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Becoming a White antiracist: a practical guide for educators, leaders and activists

S. Brookfield and M. Hess, Sterling, VA, Stylus Publishing, 2021, 276 pp., ISBN 978-16-20-36859-6

Lilian Nwanze

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BOOK REVIEW

Becoming a White antiracist: a practical guide for educators, leaders and activists, S. Brookfield and M. Hess, Sterling, VA, Stylus Publishing, 2021, 276 pp., ISBN 978-16-20-36859-6

Even though written by White authors for people working with a White audience, the 12 chapters that make up this book form a comprehensive anti-racism training resource that will be beneficial to anyone interested or involved in anti-racism type work or anyone who wants to educate themselves on issues surrounding race and racism. The authors, drawing from over two decades of experience with anti-racism training and facilitation, have skilfully merged theory and practical guidelines in the production of this book. In this review, I will provide a brief breakdown of the book chapter by chapter; give a broad overview of what the book is about, highlight parts of the book that stood out to me and then, I will proceed to offer an appraisal of the book through the lens of a Black person living outside of the United States of America.

The book is divided into an introduction and 12 chapters. The introduction contains two stories – one each, by Stephen and Mary about their experiences and motivations to venture into anti-racism work. In Chapters 1, 2 and 3 the authors make a case for White people to take up the challenge of anti-racism work, discuss what a White-racist identity is as well as highlight the need for Whites to be aware of their own racial identity (respectively). Even though the entire book is replete with stories and practical steps that can be emulated, Chapters 4–9 concentrate on more practical aspects. Chapter 4, ‘Helping people become aware of their Whiteness’, introduces interventions like online polls and video documentaries that the authors have used to help people reflect on their White identity. Chapter 5 speaks about the utility of storytelling and lists a number of protocols that can be used to encourage story telling in groups. Similarly, Chapters 6–9 demonstrate practical ways to facilitate anti-racism sessions, and the authors share prompts for discussions, questions to prompt insightful debates and procedures for navigating difficult and uncomfortable discussions. Chapter 10 deals with the vital need for White people to be involved in anti-racism work, to acquaint themselves with and draw from the works of other White anti-racists. Chapter 11, ‘Responding to institutional resistance against antiracist activism’, highlights different ways institutions resist anti-racism work and provides ways to go around the bottlenecks. The authors write interestingly and succinctly about adjusting definitions of failure and success in anti-racism work. The last chapter speaks about being an ally, and the authors warn about the danger of slipping from ally mode to ‘White saviour’ mode, giving very useful suggestions on how practitioners can engage in action for change.

At the core of the book is a call for White people to take a more pro-active role in learning about and dismantling racism rather than the usual ‘diversity and inclusion’ practice of leaving this for people of colour to champion. The authors suggest a systematic approach to achieving this goal which starts with helping White people become aware of their Whiteness and culminates in some sort of anti-racism action being taken. A strong theme that reverberates through the book is that an anti-racist White identity is only authentically so when some form of action is taken, whether individual or collective. The authors interrogate and discuss concepts such as Whiteness, White supremacy, the systemic nature of racism and outline what constitutes a White anti-racist identity. The authors ‘propose an epistemology of anti-racist thinking’, as well as interrogate diversity practices of organisations that pay lip service to anti-racism work

but in reality perpetuate the racist status quo. From early on, there is an emphasis on the importance of narrative disclosure and storytelling in anti-racism work: the book begins with the authors modelling this practice of storytelling by sharing interesting and well-crafted stories about how they got into anti-racism work in the first place. Throughout, Brookfield and Hess use their stories as entry points to demonstrate what practices work and which do not, in facilitating anti-racism interventions. Closely linked to the issue of narrative disclosure, the authors, in Chapter 7, make a case for encouraging dialogue and discussions in anti-racism work, highlighting useful exercises for practitioners to use in engaging in ‘real’ discussions about race. The authors continue to echo two vital warnings throughout the book – first that anti-racist practitioners should neither expect healing nor consensus at the end of a session and secondly that practitioners should be patient both with themselves and with those to whom they relate. Throughout the book there is the important and repeated call for practitioners to facilitate moving away from individual manifestations (and definitions) of racism and to rather focus on a systemic conceptualisation of same, in order to better tackle its pervasiveness and insidiousness. One aspect of the book that stood out as novel to me was the treatment of the link between racism and the mental health of White people (discussed in Chapter 1).

From the lens of a Black person who engages in anti-racism work, one of the greatest utilities of this book is the catalogue of resources: books, YouTube video links, newspaper citations, movies, websites, targeted activities, articles and even locations that the authors so generously share with their readers. Bringing so many rich and valuable resources together in one document is of immense benefit to anyone engaged in or interested in anti-racism work. Living up to its title as a ‘Practical Guide’, the book goes beyond the *what* and addresses the *how* in anti-racism practice. While a lot of the themes discussed in the book are not novel, the presentation, resources and guidelines are. The book is written with skilful simplicity (making it very easy to read) and buttressed with easily replicable steps and detailed guidelines for practitioners to follow. There is also a strong focus on Adult Education Models of storytelling, and group discussions which is an appealing and important addition to the anti-racism terrain. Another strength of this book is the richness that comes from the vulnerability and openness with which Brookfield and Hess share their thought processes, their successes and the failures they encountered in their years of practice.

Even though the topics raised in the book are adaptable and applicable to the entire Global North (and indeed the whole world), it is worth mentioning that a lot of the content of the book is centred around the United States of America. This is however not unusual as both authors live in the United States of America and were writing in response to happenings around them.

Overall, I found the guidelines and frameworks presented in the book very useful in my own practice as a Black woman who engages in anti-racism interventions in predominantly White spaces. The book is both informative and illuminative and is presented with an uncanny combination of rigour and comprehensiveness but also with skilful simplicity. This attribute makes it accessible to any kind of reader – whether in academia or not. In a world increasingly laden with the inequities of racism, *Becoming a White Anti-racist* is a must read for everyone – White or black.

Lilian Nwanze
Department of Adult and Community Education, Maynooth University, Maynooth, Ireland

 lilian.nwanze.2019@mumail.ie

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