

# White Fragility and the Rules of Engagement

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*How to engage in the necessary dialogue and self-reflection that can lead to structural change.*

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I am white. I write and teach about what it means to be white in a society that proclaims race meaningless, yet remains deeply divided by race. A fundamental but very challenging part of my work is moving white people from an individual understanding of racism—i.e. only some people are racist and those people are bad—to a structural understanding. A structural understanding recognizes racism as a default system that institutionalizes an unequal distribution of resources and power between white people and people of color. This system is historic, taken for granted, deeply embedded, and it works to the benefit of whites.

The two most effective beliefs that prevent us (whites) from seeing racism as a system are:

1. that racists are bad people and
2. that racism is conscious dislike;

if we are well-intended and do not consciously dislike people of color, we cannot be racist. This is why it is so common for white people to cite their friends and family members as evidence of their lack of racism. However, when you understand racism as a system of structured relations into which we are all socialized, you understand that intentions are irrelevant. And when you understand how socialization works, you understand that much of racial bias is unconscious. Negative messages about people of color circulate all around us. While having friends of color is better than not having them, it doesn't change the overall system or prevent racism from surfacing in our relationships. The societal default is white superiority and we are fed a steady diet of it 24/7. To not actively seek to interrupt racism is to internalize and accept it.

As part of my work I teach, lead and participate in affinity groups, facilitate workshops, and mentor other whites on recognizing and interrupting racism in our lives. As a facilitator, I am in a position to give white people feedback on how their unintentional racism is manifesting. This has allowed me to repeatedly observe several common patterns of response. The most common by far is outrage:

*How dare you suggest that I could have said or done something racist!*

Given the dominant conceptualization of racism as individual acts of cruelty, it follows that only terrible people who don't like people of color can commit it. While this conceptualization is misinformed, it functions beautifully to protect racism by making it impossible to engage in the necessary dialogue and self-reflection that can lead to change.

Outrage is often followed by righteous indignation about the manner in which the feedback was given. I have discovered (as I am sure have countless people of color) that there is apparently an unspoken set of rules for how to give white people feedback on racism.

## The Rules of Engagement

After years of working with my fellow whites, I have found that the only way to give feedback correctly is not to give it at all. Thus, the first rule is cardinal:

**1. Do not give me feedback on my racism under any circumstances.**

If you break the cardinal rule:

**2. Proper tone is crucial – feedback must be given calmly.** If there is any emotion in the feedback, the feedback is invalid and does not have to be considered.

- 3. There must be trust between us.** You must trust that I am in no way racist before you can give me feedback on my racism.
- 4. Our relationship must be issue-free** – If there are issues between us, you cannot give me feedback on racism.
- 5. Feedback must be given immediately**, otherwise it will be discounted because it was not given sooner.
- 6. You must give feedback privately**, regardless of whether the incident occurred in front of other people. To give feedback in front of anyone else—even those involved in the situation—is to commit a serious social transgression. The feedback is thus invalid.
- 7. You must be as indirect as possible.** To be direct is to be insensitive and will invalidate the feedback and require repair.
- 8. As a white person I must feel completely safe during any discussion of race.** Giving me any feedback on my racism will cause me to feel unsafe, so you will need to rebuild my trust by never giving me feedback again. Point of clarification: when I say “safe” what I really mean is “comfortable.”
- 9. Giving me feedback on my racial privilege invalidates the form of oppression that I experience** (i.e. classism, sexism, heterosexism). We will then need to focus on how you oppressed me.
- 10. You must focus on my intentions**, which cancel out the impact of my behavior.
- 11. To suggest my behavior had a racist impact is to have misunderstood me.** You will need to allow me to explain until you can acknowledge that it was your misunderstanding.

These rules are rooted in [white fragility](#).



Their contradictions are irrelevant; their function is to obscure racism and protect white dominance and they do so very effectively. Yet from an understanding of racism as a system of unequal institutional power, we need to ask ourselves where these rules come from and who they serve.

Many of us actively working to interrupt racism continually hear complaints about the “gotcha” culture of white anti-racism. There is a stereotype that we are looking for every incident we can find so we can spring out, point our fingers, and shout, “You’re a racist!” While certainly there are white people who arrogantly set themselves apart from other whites by acting in this way, in my experience over 20 years this is not the norm. It is far more common for sincere white people to agonize over when and how to give feedback to a fellow white person, given the ubiquitousness of white fragility. White fragility works to punish the person giving feedback and essentially bully them back into silence. It also maintains white solidarity—the tacit agreement that we will protect white privilege and not hold each other accountable for our racism. When the person giving the feedback is a person of color, the charge is “playing the race card” and the consequences of white fragility are much more penalizing.

**Racism is the norm rather than an aberration. Feedback is key to our ability to recognize and repair our inevitable and often unaware collusion.**

In recognition of this, I follow these guidelines:

1. How, where, and when you give me feedback is irrelevant – it is the feedback I want and need. Understanding that it is hard to give, I will take it any way I can get it. From my position of social, cultural,

and institutional white power and privilege, I am perfectly safe and I can handle it. If I cannot handle it, it's on me to build my racial stamina.

2. Thank you.

The above guidelines rest on the understanding that there is no face to save and the jig is up; I know that I have blind spots and unconscious investments in white superiority. My investments are reinforced every day in mainstream society. I did not set this system up but it does unfairly benefit me and I am responsible for interrupting it. I need to work hard to recognize it myself, but I can't do it alone. This understanding leads me to gratitude when others help me.

In my workshops, I often ask the people of color,

*"How often have you given white people feedback on our unaware yet inevitable racism and had that go well for you?"*

Eye-rolling, head-shaking, and outright laughter follow, along with the general consensus of never. I then ask,

*"What would it be like if you could simply give us feedback, have us graciously receive it, reflect, and work to change the behavior?"*

Recently a man of color sighed and said,

*"It would be revolutionary."*

I ask my fellow whites to consider the profundity of that response. Revolutionary that we would receive, reflect, and work to change the behavior. On the one hand, it points to how difficult and fragile we are. But on the other hand, how simple taking responsibility for our racism can be.