

# **WHITE KIDS: GROWING UP WITH PRIVILEGE IN A RACIALLY DIVIDED AMERICA BY MARGARET HAGERMAN**

The young people from Parkland who led the gun violence protests are shocking. Instead of piling up teddy bears and flowers and disappearing back into anonymity, they insist that something be done and if politicians can't figure that out, they need to be replaced. Even more astonishingly, they reached out to other young people whose voices are just as powerful, but are not heard. For example, Emma Gonzalez came to Chicago to meet with Black and Brown kids who live under the misery of gun violence every day (the South Side for short).

The Parkland kids are from relatively affluent families. The teachers at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School support their aspirations and hone their skills so that they are articulate and prepared to act. It is sickening that the kids from the South Side are unheard despite their own powerful voices and their best efforts. The Parkland kids recognize that disparity. How did it happen that the Parkland kids were both prepared and aware? Why are they heard when others aren't?

Affluent white kids live in a different world from that of the poorer members of their age cohorts. They travel more, their houses are different, they have more and better things, their daily lives are different, and the expectations of their parents are different. One more thing: the kids they see every day are mostly white, and most of the parents of those kids are also affluent and white. This is the world that Margaret Hagerman studied for White Kids.

She starts by stating the obvious: our society is racialized. All social issues seem to be tied up with race, now more than ever as the right wing descends into Trumpian white nationalism expressed not only in our national politics but in our foreign policy. It has always been racialized. *Stamped From The Beginning* by Ibram X. Kendi is an excellent history of race in the US; I highly recommend it.

Hagerman identified three separate white and upper middle class neighborhoods in a Midwestern city which she calls Petersfield. She interviewed a number of families, ten closely, talking to the kids and their parents and siblings, sometimes separately and sometimes together. The kids in this ethnographic study are in middle school, mostly 10 to 13 years old. Their parents are professionals and middle to upper middle management level business people.

One community is largely conservative, one is left/liberal, and one center blue. All of the parents want to raise decent caring children, and importantly for this study, they absolutely don't want their kids to be racists. They all want their kids to succeed academically and as adults to have the same kind of life they do; and they give the kids everything they think the kids need to achieve those goals. All of them appear to be good parents, involved in the daily lives of their children and on good terms with them.

She identifies three strategies the parents have adopted in socializing their kids, and gives us a picture of their thinking on race. The parents of the conservative community adopt a strategy of raising their kids to be color-blind, that is, they themselves believe, and want their kids to think, that racism is a thing of the past. They don't discuss race, and when they do it's in the context of equal opportunity. In the liberal community, the parents try to instill anti-racism in the kids, as well as awareness of their good fortune in having access to a life of privilege, and talk with their kids about what

can be done. In the more centrist community, the parents talk about race and social status, and try to show their kids that race is a problem and that the kids have advantages over other children but there is more emphasis on the need to succeed academically and less on responsibility to in confront the problem.

Hagerman gives a detailed picture of those strategies in action. She reports on how the kids view race and their own privilege. The kids are bright and articulate, and forthright in explaining their views. The parents are equally forthcoming.

Several things seem especially relevant.

1. Hagerman makes it clear that the US race problem are institutional, and will not be solved by individuals. This raises questions about how change could come about which are beyond the scope of this book.

2. The color-blind strategy doesn't work. If you teach kids that race isn't an issue, that everyone is equal and has equal opportunities, you leave your kids poorly prepared to face the real world where there are utterly unfair racial differences. Hagerman sees a tendency among kids raised color-blind to attribute those differences to personal failings of the kids or their parents. That is certain to perpetuate the racialized structures of the US.

3. Hagerman emphasizes the agency of the kids. Their attitudes about race are informed by parents and teachers, their peer groups and siblings, and their own interactions with not-white kids. They work out solutions to the questions they have with each other, and privately. The agency of the kids is salient with some of the parents, not so much with others.

Hagerman generally approves of Pierre Bourdieu's theory of habitus, but places more importance on the agency of the kids than he does. The parents and teachers worked to instill a habitus in the kids, but there are many other people and events

involved in the formation of that habitus. The Parkland kids and most of the kids in Hagerman's study were taught from an early age to examine those lessons and encouraged to think about them for themselves. They aren't blank slates. They are active participants in shaping their lives, even in middle school.

Hagerman says that the attitudes toward race present in middle school persist and strengthen as the kids get to high school, which seems to support Bourdieu's assertion that habitus is learned at an early age.

If you substitute gun violence for race, you can see this in action after the Parkland murders. It seems to me, although of course I don't know, that the Parkland kids thought that they had a responsibility to do something about gun violence. This was shocking to the right-wing pundits and their disciples. partly because they didn't play their part in the repulsive NRA charade of grief but mostly because white kids aren't supposed to be uppity. They are supposed to enjoy their privilege without regard to anyone else.

4. Bourdieu devoted his life to studying how the dominant class reproduces its dominance across generations so that everybody accepts it as natural and unthreatening. The Parkland kids and the kids in this study are likely to join the dominant class and are being socialized to do so. We don't talk about domination in the US. But it seemed natural to most of us that the Parkland kids spoke out and were heard. It's going to take so much more for the kids on the South Side to enter the dominant class, and on the whole, people seem comfortable ignoring them. The different treatment of these voices arises in large part from the structure of our racialized society.

This is an academic study, but every parent will benefit from thinking about the three strategies and the impact they have on children.