

Nice Racism

What's in it for me? Learn how to challenge racism by abandoning niceness and leaning into discomfort.

When it comes to racism, if you're a progressive white person, chances are you see yourself as part of the solution instead of part of the problem. But "nice" progressive white people frequently perpetrate the most racial harm in cross-racial spaces. They objectify Black people and people of color, enact daily racist microaggressions, and center their own feelings of shame when called out – that is, they make it all about them. And they're completely unaware of the harm they're causing because they've never felt the need to examine their own internalized racist beliefs. These blinks are an insightful guide for anyone who's ready to admit they're a "nice racist." You'll discover the common moves and justifications that progressive racists make – and you'll learn how to drop that veneer of niceness, become accountable, and get serious about fighting white supremacy. In these blinks, you'll also learn

why nice racists always name-drop Black friends or partners; how to process critical feedback without making it all about you; and

why trying to out-woke other people won't make you less racist.

Nice racists often do the most harm.

What do you think a racist person looks like? Try to conjure up an image – do you see a hooded member of the Ku Klux Klan? Or perhaps an angry face belonging to a white nationalist group, like the Proud Boys who stormed the US Capitol? It's true that far-right, racist extremism is on the rise in the United States. But if you're white and you want to find a racist, start closer to home. That is, look in the mirror. But I'm not that kind of white person! you may be protesting. I'm on the diversity board at work, I march for Black Lives Matter, and I chose my kid's school solely because it was diverse. Well, if that's your reaction, there's some bad news: chances are, you're a "nice racist." The key message here is: Nice racists often do the most harm. Many of us think of the far right as the villains when it comes to racism. But the truth is, well-intentioned white people who are extra careful to say and do the "right things" actually inflict the most daily harm. That doesn't make any sense, you're thinking. These people sign up for diversity committees and try to hang out with Black parents at their child's school! Well, they also flock to diverse neighborhoods, gentrifying them in the process. And they subject the Black people they encounter to a constant stream of racist microaggressions – like noting how "articulate" they are or suddenly using hip-hop slang whenever Black people are around. Face it: being "nice" isn't the same as being educated about white supremacy or taking responsibility for the harm you cause. It doesn't mean you're actually invested in changing the status quo – just that you like performing the part. On diversity boards, nice racists actively impede progress by being all talk and no action, or by foregrounding their own feelings over those of their Black colleagues. Of course, nice racists have the best of intentions. But good intentions don't solve the intractable problems of racism and white supremacy. If you're white, you've grown up in a thick soup of racist messaging: you're superior, you earned all the advantages you enjoy in life, and Black people would prosper if they only tried a bit harder. These, of course, are

all lies. The good news is, they're lies you can unlearn. But first you'll have to give up on being so "nice."

The myth of individualism is one of the most persistent aspects of nice racism.

Whenever Robin DiAngelo conducts a workshop on racism, one of the most common critiques she receives is that she's making unfair generalizations about white people. After all, participants say, white people aren't a homogenous group. Some of them were brought up to never discriminate against anyone. Others have worked hard to tackle racism in their communities despite coming from racist families. In fact, many of the white people she engages with have dedicated themselves to social justice work. They're activists, teachers, social workers, and spiritual leaders. Some of them have Black friends or family members, and they live in diverse communities. So, they ask, how dare DiAngelo group all white people together into one racist lump without even bothering to find out their individual stories? Underlying that question is an assumption common among nice racists: the assumption of individualism. The key message here is: The myth of individualism is one of the most persistent aspects of nice racism. Nice racists like to think of racism as a problem everyone relates to as individuals. By that logic, some white people are racist while others aren't. But there's no opt-out clause when it comes to benefiting from systemic racism as a white person. Whatever your personal story is, the privileges you take for granted are the result of centuries of racist policies designed to bolster white supremacy. For example, in the 1950s, the Federal Housing Authority provided affordable home loans - but only to white families. Yet how are public schools funded today? Through property taxes. This means that in Black neighborhoods, where most families have never had the chance to own property and build intergenerational wealth, schools are underfunded. Black youth end up at a disadvantage not because they don't work as hard, but because the system is set up to make it that way. It doesn't matter who you are, what you believe, or how difficult your own life has been - if you're white, you've benefited from these policies. You're never outside this racist system, and you're never immune to the grip of white supremacist ideas. White people fight against this truth for two reasons. First, accepting it would mean acknowledging that they acquired their resources unfairly - rather than through merit or that old cliché, "hard work." Second, admitting their racism would rattle their idea of themselves as good, morally righteous white people. Giving up the myth of individualism is hard. But it's the first step in actually being able to identify and dismantle your own racism.

White people can be racist and experience oppression at the same time.

Robin DiAngelo's childhood seemed anything but privileged. She grew up in extreme poverty, and her family experienced long periods of homelessness, during which they lived out of their car. She often didn't have enough to eat, and her teeth were rotten because her parents couldn't afford dental or medical care. In fourth grade, her teacher humiliated her in front of the class by telling her she was dirty and smelled bad. White

people who have grown up in circumstances like DiAngelo's often respond furiously when informed that they experienced white privilege. It seems to invalidate all their lived experiences of suffering and oppression. But as hard as their personal experiences were, they were never made harder on account of their race. And that's white privilege. The key message here is: White people can be racist and experience oppression at the same time. While DiAngelo's family was discriminated against for their poverty, that didn't make them sympathetic to the struggles of Black families - quite the opposite. She remembers her grandmother warning her not to sit on a seat a so-called "colored" person had occupied or touch food on the ground because a Black person might have dropped it. The message was clear: Black people were dirty and undesirable. This racism gave her family a sense of superiority in spite of their low status. When DiAngelo went to college, most of her professors and fellow students were white, and the syllabus was centered on white intellectuals. That made it easy for her to fit right in despite her impoverished background. Whiteness then eased her into graduate education and the social mobility she needed to climb out of poverty. The messages she internalized as a child living in poverty still shape how DiAngelo thinks and feels. She'll never be able to fully shake off the idea that she's lazy, stupid, and dirty, which makes her feel intimidated in some white spaces. And that feeling makes her less likely to speak up against racism and more likely to collude with white supremacy. DiAngelo's oppression through poverty exists in a complex relationship with her white superiority. Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw developed the concept of intersectionality to express how different aspects of a person's social and political identities intersect. For example, all women struggle with misogyny, but Black women experience the multiple oppressions of racism and sexism. For too long, white people have used their experiences of oppression to justify not needing to examine racism. But centering race actually allows for nuanced, well-informed analyses of class and gender oppression - including what perpetuates it and what will allow us to finally interrupt it.

Willful ignorance and a lack of humility make nice racists dangerous.

A Black executive whom DiAngelo knows once had a disagreement with her white assistant over a key policy issue. Her boss, who was also white, sided with the assistant. The Black executive then challenged her boss over the obvious racial bias he had displayed in siding with her less-qualified assistant - and got fired. Mind you, there was nothing wrong with her performance at work. Her crime was making her boss feel uncomfortable by explicitly calling out his racism. Nice racists have very little capacity for dealing with discomfort or examining their culpability in racist dynamics. So when confronted with their own racism, their "nice" facades crumble very quickly, and they end up lashing out. The key message here is: Willful ignorance and a lack of humility make nice racists dangerous. White people may be racist, but they don't tend to know much about racism itself - especially the way Black people experience it. That's because, to begin with, they have very little real-world knowledge of what it's like to be a Black person or person of color in the United States. They grow up in overwhelmingly segregated communities and go to "good" - that's code for "white" - schools. As the Washington Post reported in 2014, over 75 percent of white people have no Black friends. And they're constantly exposed to a media culture that centers white experiences. That means they're extremely ignorant about experiences outside their white bubble. For example, when researchers asked white respondents what they thought the wealth gap was between white and Black families, most guessed that Black

families have \$80 for every \$100 a white family has. The real answer? For every \$100 white families have, Black families have less than \$10. The white respondents had grossly underestimated the poverty gap – and therefore had no real insight into its consequences. Ignorance is just one of the ways that white people perpetuate racism. Because of segregation, they rarely have to answer to Black people, which means they have little practice in dealing with the discomfort of being called out and held accountable for racism. Instead, their discomfort and anxiety are masked in an insidious “niceness.” But niceness actually stops white people from acknowledging their own racism. Tackling white supremacy requires a willingness to deal with conflict and respond with humility when called out for racism. This can be messy and hard, and it isn’t always pleasant. But it’s how real progress is made.

Using people of color to prove you’re not racist is in fact a racist thing to do.

President Joe Biden has been praised for taking some long-overdue steps toward increasing diversity in the White House. But back when Biden was a United States senator, he was criticized for praising other senators who were open racists and segregationists. Biden’s response? He couldn’t be racist, because he’d worked alongside civil-rights activists his entire career. Biden’s move was a classic case of what DiAngelo calls color-celebrate credentialing – which is a white person using his proximity to Black people and people of color to prove he’s not racist. Former President Donald Trump has pulled the same move. When Trump was accused of racism, his chief of staff quickly announced a news conference. While Trump spoke, Lynne Patton – a Black woman and Trump appointee – stood on stage behind him. Patton didn’t say anything, but the message was clear: Trump couldn’t possibly be racist. The key message here is: Using people of color to prove you’re not racist is in fact a racist thing to do. Credentialing isn’t only used in politics. It’s a fallback tool used by nice racists everywhere to try and signal their status as “good,” progressive white people. It’s a move that often derails conversations about racial justice – preventing further engagement. For example, when DiAngelo facilitated a seminar on white fragility at the Apartheid Museum in South Africa, she was shocked when one of the audience members stood up and began strutting around the room while listing her credentials. She claimed she’d written a paper on racism at age six, worked for the Nelson Mandela Foundation, and “built houses in the townships.” The moderator urged her to take her seat, but she just continued, oblivious to the fact that the credentials she offered up as proof she wasn’t racist were undermined by her tangibly racist behavior – namely, talking over people of color and dominating the room. This kind of credentialing implicitly argues that proximity to Black people and people of color means you’re not racist. According to this logic, if you’re white and live in a diverse neighborhood – or have a Black partner, or once did an internship in an African country – you can tolerate the presence of Black people and are therefore not racist. Of course, the logic doesn’t stand up to scrutiny. Proximity doesn’t equal integration or the building of real relationships. And history shows that racists tolerate proximity to Black people just fine – think of enslavers, for example. What’s more, color-celebrate credentialing actually serves to objectify Black people, whose proximity is demanded for the social capital it provides white people.

Trying to out-woke others is harmful

and counterproductive.

When DiAngelo was in college, she and her white partner went out for dinner with another couple, who were Black. DiAngelo, who had grown up in a very segregated neighborhood, didn't have much experience in socializing with Black people – and she was anxious to make a good impression. So she spent the whole evening bombarding the couple with stories about her racist family, relaying their terrible jokes in great detail and taking delight in portraying them in the worst light possible. In the most cringeworthy way, she was trying to communicate her wokeness – how hip, aware, and not racist she was. “I'm not like my racist family! I'm one of the good white people,” she may as well have said. In reality, she was just replicating the racism she was trying to distance herself from. She subjected the couple to horrible, racist sentiments all evening – not realizing how disturbing the jokes she was ironically laughing at might be to them. The key message here is: Trying to out-woke others is harmful and counterproductive. Back when she had that awkward dinner, DiAngelo was a naive college student. But white people who have been engaged in anti-racist work for a long time are especially vulnerable to the pitfall of trying to out-woke everyone. For example, people might argue that they don't need to attend a racial-justice training because they already know everything. Instead of soaking up as much extra knowledge as possible, or supporting the rest of the group, these people behave as if they're above it all. Progressives who want to out-woke others often denounce white people to prove their moral superiority. For example, one white woman in an anti-racist group called out another white woman for some racist behavior she'd observed. But instead of having a conversation with her about it, she sent the whole organization an email in which she excoriated the woman and told her she didn't want anything to do with her ever again. Of course, holding one another accountable is important – but not if the aim is just to bolster your own sense of wokeness and prove what a great white ally you are. The truth is, white activists will get it wrong all the time. They will never arrive at a perfect, anti-racist state. So they need to be alert, vigilant, and constantly learning rather than focusing on their own credentials.

Practice decentering yourself and learning from feedback.

Imagine this: You're at work, and a Black coworker takes you aside to have a word. You were out of line when you told a joke at lunch, he tells you. The punch line came at a Black person's expense, which meant that the joke was racist; it was offensive, and you should have known better. You feel your face getting flushed, and your heart starts beating faster and faster. Why is he attacking you? You're the least racist person in the world! But before you lose your temper, pause for a second and take a good look at yourself. A Black person is offering you feedback on your racist behavior and the harm it's caused – this is a privilege, and you're wasting it! The key message here is: Practice decentering yourself and learning from feedback. A common response to receiving feedback is to center your own feelings about it. For example, you might feel defensive, upset, or exposed when your coworker takes you aside. So you focus on the way he expressed his feedback, saying that it was disproportionate or aggressive. This is the classic tactic of tone policing – that is, focusing on the delivery of the message instead of acknowledging its content. This is a very harmful way to engage with feedback. For one thing, you're claiming that your colleague isn't entitled to express anger or sadness

about the racism he experiences. You're also minimizing his experience without acknowledging that, while your behavior might seem minor to you, it has a major impact on him – or that it's the cumulation of a string of racist microaggressions. Alternatively, your response to critical feedback might be to feel shame and mortification. Recognizing that you've done harm, you might burst into tears and beg for forgiveness. This might sound like a better way to respond, but it's problematic, too. In the end, it serves to make the situation all about you and your feelings. Remember, your Black colleague has taken a risk in sharing his feedback. So don't burden him with also having to comfort you and make you feel better about yourself. Instead, thank him for his feedback, and take some time to sit with your difficult feelings. When you've processed your strong emotions and accepted responsibility for your behavior, you can then take steps to make amends.

Nice racists cling to feelings of shame, which allows them to stay stuck.

We think of feelings as being natural and pure – things that bubble up inside of us as a reaction to our thoughts and experiences. But feelings are also controlled and interpreted by the societies we live in. For example, white people will usually perceive an angry white man as powerful, while an angry Black man is seen as threatening. Some people are allowed to have strong emotions, while others are not. And some emotions are more socially acceptable than others. Confronting racism evokes all kinds of uncomfortable feelings for white people, including resentment, apathy, or even anger. But, funnily enough, the emotion that white progressives express most openly is shame. In fact, shame comes up in most of the anti-racist seminars that DiAngelo teaches. The key message here is: Nice racists cling to feelings of shame, which allows them to stay stuck. Why would shame be so much easier to express than other emotions, like guilt? Well, shame is about feeling bad for who you are, while guilt is feeling bad about what you've done. Shame presents an intractable problem, while guilt presents an action that you can be held accountable to redress. Nice racists don't actually want to have to change how they behave, and shame provides a perfect cover. By expressing shame for harm they've caused, they show themselves to be moral people who are aware of racism. They also elicit sympathy and support from other white people, who tell them that of course they're not terrible people. And presto! They're absolved of actually having to do anything. In fact, if the going gets too tough in an anti-racist workshop, they can play the shame card as a way of disengaging from the work. That's why many facilitators walk on eggshells – they've been told there's nothing worse than shaming a white person. But when it leads to action, shame is actually a normal and healthy part of anti-racist work. White people have to grapple with the fact that their position in society is determined in large part because of their race. For the first time, they have to engage with the harm they've caused. These truths can elicit shame. Shame only becomes a problem when it's used as an excuse for inaction – and as a way to recenter white progressives at the expense of the people they've harmed.

Align your actions with your values and become accountable for the harm you cause.

Following the murder of George Floyd at the hands of the police, there was a huge surge in anti-racist organizing. Black Lives Matter marches took place around the world, and seemingly every corporation released their own statement condemning racism. Anti-racist teachers and coaches were booked out for months doing diversity and inclusion trainings. White progressives got involved in anti-racist movements in record numbers, and they grew fluent in the terminology of racial justice. But there's a difference between knowing the right things to say and actually working toward change. So how can you make sure that your actions align with your values? The key message here is: Align your actions with your values and become accountable for the harm you cause. First and foremost, becoming accountable means being honest about how your white fragility derails your anti-racist work. White fragility can emerge as defensiveness, paralysis, anger, or denying your own racism at all costs. It can even look like being overly careful around people of other races – or staying completely silent in an anti-racist seminar because you're afraid of messing up. But if you're serious about anti-racist work, you're going to have to get some skin in the game and embrace vulnerability. If you make a mistake, clean it up and try harder next time. To keep yourself accountable, create circles of support by surrounding yourself with other white people who are also engaged in anti-racist work – not those who will support your racism. Join a white anti-racist caucus. And look for friends who will offer loving accountability when you mess up, allowing you to openly examine your racist behavior and pushing you to find ways to make amends. Then make sure that you're always answerable to Black people and people of color. Ask for feedback on your progress, and check in about whether you're displaying harmful behavior. But don't expect Black people to do this burdensome work for free. Pay them for their time. Make sure you handsomely compensate any person of color you invite to consult on a diversity board or committee; recognize that they bring a valuable perspective and do difficult work. And always put your money where your mouth is. Consider donating a portion of your income to a racial justice organization. Or donate your skills and resources. Promote and support the work of Black intellectuals and artists. And challenge white silence on racism. Allyship is an action rather than a state of being. It's about how you show up, every day, to support anti-racism.

Final summary

The key message in these blinks is that: Nice racists are white people who believe themselves to be progressive and tolerant – and therefore incapable of racism. But racism is a system, not a personal feeling or intention. All white people grow up absorbing the messages of white supremacy and benefiting from centuries of racist laws designed to privilege them. To dismantle white supremacy, progressives will have to develop the courage to confront their own racism and become accountable for the harm they cause – not just maintain a veneer of niceness. And here's some more actionable advice: When in doubt, consult Google. White people often ask Black people and people of color to do the work of educating them about racism. But it's unfair to ask other people to do that labor. The truth is, information about racism and anti-racist activism is freely available on the internet. So, before you badger a Black friend for answers, try googling “What is racism?” or “How to be a white ally.” You'll find lists of resources to explore.