

From White Fragility by Robin D. Angelo

you've said or done is hurtful. You will probably respond with white fragility. But unfortunately, white fragility can only protect the problematic behavior you feel so defensive about; it does not demonstrate that you are an open person who has no problematic racial behavior.

The dominant paradigm of racism as discrete, individual, intentional, and malicious acts makes it unlikely that whites will acknowledge any of our actions as racism. For example, I often read about a government official, a teacher, or another public servant expressing shockingly racist statements and still insisting that he or she is not racist. Readers may recall a West Virginia county employee—Pamela Ramsey Taylor—who held a high-level position as director of county development and was suspended after posting racist remarks about First Lady Michelle Obama on Facebook (“It will be so refreshing to have a classy, beautiful, dignified First Lady back in the White House. I’m tired of seeing a [*sic*] Ape in heels”). The mayor of the city responded, “Just made my day Pam.” Taylor’s response to the ensuing uproar was, “My comment was not intended to be racist at all. I was referring to my day being made for change in the White House! I am truly sorry for any hard feeling this may have caused! Those who know me know that I’m not in any way racist!” Although Taylor was suspended (but eventually got her job back), I am left wondering what actually qualifies as racism in the white mind.

→ When I talk to white people about racism, I hear the same claims—rooted in the good/bad binary—made again and again. I organize these claims into two overall categories, both of which label the person as good and therefore not racist. The first set claims color blindness: “I don’t see color [*and/or* race has no meaning to me]; therefore, I am free of racism.” The second set claims to value diversity: “I know people of color [*and/or* have been near people of color, *and/or* have general fond regard for people of color]; therefore, I am free of racism.” Both categories fundamentally rest on the good/bad binary. Although I organize these narratives into two overall categories, they can be and often are used interchangeably. They don’t need to make sense; they

just need to position the speaker as a good person—free of racism—and end the discussion.

Color-blind statements insist that people do not see race, or if they see it, it has no meaning to them. Color-blind claims include the following:

- I was taught to treat everyone the same.
- I don’t see color.
- I don’t care if you are pink, purple, or polka-dotted.
- Race doesn’t have any meaning to me.
- My parents were/weren’t racist, so that is why I am not racist.
- Everyone struggles, but if you work hard . . .
- So-and-so just happens to be black, but that has nothing to do with what I am about to tell you.
- Focusing on race is what divides us.
- If people are respectful to me, I am respectful to them, regardless of race.
- Children today are so much more open.
- I’m not racist; I’m from Canada.
- I was picked on because I was white/I grew up poor (so I don’t have race privilege).

The second set I term *color-celebrate*. This set claims that the person sees and embraces racial difference. Color-celebrate claims include statements such as these:

- I work in a very diverse environment.
- I have people of color in my family/married a person of color/have children of color.
- I was in the military.
- I used to live in New York/Hawaii.
- We don’t like how white our neighborhood is, but we had to move here for the schools.

- I was in the Peace Corps.
- I marched in the sixties.
- We adopted a child from China.
- Our grandchildren are multiracial.
- I was on a mission in Africa.
- I went to a very diverse school/lived in a very diverse neighborhood.
- I lived in Japan and was a minority, so I know what it is like to be a minority.
- I lived among the [fill-in-the-blank] people, so I am actually a person of color.
- My great-grandmother was a Native American princess.

In my work to unravel the dynamics of racism, I have found a question that never fails me. This question is *not* “Is this claim true, or is it false?”; we will never come to an agreement on a question that sets up an either/or dichotomy on something as sensitive as racism. Instead I ask, “How does this claim function in the conversation?” If we apply this question to these two sets of narratives, one color-blind and the other color-celebrate, we see that all of these claims ultimately function in a similar way; they all exempt the person from any responsibility for or participation in the problem. They take race off the table, and they close (rather than open) any further exploration. In so doing, they protect the racial status quo.

These typical white racial claims depend on an underlying framework of meaning. Identifying this framework can help us understand how we manage to make such claims in the context of extreme segregation and racial inequity.

Imagine a pier stretching out over the water. Viewed from above, the pier appears to simply float there. The top of the pier—the part that we can see—signifies the surface aspect of these claims. Yet while the pier seems to float effortlessly, it is, of course, not floating at all; it is propped up by a structure submerged under the water. The pier rests on

pillars embedded in the ocean floor. In the same way that a pier sits on submerged pillars that are not immediately visible, the beliefs supporting our racial claims are hidden from our view. To topple the pier, we need to access and uproot the pillars.

The above claims are all meant to provide evidence of the speaker’s lack of racism. For example, in a conversation about racism, when white people say that they work in a diverse environment or that they have people of color in their family, they are giving me their evidence that they are not racist. If this is their evidence, how are they defining racism? In other words, what underlying system of meaning leads them to make that claim? If working near people of color is the evidence that distinguishes them from a racist, then evidently a racist cannot work near people of color. This claim rests on a definition of racism as *conscious intolerance*; a racist is someone who presumably cannot tolerate even the sight of a person of color. According to this logic, because they know or work with people of color, or lived in New York, where they saw people of color all around them, and have spoken with and smiled at people of color, they cannot participate in racism. When we go beneath the surface of these claims, we can see their superficiality, for even an avowed white nationalist who would march openly in the streets chanting “blood and soil!” can interact with people of color, and very likely does so. In fact, I have seen black reporters interviewing open and avowed white supremacists on television, with both parties proceeding calmly and respectfully.

Someone who claims to have been taught to treat everyone the same is simply telling me that he or she doesn’t understand socialization. It is not possible to teach someone to treat everyone the same. We can be told, and often are told, to treat everyone the same, but we cannot successfully be taught to do so because human beings are not objective. Further, we wouldn’t *want* to treat everyone the same because people have different needs and different relationships with us. Differential treatment in itself is not the problem. For example, I wouldn’t give a document with a twelve-point font to a person with low vision, even though someone else wouldn’t have any trouble reading it. The problem is the misinformation that circulates around us and causes our differential treatment to be inequitable.