racial caucusing to be helpful?
 - c.** What are potential pitfalls of racial caucusing?
 - d.** To some extent, this group, or groups like SURJ, function as a racial caucus.
 - i.** Have you found “caucusing” to be helpful? In what ways?
 - ii.** This group only has three sessions left. How will you caucus going forward?
 - iii.** How will you ensure that you are not **ONLY** doing this work in isolation (individually or with other white people) but that you are also participating in “authentic and powerful integrated groups”?

Continue the work

5 min.

- **Disrupt:** Choose a space where whiteness is particularly normalized. This might be a place of work, worship, learning, or a social setting. Plan a way to disrupt the hegemony of whiteness in that space this week. This could look like: calling attention to the ways in which whiteness is dominating the space, breaking silence or silencing techniques, or publicly unpacking colormute or coded language.

- **Cultivate independence:** This week we talked about the importance of a “top down” and “bottom up” approach to antiracist work. Reflect and write your accountability partner your responses to the questions in the “develop independence” section below.
- Email your accountability partner answers to the following questions.
 - Disruption:
 - What was your disruption?
 - Why did you choose this?
 - Where and when did you engage in it?
 - How did it go?
 - Did it go as planned?
 - How did you feel before, during, and after?
 - How did the other person/people react?
 - Would you do it again? Why or why not?
 - Develop independence.
 - What are the systemic aspects of racism you need to learn more about?
 - What are the personal/individual manifestations of white supremacy that you notice in yourself that you would like to engage with further?
 - What would be a feasible way for you to continue this work after this group is over?
 - Why is continued engagement in this work critical?

SESSION 6: My White Fragility

Reading

- [White Fragility: Why It's So Hard to Talk to White People About Racism](#) and/or [White Fragility](#)

Objectives

- We will understand the concept of white fragility
 - We will be able to define white fragility as a state in which even a small amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves
 - We will be able to explain that white people's fragility about race is an outcome of their limited exposure to racial stress
- We will be able to describe our experience of white fragility
 - We will be able to describe experiences that have triggered our fragility
 - We will be able to describe the defensive moves we engage in when triggered
- We will be able to explain the importance of building stamina for racial stress with reference to white people's responsibility to interrupt white racism

Agenda

- Community *15 min.*
 - Discussion *55 min.*
 - Plan and Practice *15 min.*
 - Continue the Work *5 min.*
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Discuss

1. Robin DiAngelo writes that popular definitions of racism that focus on interpersonal acts of bigotry lead many to think that "If we are against racism and unaware of committing racist acts, we can't be racist; racism and being a good person have become mutually exclusive." How might this limited definition of racism contribute to white people's insulation from racial stress?
2. How often are you exposed to racial stress? Do you opt in to these situations? How easy would it be for you to avoid these situations?
3. Review the challenges that trigger racial stress for white people (p.57 of "White Fragility")
 - a. Why are white people challenged by these triggers? What beliefs or expectations are they defending when they react defensively?
 - b. What would happen if white defensiveness effectively shut down this triggering behavior?
4. How has your limited exposure to racial tension impacted the way in which you perceive of whiteness, racism, and antiracism work?
5. What are some ways my fragility impacts my thoughts, feelings, and behaviors?
 - a. Of the triggers listed, which ones impact me the most? Why might this be?

b. When I am triggered, what kind of defensiveness do I feel most strongly? Why is that?

6. What can we do to become less fragile?

Continue the Work

5

Think again of what triggers your white fragility. Engage in online experiences that don't require any work from people of color that might elicit your defensiveness.

Record how you experience your defensiveness* and share this with your accountability partner. You might choose to write to one another or set a time to chat in person or on the phone. Here are some possible prompts. Engage with as many as you need to in order to trigger your defensiveness:

- Black and brown individuals describing white people's racism
 - Example: <http://renieddolodge.co.uk/?p=842>
- Articles that call out white people or predominantly white organizations for perpetuating racism even as they espouse to fight against it or work toward social justice goals more generally
 - Example: <https://theestablishment.co/whites-only-the-caucasian-invasion-of-racial-justice-spaces-7e2529ec8314>
- Comedic takes on white people and/or white culture
 - Example: <http://verysmartbrothas.com/10-things-white-people-dont-really-seem-to-give-a-fuck-about/>

*This brief resource might help you describe your defensiveness and explore potential underlying beliefs: [Whites Receiving Feedback on Racism and Responding](#)

SESSION 7: My Fragile Friends

Reading

- [Dear White People: Things You Can Do Instead of Cry or Try to Hug Us](#)
- [Calling In: A Quick Guide on When and How](#)
- [10 Defensive Reactions to White Privilege that Make No Damn Sense - But Are Super Common](#)

Objectives

- We will be able to explain why public white grief about race and racism is problematic
- We will be able to describe manifestations of white fragility among our friends, family, and acquaintances
 - We will be able to describe experiences that have triggered these people's fragility, e.g. challenge to white racial codes
 - We will be able to describe some of these people's responses when triggered, e.g. withdrawal
- We will be able to explain why white people are responsible for supporting other white people's development of racial stamina
- We will be able to "call in" others that are demonstrating white fragility

Agenda

- Community *15 min.*
 - Discussion *40 min.*
 - Practice *25 min.*
 - Continue the Work *5 min.*
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Discussion

1. In "Dear White People: Things You Can Do Instead of Cry or Try to Hug Us," Christine Malsbary responds to a white friend who tells her it's okay to let herself cry after the election with the following thought: "I am so uninterested in your pity, and I really, really don't need 'comforting.' It is so disrespectful for you to pity me when you stand-by and allow racist policies to destroy the communities I care about."
 - a. What message do we send to people of color who we care about when we express sadness and sympathy over major news events (like August 11th and 12th in Cville) but don't engage in any of our communities anti-racism campaigns?
 - b. Review Malsbary's list of recommendations of what to do instead of crying or trying to hug a brown person. Now, think of a white person you know who was emotionally impacted by the white nationalist gathering, violence, and murder that occurred the weekend of the 12th in Charlottesville. How would you summarise Malsbary's recommendations to them?
2. How does Sian Ferguson describe the difference between "calling out" and "calling in"?
 - a. What are the goals of calling someone out? What are the goals of calling someone in? How can we know when each approach is appropriate?

3. When we decide to call someone in, what should we do?
 - a. How should we decide whether to do so publically or privately?
 - b. Why might it be important to focus on the *impact* of the individual or group's behavior rather than the *intent*?
 - c. How might you avoid presenting yourself as “more woke” or “less racist” than those you call in?
 4. Are any of the ten defensive responses to white privilege highlighted by Maisha Z. Johnson compelling to you? What makes you think that this response is justified?
 5. Of the ten responses, which do you think are the most difficult to respond to? What do you think makes it so hard?
-

Continue the Work

1. **Reflect:** If you had thirty seconds to talk about the experience of this discussion group to someone, how would you describe it?
2. **Connect:** Prepare to present on a local anti-racism campaign during the next session*. Answer the following prompts about the campaign: (1) Briefly describe the campaign. (2) How might your white racial identity impact your perception of this campaign? (3) How does the campaign work to undermine white supremacy? (4) How can we get involved?
3. **Plan:** As you read “[Opportunities for White People in the Fight for Racial Justice](#),” think about how you will leverage your time and talents in the anti-racism movement. Make sure you read the “Your Self Education” page and think about how you will continue to interrogate your whiteness in the coming months.

*It's okay for multiple group members to select the same campaign, especially because their answers to numbers two and three might vary in interesting ways. It's also okay to encourage folks to choose campaigns they may know less about.

SESSION 8: Joining the Fight

Reading

- [Opportunities for White People in the Fight for Racial Justice](#)

Objectives

- We will leave with a clear plan for how to continue to interrogating their white racial identity and its influence on their behaviors
- We will leave with a clear plan for how to join an existing local anti-racism campaign.

Agenda

- Community *10 min.*
 - Reflect *10 min.*
 - Connect *60 min.*
 - Closing *10 min.*
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Connect

For your campaign, be prepared to lead a discussion of at least the four prompts provided last week:

1. Briefly describe the campaign.
2. How might your white racial identity impact your perception of this campaign?
3. How does the campaign work to undermine white supremacy?
4. How can we get involved?

Additional discussion questions:

5. What might keep people from engaging in this kind of anti-racism campaign?
6. How long has this campaign been going on? What kind of support has it received in the white community?
7. Which of these campaigns are you most drawn to? Why do you think that is?
8. Do any of these campaigns make you uncomfortable? Why do you think that is?
 - a. What would it look like to privately wrestle with your discomfort with this campaign? What advantage might there be to keeping your reservations private?