

Can We Overcome Racism?

Sue, Derald Wing. *Overcoming Our Racism: The Journey to Liberation*. California: Jossey-Bass, 2003. 320 pp. \$22.95 hardcover. ISBN: 978-0-7879-6744-4.

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Overcoming Our Racism is the beginning of a painful journey to enlightenment that evokes emotions of anger and threat. Derald Wing Sue wants whites to face the issue of racism with honesty. This book is divided into two sections, the first describing racism as a problem and the second describing how individuals, institutions and society can work to overcome racism. Each chapter poses a question that challenges the reader. Sue not only asks difficult questions about this polarizing topic, he also poignantly outlines actions to combat racism and improve how we live and function in a pluralistic society.

Sue begins with a provocative question: “Are you a racist?” Before the reader can think about the question and answer it, Sue offers several stories of police brutality, kidnapping, and of people who have been beaten to death just because of their skin color. He suggests that these stories are paramount to understanding the intricacies involved in racism, and that we must face the truth—that racism and hatred are alive and well even today. The first chapter focuses on the importance of knowing that racism goes far beyond blacks and whites; it stretches across the entire globe from culture to culture. This chapter is very bold as Sue speaks directly to the white reader several times throughout.

In Chapter 2 Sue provides a comprehensive explanation of racism with research findings related to demographics. Findings describe discrimination, prejudice, and stereotypes, such as all blacks have negative attitudes, are less intelligent, prone to crime, dangerous, unclean, and untrustworthy. Other topics converge on racial and ethnic group terms, such as Latino Americans and Asian Latino Americans. The section concludes with meaningful exercises and feedback that incites curiosity for the next section.

In Chapter 3, Sue defines oppression and compels readers to contemplate their conscious and unconscious thoughts and actions. He asserts that sometimes we oppress and don’t even know that we do and further suggests we consider our personal role in racial oppression. Here, he identifies three forms of racial oppression: individual, institutional, and cultural. He integrates a conscious/unconscious racial oppression Likert

scale and exercises at the end of the chapter, which helpfully translates the theoretical constructs into real world practice.

Chapter 4 begins with a discussion of the Rodney King beating, a disturbing historical event of racial discrimination and police brutality. Sue then offers insight on the “channels” that shape our racial realities: schooling and education, the mass media, and peer and social groups. He contends that all of these channels play an important part in how and why we perceive people to be different based on the color of their skin. This chapter provides a sound rationale for an understanding of the mechanisms we acquire which contour our worldview on racism.

In Chapter 5, Sue author comments on white supremacy and describes “ethnocentric monoculturalism,” whose five components are: a) belief in superiority; b) belief in the inferiority of others; c) power to impose standards; d) manifestation in institutions and society; e) the invisible veil that provides foundational knowledge for readers with little exposure to this construct. Sue’s discussion of this topic is insightful, laden with critical and factual issues. Unique to this chapter is a quote from comedian and social activist, Dick Gregory, who said that “blacks don’t hate white folks; we just hate the white racist institution.”

The title of Chapter 6 grabs readers’ attention: “What does it mean to be white?” Sue details his travels through downtown San Francisco asking this question to several white people. He concludes that people of color understand white privilege better than whites. He goes on to discuss the myth of the “melting pot” and boldly states that this concept is an attempt to increase white supremacy. At the end of the chapter summarizes that being white means a) being socialized into a world of white supremacy; b) inheriting/benefiting from white privilege; c) denying the reality of people of color; d) being right; e) equating human being with being white; and f) being an oppressor with the power to force your will on persons of color. This chapter could stand alone to inform student affairs practitioners, administrators, faculty, and policymakers who are working to improve the institutional climate for diversity.

Chapter 7 asks and answers the question, “What is white privilege?” This chapter includes a list of advantages for being white, followed by disadvantages for people of color. Sue includes an exercise called “white privilege inventory.” He challenges readers to answer honestly true or false questions such as “I am seldom placed in a position where I am asked to speak for my race.” This final section of the book starts the “overcoming the problem” process; a time to heal and begin work on a solution. Sue speaks first about the process of white racial identity development, which consists of seven phases: naïveté, conformity, dissonance, resistance and immersion, introspection, integrative awareness, and commitment to antiracist action. Sue thoroughly explains each phase and suggests how one might move through the different developmental stages. He builds upon the previous chapter by describing four steps to help with personal responsibility for change. He discusses combating racism at the societal level in terms of principles for anti-racism. The steps and principles follow a hierarchy from attitudes and beliefs to action.

Sue closes with a personal message to all people of color. He shares his experiences with racism. He wants people of color to concentrate on strengths gained through adversity. He states five to principles to live by: collectivism; racial and ethnic pride; spirituality and religion; interconnectedness of mind, body and spirit; and family

and community. Sue's personal experiences of overcoming racism are inspiring for people of color. He contends that it is important for people of color to experience racism. He also suggests that we will never eradicate or eliminate racism and that white people can be valuable allies. Sue challenges his readers to accept that all bad things that happen to people of color are not the result of racism and, lastly, that being who you are is the best way to combat racism.

Taken as a whole, this book should increase readers' knowledge and awareness of prejudices and biases. Such insights may increase the possibility for societal change. In part, this book is a great self-help tool for someone who wants to examine and challenge their racial identity or for someone who struggles with racism. This book should be considered for potential use in diversity workshops and training sessions. When all is said and done, *Overcoming Our Racism* is a significant contribution to improving race relations throughout the United States.

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