

On Engaging Racial Privilege: Youth, Whiteness, and the Confines of Empathy

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Young people growing up in the United States are now on the frontlines of grappling with race, racism, and multiculturalism in their daily lives. They have seen the election of the first African American president, followed by one elected on a racialized promise to deport “illegal” immigrants. They are witness to daily news of police brutality towards Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) and the uprising of the *#BlackLivesMatter* movement in response. In this landscape of racialized injustices, popular and scholarly attention has expanded its scope of “minority” negotiations of racism and racial identity to include negotiations of whiteness and the implications of white fragility undertaken by the perceived white majority.

Ethnographic studies demonstrate the role of class (Kefalas 2003), socialization (DuRocher 2011; Van Ausdale and Feagin 2001), privilege (Bonilla-Silva 2006) and agency (Moran 2020; Winkler 2012) on youth perceptions of race and racism. Building upon these frameworks, the works of DiAngelo (2018) and Hagerman (2018) have each promoted the lens of whiteness for deepening our understanding of inequality. Careful consideration of how the next generation of White youth make sense of, develop a consciousness about, and engage with whiteness, is of critical significance to understanding how racial inequity and the behaviors and ideals that foster it persist.

Consider empathy. Consider its role in how young people emotionally and intellectually engage with race and their own sense of whiteness. How does empathy both enable and prohibit racial inclusion? Take, for example, my daughter. Consider how, at as young as four years old, she described people who did not look like her (i.e., non-White) by the particular shade of their skin—they were brown, beige or tan, never black. When speaking about herself at the same age, she called herself “White” perceiving it as a category to which she belonged, even though it didn’t precisely describe the color of her skin. And consider how, in more recent years, she described her hope that Black people would win in the Olympics, demonstrating a sense of empathy that effectively highlights and perpetuates the racial exclusion she laments.

This simple, anecdotal example illustrates the relevance of empathy as a potential mode of youth engagement with whiteness. As DuRocher’s (2011) work on the socialization of racism demonstrates, the concept of whiteness is fluid and requires constant justification and upkeep. Invoking empathy as a mode of engaging race and whiteness indicates a rejection of color-blind ideology in favor of color consciousness (Hagerman 2014), inarguably a positive step towards racial equality. However, careful consideration is needed to unpack the extent to which social hierarchies are, in fact, troubled or dismantled by instrumentalizing empathy in this way.

Broadly conceived as a kind of antidote to racism, the notion of empathy can instead serve to perpetuate power dynamics; the ability to express it, after all, is related to the extent of one’s sense of belonging in a particular social context. Moreover, empathy is, in essence, a

relational capacity—it reflects our role in relationship to other people. Such emphasis on the other can arguably prevent a deeper self-reflection of one’s sense of whiteness and the power and privilege attached to that whiteness (Hagerman 2014). It is, I propose, in the space of self-reflection where the potential to disrupt hollow deflections of racism in favor of a more substantive grounding in anti-racism is born (Kendi 2019). Of critical significance then, is the extent to which empathy, or at least the performance thereof, serves to enable a White identity that maintains inequality.

Efforts to dismantle white supremacy and white privilege must consider how young people learn of, rely upon, and challenge their own whiteness. Shifting youth ideology increasingly engages empathy as a mode of emotional and intellectual engagement with race and whiteness. Exploring the complex relationship between whiteness and empathy, as one expression of color consciousness among young people, will propel our understanding of how white supremacy and white privilege might ultimately be maintained or upended.

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