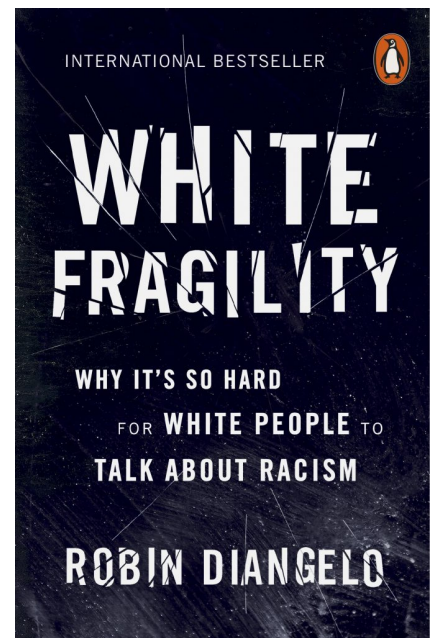


Review: White Fragility – Part 1: Understanding by analogy

I'm reviewing this book with some trepidation. It is far from my field of expertise. It is not a Christian book. It interacts with a topic that invokes emotional as well thoughtful response. It's a serious book about serious things with which we must seriously engage.



The broad issue that *White Fragility* touches upon, of course, is systemic and cultural racism. We might instantly think, therefore, that the focus is on people of colour. That's a telling assumption which raises the exact issue that the author is focused on, as per the subtitle: The problem is "Why it's so hard for *white* people to talk about racism."

The author is Robin DiAngelo, an academic and a professional in the area of diversity training. The illustrative anecdotes she brings from her experience ground her discourse. It's unfortunate that this attaches the book very closely to the US context, but that does not diminish its value for the broader Western and post-colonial world.

My reflections are going to come in a number of parts, spread out over a number of posts on this blog. I will be "wrestling out loud", so to speak, and doing so in response to the DiAngelo's focus. She is articulating an observation about

white people, and I am a white person. I have gone through some difficult introspection as a result of this book, but I am not laying claim to any emotional hardship. In all that follows, I will simply be seeking to follow the aim of my blog; it's a "wild attempt at thinking things through." We live in a racially charged world which white people are often blind to, or deny – this is our *white fragility*. What are the dynamics behind that? How might we own what we need to own up to and act upon it well? I welcome any feedback and critique. I am on a learning curve.

My intention is to engage with this book in three ways. The first part is included below. The second and third part will come in subsequent posts, which I will link here when they are uploaded: Part 2, Part 3a, Part 3b

Firstly, in this post, I am going to try and **understand by analogy**. I will be drawing on my own experience of being an immigrant and of English classism. I want to be clear: I am not pretending that there is any equivalence between my experience and that of people of colour. I am, however, seeking to understand DiAngelo by applying her thoughts to something that is within my own comprehension. I participated in some racial awareness training recently and it affirmed a similar approach; being aware of when we ourselves have been "othered" can, if held well, use empathy as a bridge to understanding.

Secondly, in a subsequent post, I'm going to try and **admit my ignorance**. This book *does* challenge and confront white people, and I am a white person. Having done my best to understand what the author is saying, I will aspire to allow myself to be undone by it, and examine myself racially. At the very least, I will try and find the bounds of my what I do not know.

Thirdly, in a one subsequent post, and then another, I will **seek a dynamic of resolution**. I come to this as someone aspiring to be a disciple of Jesus. This fundamentally forms

and shapes how I will explore and interact with DiAngelo's approach. I will discover much that mutually affirms, and also some philosophical collisions. Please note: I am not looking for a simplistic *solution* here, but what I'm calling a *dynamic resolution*, i.e. a pathway ahead towards what is *right*, to which I, for my part, can aspire.

Part 1 – Understanding by Analogy

When my family and I arrived in the UK in 2015 we found ourselves in the middle of "Middle England." It was a significant cultural collision. We made many mistakes, and we sought to educate ourselves. Our encounter was with the sociological collective that we might generally call "The Middle Class." At the time, I wrote about some of the reading I'd done as I struggled to understand.

I'm mentioning this *not* because I think there is an equivalence between classism and racism. Rather, it is a reflection using analogy; my understanding of one thing will inform my understanding of another thing. I have found myself agreeing with much of what DiAngelo says about white people *because* I have seen similar dynamics within the English middle class. I am also aware that I have only seen these because, as an immigrant, I have straddled the boundary of being on the "inside" and the "outside" of the normative group. But let me say it again: I am not conflating. A white immigrant's experiences are grounded in aspects of identity, (e.g. accent, cultural presumptions), that are often *positively* received and generally excused or overlooked. All that my experience affords, if anything, is a glimpse under the sociological hood.

For instance, DiAngelo asserts from the very beginning that "being white has meaning" (page 2). As a group, white people do not see themselves as a racial category, but rather as a

racial *norm*. This is a confronting truth. Many white people would dismiss it as a nonsense. I may have included myself in that number at one point but, from my cross-cultural experience, I now know what it means for a class of people to be blind to themselves while classifying others. I can grasp a little of the *concept* of whiteness in this regard, even if I can't fully appreciate the impact of it.

Those on the inside of a "normative class" cannot taste the water they swim in. Immigrants do. In order to process the dynamics of their new situation, *generalisations* are needed: We have to be able to make conclusions: "Middle class English people exhibit a certain behaviour." This is necessary in order to navigate the world we have landed in and so minimise social and psychological injury. It does *not* mean that every middle class individual person acts that way. Similarly, DiAngelo, generalises about race, and unashamedly so (page 11). It offends the "cardinal rule of individualism" and our visceral white, middle class hatred of being managed as a herd. Yet we *do* act with some herd-like dynamics, and a lack of awareness is part of the problem. Those dynamics are maintained through what DiAngelo calls "socialization"; "we make sense of perceptions and experiences through our particular cultural lens" (page 9). Immigrants have to learn these perceptions, but for the dominant culture they just "are", and are often unexamined.

Why this blindness? In the middle class there is often an underlying foundation of fear and shame: the fear of never quite being secure enough, and the shame of being comfortable when others are desperate. DiAngelo, speaking of whiteness, identifies defining ideologies such as *individualism* and *objectivity*. I can also detect these within the middle class; as a member of that group I learn (i.e. am socialised) to think of myself as fully in control of my own destiny, and able to impartially assess myself and others. By these means I can divest myself of responsibility for

another's misfortune, protect myself from their fate through objective assertions of why they are lesser, and unconsciously invest in a system that will maintain my conclusions. If we disrupt this system, we disrupt some deeply held self-protections; we are *fragile*. I can therefore comprehend why DiAngelo asserts: "We need to discuss white people as a group – even if doing so jars us – in order to disrupt our unracialized identities" (page 89).

I could see the power of the belief that only bad people were racist, as well as how individualism allowed white people to exempt themselves from the forces of socialization. I could see how we are taught to think about racism only as discrete acts committed by individual people, rather than as a complex, interconnected system. And in light of so many white expressions of resentment toward people of color, I realized that we see ourselves as entitled to, and deserving of, more than people of color deserve; I saw our investment in a system that serves us.

(Pages 3-4)

There are other analogical correlations as well. DiAngelo asserts that racism is "a structure not an event" (page 20). I find it interesting, and helpful, that her references to *overt* acts of racism are usually the illustrative *beginnings* to her broader argument; the overt is used to reveal the related, covert, hidden, systems. Again, without conflating, there is a correlation in classism: Overt acts of snobbery are relatively rare, and, after all, "it's not like we put people in the workhouses anymore." We do, however, define success, and restrict the pathways to it, in ways that "help" people to know their place and stay there. I can conceive of what DiAngelo means when she talks about "new racism", "a term coined... to capture the ways in which racism has adapted over time so that modern norms, policies, and practices result in similar racial outcomes as those in the past, while not appearing to be explicitly racist" (page 39).

DiAngelo asserts that the “social forces that prevent us from attaining the racial knowledge we need” include “the ideologies of individualism and meritocracy, narrow and repetitive media representations of people of color, segregation in schools and neighbourhoods, depictions of whiteness as the human ideal, truncated history, jokes and warnings, taboos on openly talking about race, and white solidarity” (page 8). I can elucidate at least one analogical example from this list: My children have gone to a good school and can do so by virtue of our address. We do, however, live in a “poor neighbourhood.” At some point the school’s catchment was arranged to include this neighbourhood. I suspect it was a deliberate attempt to help the lower classes. But here’s the observation: it is the children from the poorer, multi-racial neighbourhoods which are required to travel two miles uphill to get to the campus. It sits and belongs in the middle of a more affluent suburb. This is not an overt act of classism (or even racism in this case); nobody has said “let’s make it difficult for the poor kids and the BAME kids to get to school.” But somehow it’s ended up that way. It’s not the only example in the city I live in.

Here’s another correlation: DiAngelo asserts, “I believe *white progressives cause the most daily damage of people of color*” (page 5, her emphasis). Her point, as I understand it, references those who see the evil in overt racism, and decry it, yet, in failing to realise their own complicity in systemic racism, end up reinforcing it. The correlation in classism is with regard to those who “care for the poor” in some way. I see this in church circles all the time; even when it is manifested in good things such as food banks, there is, so often, an entrenched “client-patron” model at work. It is unspoken but real: “I am here to help you. I am normal. You are a poor person.”

“White equilibrium is a cocoon of racial comfort, centrality, superiority, entitlement, racial apathy, and obliviousness,

all rooted in an identity of being good people free of racism” (page 112). DiAngelo is not speaking nonsense. I’ve seen this dynamic with respect to class. But now I must seek to understand it with respect to race and my own whiteness. I need my equilibrium disturbed. When it comes to understanding racism, I must admit that I am playing an equivalent part, in racial terms, to what the middle class has played in my immigrant experience. In other words, I am likely to be unaware, and unable to taste the water I’m swimming in.

I must turn away from my known analogy, and do my best to understand myself racially. This will be the content of my second part.