

Common White Responses To Anti-Racism

When issues of racism come up, White people often have conflicting feelings and become defensive. But understanding the distinction between responsibility and guilt can help, as can understanding the causes of that defensiveness. Recognizing common types of defensiveness can lead to a better way of responding that can further dialogue and move us all toward rectifying the historic structures of racism that persist.

In April of 2019, Kyle Korver, a professional basketball player, wrote an article for *The Players' Tribune*, a platform where professional athletes can write directly to their fans. Korver, then a member of the Atlanta Hawks and later the Utah Jazz and Milwaukee Bucks, writes about his initial reactions to the news that his teammate and best friend, Thabo Sefalosa, had been beaten and arrested by New York Police.

Korver, who is White, reports that his immediate reaction was to wonder what Thabo had done to warrant the treatment. It was not, as he realized later, to wonder how Thabo was or whether he was all right and needed anything. Instead, he had put Thabo in the position of the perpetrator of some crime.

Yet Korver realized that had he been in Thabo's position, being White, he likely would not have been stopped by police, much less beaten. (Thabo's leg was broken, a season-ending injury, though he had done nothing to warrant the attack, as a jury later determined.) When racial heckling at NBA games later in the season were aimed at his teammates, Korver came to understand how his earlier reaction was a typical White response and part of a much larger problem, a racially charged environment that automatically casts Black men as the wrong-doers.

But Korver went further. He came to understand that the problem—this racially charged society we all live in—was, as a White man, his responsibility to correct.

Why his responsibility?

Korver realizes that being White means he has the great privilege of opting in or opting out of racially charged issues, debates, and protests. Moreover, he has the great privilege to go through his entire life and never be targeted for unusual or violent treatment because of his race. His teammates of color, in the NBA and WNBA, do not ever have that choice. For them, being born with a particular color of skin, race is always, everywhere present.

That is inherently unfair. And Korver has the courage to say so and to take action to address that unfairness.

But let's take a moment to look at that idea of responsibility. Korver did not encourage the New York police officers to use excessive force on Thabo nor did he encourage them to even target him as a Black man. And later, Korver did not cast racial slurs from the stands at Thabo and other teammates at a Jazz game. So why should he feel responsible to do anything?

There are two answers for that. The first has to do with ownership. And the second has to do with complicity.

White Privilege, Guilt, and Responsibility

One of the most difficult things to do, if you're White in American society, is to recognize your own privileges regardless of how visible they are. If you're White, you walk through the world pretty much never encountering race as a factor for yourself. It is a factor for others, of course, and you're probably sometimes tired of hearing about it or worrying about it, however well-intentioned you may be.

And that is the problem. Since you do not experience race every day, you cannot see race as an everyday issue. But for people of color in America, it is. And what makes things worse is when this fact is pointed out, White people often get angry and then defensive, feeling they are being made to feel guilty for no reason.

But in that anger is a clue to understanding.

Anger is an outward expression of fear, especially the fear at losing something—in this case, for White people, the sense of who they are in the world. They might have to ask themselves if it is possible that they are harming others without even knowing it. Is it possible that they are guilty of racist attacks, however unintentional? To claim so seems so outrageously unfair that they want to fight back against those charges.

But let's step back a moment to consider an analogy.

Imagine you have inherited a large old home from your grandfather who has recently passed away. It has been in your family for generations, going back two hundred years (or more), and is solid and stately and, in its way, beautiful. But there's a flaw in it, a significant flaw—say the staircases leading up to the porch and front door are poorly designed and can't be used safely except by the young and able-bodied. In fact, there have been a number of injuries over the years and many people are simply barred from using the stairs.

How would you feel about that?

Probably, you would feel grateful at having inherited a nice home but you'd be concerned about those stairs. You're a person of goodwill and don't want anybody getting hurt. Moreover, you want everyone to have the same access to your home.

And so you set about figuring out how to update the stairs.

Maybe there's a simple fix, but it's more likely that the stairs will need some major work. You may have to remove them entirely and rebuild that entire part of the porch. And it's possible, in so doing, that you find that the entire structure is compromised. But as the inheritor of the house, you know that you are responsible for its design and for the safety of all those who enter.

Notice that you are not guilty of having built a house that has a poorly designed staircase or larger structural flaws. But as the inheritor of that house, you are now responsible for it. And that's the key distinction: You are not guilty, but you are responsible.

This is what Kyle Korver is expressing in his story of his work for a more racially just world. He did not build the house he's living in. Like us, he simply inherited it. But being White, he has the great privilege of never having to worry about racist barriers, like faulty stairways barring access to the front door of society, though he is very aware that racist stairways exist. He's not guilty of having built them, but as someone who owns that house, and who benefits from living in that house, he is responsible for fixing the stairs, fixing the structure.

And he's even more responsible than his teammates of color are because he and his family have benefitted from those racist structures—everything from better schooling to higher property values to promotions at work. The faulty stairs, over the centuries, have manifested as everything from the genocide of the indigenous peoples of North America, to the labor of enslaved people from Africa, to the Jim Crow laws that kept political and economic power concentrated in White hands for over a hundred years.

To leave the work of tearing down and rebuilding those stairs and fixing the porch's structure to his teammates of color is to put an additional burden on top of the already burdensome consequences of our long history of racism. Should the victims of a racist history and society also be the ones to have to fix the system? Should those who have been barred from the benefits of coming into the house now be required to rebuild that faulty stairway without the help of the owners of the house or, worse, having to battle their opposition to the work? That seems an unfairness on top of an unfairness.

Common White Responses to Race-Based Guilt

If you're White, and you've read this far, I wonder what your emotional responses are. Are you feeling some guilt, some anger, some sadness or defensiveness? These are very common responses. However, if you're committed to helping dismantle racism in America or to learn more about how you can help, it's important to be able to go beyond defensiveness so that you're open to new perspectives.

Robin DiAngelo wrote "White Fragility," an article published in the *International Journal of Critical Pedagogy* in 2011. She followed that with *White Fragility: Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk about Racism*, a book which quickly became a

best seller. DiAngelo offers some ideas that can help us all understand White responses to issues of race and racism and, perhaps, go beyond them.

First, the main reasons White people have such a difficult time talking about race is a perception that one of the core principles of what it means to be American is being challenged. White people like to think that “American” is a non-racialized term and so “being American” is also non-racialized.

However, upon inspection, it’s easy to see that this “non-racialized” American, in both appearance and behavior, is always White. The “typical” American, for White people, is a native English speaker, middle-class, and White. As such, White is the default race of America for White people, and it has been the default for so long that it appears “natural.” It just feels right (for White people) for Americans to be White. By contrast, children of color learn at an early age that they are not like the “typical” Americans; they have to battle the idea that they are other and less than, that they are second-class citizens.

But you might ask, “Is White a race?”

Historically, and overwhelmingly, the answer to that question is yes. In the United States, who was and was not counted as “White” has been contested and revised numerous times since the earliest days of this country and even before.

For example, is a child born of a White father and a Black mother to be considered White or Black or both? This was a real and very troubling question in the American Colonies because they followed British Common Law, which stipulated that a child’s status followed that of its father. This meant in England that if a male aristocrat had a child by his servant, the child would be the father’s son and considered of noble blood.

In the American Colonies, however, there was a problem. White men who enslaved Black people often raped their Black enslaved women. Would the status of the biracial children follow the father so that they would be considered White and therefore “free” as British Common Law would require? (It was illegal to enslave a White person.) Were these biracial children to be considered full and free citizens of the Colonies and later the States?

Prejudice demanded the answer be “no” and so the Colonial governments and then the early State governments determined that a biracial child in America would inherit the status of the mother, flouting British Common Law. Problem solved. The consequence was generations of biracial children sired by and then “owned and sold by” their White slaveholding fathers.

These biracial children were determined, by law and for convenience, not to be White, a racial construction that had to be defended by manipulating the law. Similarly, European immigrants from the southern parts of Europe along with most Irish were not considered White for many years, not until they had gained economic and political powers. Asians were cast as non-Whites and most were barred from entering the US for over a century.

These and numerous other instances show that Whiteness is a construction like any other race, constructed for political and economic purposes and protected by laws. But since Whiteness has been the standard against which to measure others, the central place from which to see and from which to write the laws (and make the movies and write the books), it does not appear to exist at all, at least for White people.

But it does. Just ask anyone who is on the outside. Ask any child of color who watches television and then looks in the mirror.

White people tend to feel their worldview is challenged when they are told they live in a White world, one in which White people have privileges that others do not. To White people, this world is not a “White world” but is simply “the world.” So when this worldview is questioned, their sense of safety is threatened. Can it be that White people don’t live where they think they live? Isn’t “America” just “America” and not “White America”? A White person might ask, “Have I been deluded into thinking I’m innocent all these years?”

This conflation of “American” with “White” means that any challenge to Whiteness as a thing and not an invisible (and inconsequential) default is, to White Americans, a challenge to America as a whole. This is why protesting racist practices often feels to White people like unpatriotic acts.

Here's a well-known example. Colin Kaepernick became famous in 2016 for kneeling during the national anthem before his San Francisco 49ers' games. Kaepernick was protesting police brutality that disproportionately targets Black men. His protest spread and soon drew the ire of many White Americans who saw his actions as disrespecting all things American. Rather than seeing Kaepernick's protest for what it was—against police brutality, which everyone should be against—many White commentators and critics, including President Trump, angrily called his protests an affront to “America.”

According to DiAngelo, this kind of response is common, widespread, and unhelpful. In her 2011 article, she explains why. She says that

White people in North America live in a social environment that protects and insulates them from race-based stress. This insulated environment of racial protection builds white expectations for racial comfort while at the same time lowering the ability to tolerate racial stress, leading to what I refer to as White Fragility. *White Fragility is a state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves.* These moves include the outward display of emotions such as anger, fear, and guilt, and behaviors such as argumentation, silence, and leaving the stress-inducing situation. These behaviors, in turn, function to reinstate white racial equilibrium. (emphasis added, 54)

In essence, DiAngelo says that White people live mostly free of having to confront racist issues and so feel entitled to being comfortable about race. Therefore, they have a very low tolerance for racial stress, which leads to feeling defensive: getting angry, leaving, etc. These defensive moves are all designed to help the White person feel comfortable again.

Types of Responses: Backing Out, Leaning In

At this point, we might ask what this has to do with writing and writing in the academy. As the companion essays on race, rhetoric, and *Active Voices* explain, writing is part of a larger rhetorical history that has racism, sexism, and classism woven through it. When we study the language of colleges and composition, we are studying the language in which racism, sexism, and classism live. If we are serious about our responsibility to correct this faulty structure, we would be wise to guard against the feelings of guilt and the defensiveness that follow.

So let's look at a few of the most common types of responses White people often have when discussions of race make them angry and then defensive. Anger is an internal sensation but defensiveness is a mental response that takes many forms, most commonly denial, rationalization, shifting the blame, and withdrawing.

Denial is obvious: you simply tell the person they're wrong, that what they see doesn't exist. This ends the conversation and quickly restores the White person's sense of safety.

Rationalization is a bit more subtle. It involves explaining away the issue, putting it in historical context or minimizing it through an apparently reasonable argument. The result is a distancing of the issue and a diminishment of the concern of the other person. In effect, rationalizing a race issue dehumanizes the other person since it effectively removes the point the person was making from that person's control and puts it into the White context that allows White people to feel more comfortable.

Another common response is to **shift blame**: “I didn't do it.” This shifting can sometimes be outrageous, such as arguing that since some African peoples participated in some small way to the massive slave trade of the sixteenth through nineteenth centuries that “they did it to themselves.” More often, the shifting is subtle, such as arguing that racism had its origins in faulty scientific thinking of otherwise well-intentioned men: “they” founded racist ideas, not me. And even more often, White people shift the blame to the cultures of people of color, arguing a cultural deficient, such as a (false) “culture of poverty,” in which people of color supposedly perpetuate a learned helplessness or, worse, criminality within their home cultures.

Finally, **withdrawing** can be either emotional—setting up an emotional wall or effecting a passive-aggressive silence—or physical—actually leaving the scene. Like the other responses, withdrawing is designed to protect and restore the comfort of the White person.

A better response for a White person who feels uncomfortable talking about race would be “leaning in.” This means accepting the discomfort as something that just is rather than turning away from it or seeking to assuage or evade it. If a

White person can recognize discomfort as a natural response to having their worldview challenged, they can then stay in the place where good work can be done. The essay on rhetorical listening and nonviolent communication explains more helpful responses.

In Sum

White Americans live in a world that has been designed by and for White people and so have the privilege of living free of race issues most of the time, unlike people of color for whom race is always present. While White people today, for the most part, are not guilty of having created this racist system, they are responsible for correcting it due to their inheritance of and benefitting from that system. However, when White people's belief in a non-racialized America, of "American" as White in all things but name, is challenged, they can easily become defensive and, seeking to restore their sense of comfort, deny, rationalize, shift the blame, or evade the issue. A better response would be generous, nonviolent listening.

Extending the Conversation

Activity 1

Talk back. Take a look through this chapter again and do a bit of research. What did I get wrong? What did I get right? What ideas might you challenge and on what basis? What are the consequences of your views in terms of rights and responsibilities?

Activity 2



<https://www.theplayerstribune.com/en-us/articles/kyle-korver-utah-jazz-nba>

Check out Kyle Korver's "Privileged" in *The Players' Tribune*. How convincing is his argument? Thinking rhetorically, why is it important that Korver spoke up in this way, in this publication? Also, what else has been happening in professional athletics related to race and race relations? Do a bit of research and place those actions in the context of this chapter. Finally, what do you think about all this? Do athletes, like Korver, have a special responsibility to speak, given their status in our society?

Activity 3

Robin DiAngelo's ideas are not without controversy. First, take a look at a few videos in which the concept of White fragility is addressed—a simple Google search of Robin DiAngelo videos will provide numerous links. But second, take a look at a response critical of DiAngelo. John McWhorter writes that *White Fragility* "talks down" to Black people. Check out his *Atlantic* article and, combined with ideas from this chapter and your other research, develop your own, however tentative, position.

<https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/07/dehumanizing-condescension-white-fragility/614146/>

Works Cited

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- . *White Fragility: Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2018.