

White Fragility Reader's Guide

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- READERS GUIDE

White Fragility **Reading Guide**

Written by Özlem Sensoy and Robin DiAngelo

Before You Begin: Suggestions for Discussion

This reading guide is intended to support formal and informal group discussions of *White Fragility*. We offer the following pedagogical tips as you organize your discussion.

On size:

Small group discussions work best when the size of the group is large enough to advance discussion but not so large that any member of the group can avoid sharing or, conversely, wants to share, but cannot find airtime to do so. For this reason, it is recommended that groups target a size of five to seven members. If you are part of a larger study group, just organize yourselves into smaller sub groups of approximately five people.

On composition:

There can be strategic advantages to organizing yourself into what are sometimes called *affinity groups*, wherein people with a shared identity (such as cis-men, or Asian women, or Indigenous people) work through issues particular to them, in a closed group. If your group is diverse, discuss how you want to organize yourselves (in a mixed group or an affinity group for all or part of various chapter discussions).

On monitoring the group:

If you are self-monitoring your group, discuss how you will assign a

facilitator for each session. This can be a rotating responsibility if you plan to meet over multiple sessions. The task of the facilitator will include keeping the discussion on topic, ensuring shared airtime, and note-taking (if part of a formal discussion group), as well as ensuring that the group's time is monitored.

On facilitating:

Tips for facilitators of white discussion groups

Based on the following patterns, it is highly recommended that a facilitator or team of facilitators be assigned when primarily white groups discuss racism. Facilitators should think of themselves as *guides* rather than as teachers. This means the overall task of the facilitator is to keep the group focused and on track, with equitable sharing of the airtime. This will be easier to do if at the start of the discussion you tell the group that this is your task. You could even name the patterns ahead of time and ask group members to watch out for these themselves.

Common Patterns

1. Distancing: Identifiable via expressions including “People should just __,” “Society is __,” “How do I tell my coworker __,” “What about all the people who aren’t here today who should be __,” “The executive team at my workplace __,” and “My family member __”

Response techniques: “Can you speak to how you see this in *your own* behaviors/thoughts/beliefs in life/work?” “What part do you see yourself playing?” “What might *you* do...?” “How is the most effective way for someone to talk with *you* about *your* racism?”

2. Checking out: Identifiable via behaviors including texting, working on laptop, engaging in side conversations.

Response techniques: At the start, ask participants to put phones/laptops away. Explain that effective discussion on racism often causes disequilibrium for those of us who are white and that technology functions as a way to check out. Further, when people of color are present, the distraction of technology sends a problematic message. Someone who has an emergency or is expecting a text or call should leave the room at that time. Regarding side conversations, the facilitator might say, “I am having trouble hearing. Please give your attention to the speaker.”

3. Dominating the discussion: The same person or people speaking first, at length, immediately, and/or several times while others sit back in silence.

Response techniques: “Who haven’t we heard from?” “Let’s wait a little longer to make space for people who need more time.” “I’m going to ask that if we have spoken twice already, we wait until everyone else has had a chance before we speak again.” “Let’s go around the table and check in.” “Does anyone else want to share their perspective?” “We all have a responsibility to share our thoughts so others in the group know where we’re coming from or what we’re struggling with.”

4. Positioning themselves as already getting this/Giving evidence for why this discussion doesn’t apply to them: “I already know all this.” “I come from ___ and I can’t believe how white it is here.” “I realized many years ago that___.” “I am married to/have children who are ___,” followed by distancing (rather than insight and recognition that this doesn’t exempt them and their learning is not finished).

Response techniques: “The book poses an important question, ‘How do we know how well we are doing?’ “Where do you see your current learning edge?” “DiAngelo states that nothing exempts us from the forces of racism. How are situations that are unique to us still informed by racism?” “How does being white shape one’s sense that they are ‘beyond’ this discussion?” “Can you name three actions in the last month that demonstrate your awareness in practice?”

5. Hopelessness: “Racism is never going to end.” “I can’t do anything.” “What are we supposed to do?” “This is just about making us feel guilty.” “We have been doing this for years now and nothing changes.” “The administration are the ones that need this and they just don’t care.”

Response techniques: “The author speaks to the question of guilt. What points does she make?” “If we apply the question the author asks, *How does our discouragement function?* how would we answer?” “What concrete actions have you attempted thus far? What books have you read? What antiracism networks have you joined? The perception that nothing can be done often keeps the existing system in place.”

6. Expecting people of color to teach us (white people) about race:

Turning to people of color for answers or to go first: “I grew up in a sheltered environment, so I don’t know anything about race.” “Sharon, tell me about the racism you have experienced.” “Sharon, you go first.”

Response techniques: If you are in a multiracial reading group, don’t assume that the people of color will speak first. If uncertain, ask them what they prefer. “While those of us who are white need to listen to people of color, in this context let’s take some risks and go first.”

“People of color and Indigenous people have spent a lot of time thinking and speaking out about white supremacy and against racism. This is the time for white people to step up to the conversation.”

“Mainstream society often has us focus on the targets of oppression rather than the agents. In this setting, focusing on people of color can let white people off the hook for naming their participation in racist systems.” “How have you managed thus far not to know the answers to your questions on racism?”

7. Claiming this discussion doesn’t apply to them because they are not from the US:

“I’m from Germany and we don’t have these issues there.” “Canada is a multicultural society.” “It’s completely different where I am from because everyone is the same.”

Response techniques: “At what age were you aware that black people existed? Where did they live? If in Africa, what were your impressions of Africa? Where did you get your information about Africa?” “Did you watch Hollywood movies? If so, what impressions did you get about African Americans from US movies? What about Disney movies and cartoons?” “What was your relationship to Asian heritage people? What were Asian people like, in your mind?” and so on.

Countering Common Patterns via Silence Breakers

These sentence starters, termed “silence breakers,”^[1] are suggested openings intended to address two common challenges for white people in cross-racial discussions: First, the fear of losing face, making a mistake, or not being able to manage impressions that often prevent white people from authentic engagement. Second, the lack of humility we often have when discussing racism. The silence breakers can help engender a stance of curiosity and humility that counters the certitude

many white people have regarding our racial perspectives. In doing so, they tend to open, rather than close, discussion and connection.

Silence Breakers

1. I'm really nervous/scared/uncomfortable saying this and/but ...
2. From my experience/perspective as [identity] ...
3. I'm afraid I may offend someone, and please let know if I do, but ...
4. I'm not sure if this will make any sense, and/but ...
5. I just felt something shift in the room. I'm wondering if anyone else did.
6. It seems as though some people may have had a reaction to that. Can you help me understand why?
7. Can you help me understand whether what I'm thinking right now might be problematic?
8. This is what I understand you to be saying: ____ Is that accurate?
9. I'm having a "yeah but." Can you help me work through it?
10. I'm engaged but just needing time to process this. What I am working on processing is ____.[2]

Additional Tips for a Productive Discussion

As DiAngelo notes, white people addressing white fragility surfaces several dilemmas. First, it requires that white people be centered in the conversation about racism. This can be problematic because it reinforces the white centering that is taken for granted in society at large (it is the author's hope, however, that it is a centering that *exposes*, rather than protects, the workings of white supremacy). Second, it positions white people—yet again—as the experts. Based on these dilemmas, the following points are important to keep in mind:

1. This book and its arguments build on antiracism scholarship and activism that people of color have written for generations. That scholarship has been fundamental to the ability of the author to explicate white fragility. Use this text as the starting point—rather than the ending point—to educate yourself on racism. There are many suggestions for engaging with the work of people of color in the Resources for Continuing Education section of this book.

2. The primary goal for white people working to understand racism is not to learn how racism impacts people of color. The primary goal is to recognize how the system of racism shapes *our* lives, how we uphold that system, and how we might interrupt it.

3. For people of color, multiracial, and Indigenous peoples who are part of an informal or formal discussion group, the book and this guide will hopefully validate your lived experiences and offer some helpful insight into the challenges of trying to talk to white people about racism. Like the book, this guide is primarily focused on raising the consciousness and increasing the cross-racial skills of white people. In so doing, many of the questions will be specific to them. Yet while the work of this text is primarily focused on the role that white people play within the system of racism, people of color are exposed to the same messages and must also consider how those messages have impacted them and the resultant role they may play. This dynamic is colloquially described as “assimilation” (or “acting white”) and is described in scholarship as “collusion.” These terms refer to people of color upholding values and behaviors that negatively impact their own and other groups of color and ultimately support white supremacy. There are many pressures to collude, the foremost of which is that there are rewards for conformity with the system. If we behave in ways that the dominant group finds favorable, we will likely receive benefits (or at least minimize penalties) in our daily interactions with them. As you study the dynamic of white fragility, consider your role and responsibilities in relation to collusion and adapt questions accordingly and as needed.

Note for those using this guide outside of the US context

The dynamics of white fragility are familiar in all societies in which white people hold institutional power and/or have a white settler colonial history, including Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Europe, and South Africa. While the book focuses on the specific sociopolitical context of the US, it is for you to reflect on how these dynamics manifest in your specific sociopolitical context. For white people who did not grow up in the US but live in the US now, consider how US-based racial dynamics (and globally circulating US cultural stories and images) shape your current ideas about race, your life, and cross-racial

relationships.

For all readers

The chapter questions are intended to deepen your reflection and understanding of the chapters and constructively inform your response to white fragility.

Keep the following principles in mind. You may need to return to them on occasion, so consider posting them in the room or having them available on cards:

1. A strong opinion is not the same as informed knowledge.
2. There is a difference between *agreement* and *understanding*. When discussing complex social and institutional dynamics such as racism, consider whether “I don’t agree” may actually mean “I don’t understand.”
3. We have a deep interest in denying the forms of oppression that benefit us. We may also have an interest in denying forms of oppression that harm us. For example, people of color can deny the existence of racism and even support its structures. This denial may keep them from feeling overwhelmed by the daily slights or protect them from the penalties of confronting white people on racism. However, regardless of the reason, this denial still benefits whites at the group level, not people of color.
4. Racism goes beyond individual intentions to collective group patterns.
5. We don’t have to be aware of racism in order for it to exist.
6. Our racial position (whether we identify as white, a person of color, or multiracial) will greatly affect our ability to see racism. For example, if we swim against the “current” of racial privilege, it’s often easier to recognize, while it’s harder to recognize if we swim with the current.

7. Putting our effort into protecting rather than expanding our current worldview prevents our intellectual and emotional growth.

Before you begin discussing chapter by chapter, spend some time reviewing the guidelines above.

[1] Adapted from Anika Nailah and Robin DiAngelo

[2] Excerpted from Robin DiAngelo and Ozlem Sensoy, "Calling In: Strategies for Cultivating Humility and Critical Thinking in Antiracism Education," *Understanding & Dismantling Privilege* 4, no. 2, (2014), <http://www.wpcjournal.com/article/view/12101>

About the Guide Authors

Robin DiAngelo is an academic, lecturer, and author of *White Fragility*. She has been a consultant and trainer on issues of racial and social justice for more than twenty years. She formerly served as a tenured professor of multicultural education at Westfield State University.

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Introduction

The *New York Times* best-selling book exploring the counterproductive reactions white people have when their assumptions about race are challenged, and how these reactions maintain racial inequality.

In this “vital, necessary, and beautiful book” (Michael Eric Dyson), antiracist educator Robin DiAngelo deftly illuminates the phenomenon of white fragility and “allows us to understand racism as a practice not restricted to ‘bad people’ (Claudia Rankine). Referring to the defensive moves that white people make when challenged racially, white fragility is characterized by emotions such as anger, fear, and guilt, and by behaviors including argumentation and silence. These behaviors, in turn, function to reinstate white racial equilibrium and prevent any meaningful cross-racial dialogue. In this in-depth exploration, DiAngelo examines how white fragility develops, how it protects racial inequality, and what we can do to engage more constructively.

Questions and Topics for Discussion

1. Chapter 1: The Challenges of Talking to White People About Racism

1. Identify a passage from chapter 1 that invokes any sense of discomfort. Highlight this passage and return to reading it periodically as you work through the book. What does this passage reveal about your socialization into the white racial frame? Does your discomfort shift over time? If so, what supported that shift?

2. If you are working through these questions as part of a white discussion group, how will you keep the discussion on track (focused on *ourselves* and our *own* participation)? How will you ensure that when common white patterns surface (distancing, intellectualizing, rationalizing), you will work to identify and challenge them rather than ignore or avoid them?

3. How do so many white people feel so confident in their opinions on racism, even as they live their lives in segregation?

4. How can we make generalizations about what it means to be white when we don't know each person's individual story?

5. What are some constructive ways to use your emotional reactions when your opinions on racism are challenged?

6. Explain in your own words the author's critique of the ideology of individualism.

2. Chapter 2: Racism and White Supremacy

1. What does it mean to say that race is “socially constructed”?
2. What is the difference between racial prejudice, racial discrimination, and racism?
3. What does the author mean when she says that there is no such thing as reverse racism?
4. How does the birdcage metaphor illustrate oppression?
5. What is scientific racism? Give some examples of how scientific racism is conveyed today.
6. What does Cheryl Harris mean when describing whiteness as a form of property?
7. What is problematic about the idea of the U.S. as a great “melting pot”? How did the melting pot actually work?
8. Discuss Coates’s statement that *race is the child of racism, not the father*.
9. The author cites Ruth Frankenberg’s description of whiteness as “a location of structural advantage, a standpoint from which white people look at ourselves, at others, and at society, and a set of cultural practices that are not named or acknowledged.” Explain each of these dimensions in your own words.
10. How is the author using the term “white supremacy”?

The White Racial Frame

1. Explain the concept of the *white racial frame*. What are some examples?
2. Take a few minutes to share some of your answers to the reflection questions on pp. 35-37. What surprised you? (These questions can be downloaded as a handout from www.robindiangelo.com.)
3. What patterns in the answers to the reflection questions do you notice within the group?
4. What insights do the answers give you on implicit aspects of our racial socialization?
5. What are some ways in which racism is “deeply embedded in the fabric” of society? Provide some examples.

3. Chapter 3: Racism After the Civil Rights Movement

1. What is the impact of white people not knowing our racial history?
2. What is color-blind racism and why is it problematic?
3. How did racism change and adapt after the civil rights era? Consider attitudes as well as behaviors.
4. Why does the author say that white progressives cause the most daily harm to people of color?
5. Why does the author consider young white people today to be no less racist than white people in the past?
6. How would you respond to someone who says, "Doesn't it all come down to what your parents taught you?"

4. Chapter 4: How Does Race Shape the Lives of White People?

1. The author traces some of the specific ways that her life has been shaped by racism. Consider your own socialization. In what specific ways has your life been shaped by racism? (If you are white, try to answer this question without mentioning people of color).
2. Identify at least three ways that *white racial belonging* has been conveyed to you in the last week (you might start by opening your wallet and looking at the bills there).
3. What are the earliest racial messages you can recall? Try to move beyond what you were openly told and work to identify *implicit* messages.
4. In what settings have you experienced the expectation of white solidarity/racial silence? How has that expectation been communicated to you? How have you responded? What consequences have you faced or fear you will face by breaking with white solidarity?
5. The author describes the power of segregation. She argues that this segregation is "active." What does this mean?
6. Discuss how various patterns of segregation across your lifespan shape your racial frame.
7. If you are white, which of the patterns discussed in this chapter have you seen in yourself? Which of the patterns challenge you the

most? Why?

8. Consider some aspects of your identity other than race (i.e., gender, sexuality, religion, class, ability, nationality, age). How does race shape how you experience these identities? For example, how might being white shape how you experience disability? Poverty? Gender identity and expression?

9. If you are a person of color, how have you witnessed white people enacting *white solidarity*?

10. The author states that white ignorance is not simply a matter of not knowing; it is a highly effective response that protects white investments in racism and thus is actively maintained. Discuss this statement.

11. What does the author mean when she says that white people are not, in fact, racially innocent? How can we know much about race if we have lived separately?

5. Chapter 5: The Good/Bad Binary

1. What does it mean to say that racism is “a structure, not an event”?

2. The author suggests that one of the most effective barriers to talking about racism with white people is the good/bad binary. How have you seen this binary underlying common white responses to charges of racism? How might you respond when the binary surfaces in discussions about racism?

3. If you are white, share some examples of the good/bad binary in your own responses to suggestions that you are complicit with racism.

4. When the author challenges the idea that we are all unique and therefore cannot be generalized about, what thoughts and feelings come up for you? How might these thoughts and feelings function?

5. The author lists two types of narratives that are commonly used by white people to deny complicity with racism: *color-blind* and *color-celebrate* (p. 77). Which narratives have you used yourself, or still use? If you could speak back to yourself with the voice of the author, how would you counter the narrative?

6. How can a white person still enact racism in a close relationship with a person of color? Doesn't the close relationship itself prove that the person is *not* racist? Explain how and why enacting racism in a

close relationship with a person of color is not only possible but inevitable.

7. If you are white, when was the last time someone challenged you to look at an aspect of yourself related to racism? How did you feel? How did you respond? What insights did/can you gain from the exchange? If no one has ever challenged you (or not in a very long time), what might that tell you about how whiteness shapes your life?

6. Chapter 6: Anti-Blackness

1. The author claims that in the white mind, black people are the ultimate racial other. What does this mean?

2. What does it mean to say that anti-blackness is present across all communities of color, even within black communities?

3. How does the author make the case that the construction of white identity and white superiority was in fact dependent upon the simultaneous creation of a particular *idea* of blackness? How are these ideas sustained?

4. What are some of the misunderstandings about affirmative action and what do these misunderstandings reveal about anti-blackness?

5. Why haven't affirmative action programs changed our racial outcomes?

6. What does the author mean when she suggests that causing pain and suffering for black people rests on a sense of white righteousness?

7. Return to the reflection questions on the white racial frame on pp. 34-36 and answer them while replacing the term "people of color" with the term "black people." What do you notice?

8. The author states that the film *The Blind Side* is "insidiously anti-black." Using the framework of the book, explain how a viewer can not notice the anti-black messages yet still be shaped by them.

9. Consider the bulleted list following the author's analysis of *The Blind Side*. In which other films have you seen these racial scripts?

7. Chapter 7: Racial Triggers for White People

1. Discuss the social taboos mentioned on p. 100. Give examples of each from your own life.
2. Explain the triggers listed in this chapter in your own words and share examples of each in daily life.
3. The author writes that white people have limited information about what racism is and how it works, while at the same time they have very strong opinions about racism. Explain how both of these can be true at the same time. In your own words, practice stating the difference between having information about what racism is and having opinions about what racism is.
4. The author shares the story of Mr. Roberts and lists the ways that the two teachers in the story dismissed what they did not understand. Discuss this example. How have you seen or participated in these forms of dismissal?
5. How does the author challenge the idea that our *intentions* are “what count”?
6. Discuss Bourdieu’s concept of *habitus* as a way to understand the racial disequilibrium that leads to white fragility. In what ways is this concept helpful in explaining how racial disequilibrium works?

8. Chapter 8: The Result: White Fragility

1. What is the “discourse of self-defense”? Have you ever used it yourself? If so, thinking about it now, how did it function in the interaction?
2. Share a time that you experienced your own white fragility or witnessed another white person’s.
3. What strategies do white people use to reset white racial equilibrium?
4. As a white colleague, how would you explain to Karen (p. 107) what is problematic about her response? If you are a person of color, what strategies could you use to address Karen’s white fragility?
5. Why are questions such as “What is the right thing to say?” or “What am I supposed to say?” the wrong questions? How might you respond the next time you hear these questions?
6. The author claims that white fragility functions as a form of bullying. How so?

7. What is meant by the statement that white fragility is “white racial control.” How does white fragility function as racial control?

8. The author ends this chapter by sharing an interaction with a man of color who, when asked what it would be like for white people to be open to feedback, replied, “It would be revolutionary.” She asks white readers to consider the profundity of this man’s reply. What feelings did you have when you read that response?

9. How might this man’s reply inform how you respond to feedback from people of color, going forward?

9. Chapter 9: White Fragility in Action

1. Why are white people more receptive to other white people (rather than people of color) educating them on race? What does this say about the role white people must play in addressing systemic racism in society broadly and specifically in our homes, with our friends and family members, and in our workplaces with our colleagues?

2. What are the opportunities and dilemmas of white people educating each other on racism?

3. Discuss the *claims* on pp. 119-120. Have you ever made any of these claims yourself?

4. Now consider the *assumptions* underlying those claims on p. 121. Which ones have you held? Do you still hold some of these? If so, how do they function for you and what would it mean to you to shift them (what do you see yourself as having to “give up”)?

5. In your group, take turns speaking back to the assumptions your group members shared in question 4. Which speak backs were the most effective for you?

6. What is the language of self-defense and why is it problematic?

10. Chapter 10: White Fragility and the Rules of Engagement

1. The author presents a set of eleven “cardinal rules” (pp. 123-24) when giving feedback to white people regarding racist assumptions and patterns. For each rule of engagement, provide an example of the

rule in action.

2. What assumptions do these rules rest on?

3. DiAngelo presents these rules in a language of critique in order to reveal how they function. Of course the “rules” are rarely explicitly expressed this way. Consider what you hear white people say that communicates “do not give me feedback under any circumstances” etc.? Go through each of the eleven rules and share how you have heard these rules expressed in practice.

4. How would you rewrite these rules from an antiracist framework? (A worksheet for rewriting the rules of engagement can be downloaded from robindiangelo.com/resources.)

5. In your own words, what is problematic about common guidelines for building trust in discussions about racism (e.g., “don’t judge”)? How do these guidelines function? Who are they for? Whose comfort do they protect?

6. The rules of engagement around white fragility have at least three parts: those giving feedback, those receiving feedback, and those witnessing these exchanges. Practice some language for each by preparing your own “sentence starters” such as the silence breakers above. How might you begin to give feedback? How might you respond to feedback given to you? What might you say as you witness an exchange of feedback?

11. Chapter 11: White Women’s Tears

1. The author opens this chapter with the story of a woman of color in a multiracial group stating that she did not want to be subjected to white women’s tears. Why were white women asked not to cry in the group?

2. The author argues that emotions are political. How are emotions political?

3. There have been social media critiques of white feminism. What are some examples of “white feminism”?

4. What does it mean to take an “intersectional” approach? Provide some examples.

5. Throughout the book the author reinforces the idea that we “bring our histories with us.” What does this mean and why is it so

important?

6. White women often assume a shared sisterhood with women of color. What is problematic about this assumption?

7. Discuss some of the ways in which white men's fragility manifests. What is important for white men to understand about the impact of each of these behaviors?

8. The author writes, "Since many of us have not learned how racism works and our role in it, our tears may come from shock and distress about what we didn't know or recognize. For people of color, our tears demonstrate our racial insulation and privilege" (pp. 135-36). Discuss this passage and the ways that white emotional distress and shock (tears, defensiveness, anger, grief) shape conversations on racism. What do these dynamics reveal about the sociopolitical function of emotions?

9. Consider how emotions function in public space. For instance, how do white people often read the emotions of women of color, and peoples of color generally? Consider how emotions are read racially by white people with cultural figures such as Serena Williams, Nicki Minaj, Cory Booker, Maxine Waters, and Mazie Hirono, as well as the way that institutions (like media) respond to emotions in racialized ways. Conversely, how are the emotions of white people read (and the intersections between race and gender in all readings)? Consider cultural figures such as Christine Blasey Ford, Elizabeth Warren, Brett Kavanaugh, Lindsey Graham, and Donald Trump.

12. Chapter 12: Where Do We Go from Here?

1. Using an antiracist framework, how would you respond to a white person who said, "You just want me to feel bad and guilty about something that I had nothing to do with"?

2. Very little if anything in society at large supports us to persist in the work of antiracism. In fact, much pressures us *not* to continue the work. Because of this, we need to set up support for ourselves to continue. How will you set up support for yourself to stay on the journey? How will you resist complacency? Consider both in-group support and racially mixed group support networks. How will both settings be important in different ways?

3. The author states that it isn't enough for white people to be nice

and that, in fact, racism depends on white people simply being nice. Discuss this statement. How does niceness alone uphold the racial status quo?

4. If we accept that racism is always operating, the question becomes not “*Is racism taking place?*” but rather “*How is racism taking place in this specific context?*” How does awareness of that change how we think about our lives and our actions?

5. Why must white people resist cynicism and remain hopeful? At the same time, what are the pitfalls of hopefulness? What is the difference between hope and denial?

6. The author shares a time that she perpetrated racism toward a coworker and the steps she took to repair the damage. Identify the underlying antiracist assumptions listed on pp. 142-143 that are demonstrated in these steps.

7. Discuss the suggestions for continuing the work of antiracism. Which are the most challenging? How can you meet those challenges?

About this Author

Robin DiAngelo is an academic, lecturer, and author and has been a consultant and trainer on issues of racial and social justice for more than twenty years. She formerly served as a tenured professor of multicultural education at Westfield State University.

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