

How Well-Intentioned White Families Can Perpetuate Racism

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The sociologist Margaret Hagerman spent two years embedded in upper-middle-class white households, listening in on conversations about race. When Margaret Hagerman was trying to recruit white affluent families as subjects for the research she was doing on race, one prospective interviewee told her, “I can try to connect you with my colleague at work who is black. She might be more helpful.”

To Hagerman, that response was helpful in itself. She is a sociologist at Mississippi State University, and her new book, *White Kids: Growing Up With Privilege in a Racially Divided America*, summarizes the two years of research she did talking to and observing upper-middle-class white families in an unidentified midwestern city and its suburbs. To examine how white children learn about race, she followed 36 of them between the ages of 10 and 13, interviewing them as well as watching them do homework, play video games, and otherwise go about their days.

These kids and their parents display a range of beliefs about race. “Racism is not a problem,” one girl tells Hagerman, adding that it “was a problem when all those slaves were around and that, like, bus thing and the water fountain.” Meanwhile, the girl’s mother nods along. Other parents in the book have educated themselves better, but often, intentionally or unintentionally, still end up giving their kids advantages that, in the abstract, they claim to oppose. (White Kids is not, as Hagerman writes at one point, “a particularly hopeful book.”)

[Joe Pinsker] recently spoke to Hagerman, and that second group kept coming up in our conversation—how, despite their intentions, progressive-minded white families can perpetuate racial inequality. She also discussed ways they can avoid doing so. The interview that follows has been edited for length and clarity.

Joe Pinsker: One reading of your book is that the way white parents talk about race with their children does matter, but that what you call the “bundled set of choices” they make about what types of people their children encounter every day might matter even more. Can you talk about that set of choices and what it determines?

Margaret Hagerman: I use the phrase bundled choices because it seemed to me that there were some pretty striking patterns that emerged with these families in terms of how they set up their children’s lives. For example, I talk in the book about how choosing a neighborhood leads to a whole bunch of other choices—about schools, about the other people in the neighborhood. Decisions about who to carpool with, decisions about which soccer team to be on—you want to be on the same one as all your friends, and all these aspects of the kid’s life are connected to the parents’ choices about where to live.

I’m trying to show in the book that kids are growing up in these social environments that their parents shape. They’re having interactions with other people in these environments, and that’s, I think, where they’re developing their own ideas about race and privilege and inequality.

Pinsker: Some of the parents in your book may see the problems with choosing mostly white neighborhoods or schools, but the explanation they usually provide for those choices is that they just want what’s best for their children. This rationale is generally considered understandable, even honorable, but can you talk about its dark side?

Hagerman: One of the things I talk about in the book is what I call this “conundrum of privilege,” which is that these parents have a lot of resources economically as well as status as white people. They can then use those resources to set up their own child’s life in ways that give them the best education, the best health care, all the best things. And we have this collectively agreed-upon idea in our society that being a “good parent” means exactly that—providing the best opportunities you can for your own child.

But then some of these parents are also people who believe strongly in the importance of diversity and multiculturalism and who want to resist racial inequality. And these two things are sort of at odds with one another. These affluent white parents are in a position where they can set up their kids’ lives so that they’re better than other kids’ lives. So the dark side is that, ultimately, people are thinking about their own kids, and that can come at the expense of other people’s kids. When we think about parents calling up the school and demanding that their child have the best math teacher, what does that mean for the kids who don’t get the best math teacher?

Pinsker: What would it look like for a white affluent parent to make a choice not to give their children “the best”? Is it a matter of not calling the school to get the best math teacher? Or is there a more proactive thing a parent might be able to do?

Hagerman: I think part of it is how we choose to define “the best.” Some of the parents in my book, they rejected the idea that their child needed to be in all the AP classes. They valued other elements of their children’s personalities, such as their concerns about ethics or fairness or social justice. There were a handful of parents in my study who resisted having a separate track for AP students, for example, which can sometimes be a segregating force within schools.

There were also affluent parents who were very much opposed to having police officers in schools, and they

were using their position of influence in the community to try to get the police officers out of there. Maybe others would be aware of their own presence at PTA meetings, making sure they're not dominating them and making sure they're not putting their own agenda ahead of their peers' agendas. I'm not sure that I saw tons of behavior like that, but I certainly saw moments where some of the families were concerned more about the collective than their own kid.

Pinsker: Some parents in the book seemed to think of diversity as something that could be let in selectively, to teach certain lessons to their kids. This came up with a lot of parents' decisions to send their kids to public schools, which were more diverse than the private ones. Can you talk about how, for a lot of affluent white parents, diversity is something that can be toggled on and off as they please?

Hagerman: I think the best example is when these two parents decided to pull one of their children out of a public school after a racist incident there. There was a lot of turmoil, and when things basically got too challenging, they just picked their kid up and took him to a different school, a private school. And the ability to do that was not only a reflection of their economic privilege—they had the resources to suddenly, mid-school year, send their kid to an expensive private school—but also a reflection of racial privilege in that you can somehow escape racism when you want to as a white person. Certainly that's not the case for people of color.

Pinsker: So far we've talked about how white parents shape their children's views on race. But a big theme of the book is that kids themselves actively contribute to the formation of racist beliefs. How does that work?

Hagerman: One of the things I was really struck by was how frequently some of these children used the phrase That's racist or You're racist. They were using this word in contexts that had nothing to do with race: They were playing chess, and they would talk about what color chess pieces they wanted to have, and then one of them would say, "Oh, that's racist"—so things that had to do with colors, but also sometimes just out of the blue, instead of saying, "That's stupid." These kids have taken this phrase, That's racist, and inverted it in a way such that it's become meaningless.

Pinsker: One question you occasionally bring up in the book is: What value does one parent's action hold when going up against a systemic problem? And I'm not asking Does it have value?, because of course it does. But I wonder how you think about all the micro-level decisions that these parents are making in the context of the central conundrum.

Hagerman: In my book, I'm trying to highlight this tension between the broad, overarching social structures that organize all of our lives and the individual choices that people make from within these structures. So yeah, if we had equal educational opportunities, people would not be able to make choices that would confer advantages to their child over someone else's child, right? That wouldn't even be a possibility. Certainly, the structural level really matters.

But the best answer I can really give is that the micro level potentially could shape what goes on at the institutional or structural level. I really think—and this might sound kind of crazy—that white parents, and parents in general, need to understand that all children are worthy of their consideration. This idea that your own child is the most important thing—that's something we could try to rethink. When affluent white parents are making these decisions about parenting, they could consider in some way at least how their decisions will affect not only their kid, but other kids. This might mean a parent votes for policies that would lead to the best possible outcome for as many kids as possible, but might be less advantageous for their own child. My overall point is that in this moment when being a good citizen conflicts with being a good parent, I think that most white parents choose to be good parents, when, sometimes at the very least, they should choose to be good citizens.

Pinsker: I don't doubt that you're onto something, but, pragmatically speaking, wouldn't that ignore a biological impulse to look after one's own?

Hagerman: So as a sociologist, I'm much more interested in how things are socially constructed rather than biologically constructed. For example, there are lots of families who have kids who are adopted, or where parents are taking care of kids who aren't biologically theirs—I don't have any children, but I care very deeply about other people's kids, and would do things to protect them. So, I hear what you're saying, but I wonder if even the way we think about what it means to be a parent is to some extent socially constructed. We have other societies that do things differently. I think when we look across time and history and geography, we can see that the way that we're doing it—prioritizing your own child over everyone else—is one way, but I don't think that has to be the only way. I don't have any grand answer, but I think people could think in bigger ways about what it means to care about one another and what it means to actually have a society that cares about kids.