

Theories of Understanding—Originally submitted in April 2021

Positionality and Identity

On the last day of a March for Our Lives (MFOL) summit I attended in summer 2019, I was so emotionally and physically exhausted I missed breakfast and slept through X González's (one of the founding members of MFOL, known for their "we call BS" line in a speech) talk about self-care, which I desperately needed to hear. Off to a rocky start, I was ecstatic for the day because I had the privilege of watching Manuel (Manny) Oliver, father of Joaquin Oliver, one of the victims of the shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School, present the mural he had been working on throughout the summit. I was so inspired by his activism (art and activism) and his ability to make his audience experience whatever emotions he was currently feeling. Manny explained that this morning he had a meeting with some of the MFOL founders about the vandalization of his mural that occurred last night. Manny then explained that he was the one that vandalized his own mural. He let us all believe he was done with the mural the night before with the message that we will defeat the pro-gun agendas and individuals that stand in our way. As empowering as that was, that was not what he wanted us to leave with. Instead, he wanted to show us that we must remember why we are fighting for our lives. In the "fake" finished mural, Muhammed Ali was punching a punching bag with the words "NRA, La Pierre, Mitch McConnell, lack of gun violence education." In the final version of the mural, Manny covered up the punching bag with flowers, clothed Ali, painted Joaquin under Ali's arm, and hammered a hole into the mural where Muhammed Ali was punching the bag. In that hole, there were flowers and under the flowers, Manny had written, "the flowers are from Joaquin." He wanted us to know that Joaquin will be remembered for the beautiful person that he was, and he deserves to be honored through this activism.

Manny then explained that Joaquin's birthday was coming up and he asked us to sing happy birthday to Joaquin as if he was in the room with us. I had held in my emotions and memories of my own experiences with the aftermath of gun violence this entire summit and could not hold back any longer. Three hundred voices sang for Joaquin as I sobbed uncontrollably. After we finished singing, nobody batted an eye at me hysterically crying, not even the table of people who I had spent the entire summit getting to know. Nobody looked at me, nobody seemed to care to ask me if I was okay and I felt incredibly alone. The irony of this was that in this event, we were supposed to learn how to balance activism and self-care and to check in on each other and have empathy. Maybe everyone around me was too scared or uncomfortable to try to comfort the girl who was bawling her eyes out but if I was next to that girl, I would have asked her if she wanted to go out into the hallway or if she wanted a hug. In this moment, I realized that all I wanted to do with my life was be the support I wished I had at my most vulnerable and saddest state. I also learned the importance of showing vulnerability whether it would lead to isolation or community. Although I felt extremely lonely in the moment, it gave me the opportunity to truly understand what it is like to feel alone and gain a sense of empathy for other people who felt the same as I did.

This was a defining moment for me because after I processed and reflected the entire summit, I understood that what is most important to me is that I do everything in my power to make someone feel better. Whether this is through political activism, or volunteer work in a small non-profit organization, showing up, being authentic, and present (physically but also mentally) can make a colossal difference in someone's life.

As a young person, I feel that I am constantly overlooked and am not taken seriously. I feel that if I show vulnerability or any emotion, I will be looked at as immature and will not be

taken seriously. Although I know this is not the case in many circumstances, various life experiences have given me the impression that people will not care about what I have to say unless I show my ability and eligibility to be a part of a team that makes a difference without letting my age, gender, and emotions get in the way.

Stereotypically, both women and young people are not taken seriously, as leaders, or just in general, day-to-day life experiences compared to the average white man. As we are the next generation who will be deemed responsible by society for fixing all the issues our past generations have left for us, we must figure out how we can insert our voices into today's conversations. Major change takes lifetimes to accomplish and with all the change we are expected to make, we must be trusted by older generations who currently do not believe in us.

Being young and a woman are important identities to me because they have influenced many of the opportunities that I have or have not gotten. Although there are other parts of my identity that I think are also important, they do not affect me as much due to my privilege. An example of this is that I am white. I was raised in an affluent and predominantly white town where I never had conversations about race and racial injustice. Although I was fully aware that racism exists and skin color can determine privilege, I never analyzed why that is and how it can be changed until I took a class called Conversations on Race as a sophomore in high school. I think that using my white privilege to be anti-racist and fight racist systems is extremely important. But my privilege also comes with the luxury of not being constantly reminded of the color of my skin because I never have to deal with the never-ending injustices that people of color face on a daily basis.

In a class I took in the past, I learned about how most people tend to think of the most important identities of themselves as the parts that are most disadvantaged. In my case, I am

young (although this is not what most people think of when they think of a minority status, and it is not a minority, young people are often silenced due to assumptions that they are not mature or smart enough like how other racial, ethnic, and gender minorities are), and I am a woman. The experiences I have had as a woman such as being talked down to, viewed as too emotional, being objectified, and taken advantage of have constantly reminded me of the fact that my gender is frequently viewed as less than the dominant gender. As I have had experiences to educate and empower myself as a young woman, I have learned that having vulnerability and showing emotion is brave and should not be shameful. Using my privilege and power, I want to contribute to the idea of using vulnerability as a strength which can teach us radical empathy.

As I was at the summit surrounded by three hundred people who had formed somewhat of a community, I felt as though something was missing in all of us. Empathy has the power to comfort strangers, and that was something that I feel my generation has lacked. Learning empathy can help uplift people with identities that are not the majority/default and has the power to create community and change a world that very much needs it.

Regarding my praxis project, using empathy is vital for strong relationships to be built between students themselves and with their mentors as well. Personally, my college application experience was very different from what many Claremont students will encounter. I grew up knowing I was going to college, and I already had loads of knowledge about how to apply. I had all the resources I could ever need at my fingertips, and I do not think I realized how privileged I was to have all of that at the time. I can use empathy to better understand why students may not know anything about the college application program. Many of them never had time to think about where or if they are going to college. Sometimes this mentorship program can be frustrating and overwhelming for me because there is so much information to teach, and it is

sometimes hard to understand how students have never even heard of simple things like the Common Application. In moments like these, I must remember that these students are also overwhelmed and stressed out. They may also feel alone in this process so it is vital to foster an environment that shows that they are supported unconditionally and that they will succeed in whatever they choose to do. Taking a step back and reflecting on what students may be thinking provides me with the space I need to empathize with the students and teach students to use empathy in their everyday lives.

Theory of Social Inequality

In December 2012, there was a shooting at my old elementary school, Sandy Hook Elementary School. As this event shocked the nation, we were all sure that there would be a change in the policies regarding firearms. Eight years later, there has been minimal change on a federal level and the issue of gun violence is worsening by the day. Many blame government officials for the static gun policies and although they have a very large influence on politics and an incredible amount of power, change can effectively occur on a local level as well. I believe that any positive influence for change is essential for the greater issue no matter how small the contribution is. Community power and change, though small when looking at it through the scale of the nation, has immediate impacts on the community and surrounding area. Though it may not change the entire country, community change and power has the potential to completely change a community.

The shooting was the only instance where I experienced violence in my upbringing. I still fear for my life in most public places. Although I did not directly experience or witness the shooting, I saw what it did to my town and the families of victims. After learning everything I can about gun violence after the shooting, I came to realize that the majority of firearm deaths

are suicide followed by homicide. The news and media tend to focus less on these types of gun violence and more on mass/school shootings. I never realized how severe the gun violence epidemic was until I became more educated about everyday gun violence and deaths, especially after experiencing the aftermath of a shooting. After understanding this, I learned that in order to contribute to ending gun violence, I would have to also work on other issues that intersect with gun violence. Issues related to gender, race, sexual orientation, class and environmental issues all intersect with gun violence and are frequently exacerbated by gun violence. Although I do not want to strictly work in gun violence prevention (just violence prevention in general), it has taught me so much about how different social issues intersect and contribute to the overall issue.

Frequently, violence occurs in low-income areas and where people of color live. No race or ethnicity causes violence. However, the injustice and racist systems in America have created a world for many where violence is necessary for survival and because of this, certain types of gun violence involves people of color more than it does white people. As someone who never experienced violence growing up, I had the privilege of never fearing for my life on my way to school or while walking around outside until the shooting. After the shooting and from learning about the violence that people of color experience, I felt guilty for not noticing all the intersections of racism and violence that occur. My white privilege allowed me to not even think for a second that there could be racism and violence towards people of color in my school system or hometown. As I have grown and educated myself about racism, it is quite obvious that racism exists everywhere in America; we may not always notice it because we are not affected by it, but it is present.

Arguably, every social issue contributes to violence (of any kind) in some way. I believe that actively fighting to end any social issue helps mitigate violence. My personal belief is that

individuals who have proper support from their government, workplaces, and their communities, violence can be reduced. Social issues are involved in every part of our lives and any action to fix them is a step to a more peaceful and just world.

With my praxis project, I hope to use the education of social issues, community building, and college preparation, to help students gain a better sense of themselves in the world. Although this may not directly influence the amount of violence in the world, it allows individuals to learn empathy, compassion, and trust which have the potential to lessen violence. Empowering youth in Worcester may also not have a colossal impact on racial issues in America. However, small steps in the right direction have the potential for great change.

In *Black Bastards and White Millionaires*, Payne uses the attribute theories to explain how some academics explain social and educational inequity. Attribute theories are a type of explanation of social inequity in a broader category of “denial theories.” Denial theories of inequality deny any type of direct, causal relationship between two groups of people. Payne writes, “Attribute theory, in its pure form, simply denies outright that what Haves do to Have-nots is the source of Have-not troubles” (Payne, p.14). The relationship between Haves and Have-nots is shaped and viewed through different world systems (ex. capitalism as an economic system) which negatively contributes to the inequality and disparities of issues they face. He also explains that “every way of seeing is a way of not seeing” (Payne, p. 14) which helped me understand that the way that individuals/groups/societies view social issues related to inequality may not be the way others see it. Any theory helps us more clearly see certain social issues however, it can also cause us to miss other root causes and important information because of certain unexamined viewpoints or ideas.

This is something that I can apply to my own life; I argue that my white privilege made me ignorant of the racism that students of color experienced in my high school because I did not directly experience or witness it. Using the attribute theory, Payne is saying that it denies the idea that my obliviousness to racism in my school system is a contributing factor to the troubles that people of color face. I was blind to racism in my own high school because it did not affect me and was not as obvious as it would have been for someone who is the victim of these issues. Although I think that any person who is not actively anti-racist is contributing to racism and racist systems, some may argue that I was not participating in any racist actions or being outwardly racist so therefore, I was not contributing to racism. Even though I do not think being complacent is the root of racism, it contributes to the issue massively and helps perpetuate the systems that purposely harm people of color. Payne's quote stating, "every way of seeing is a way of not seeing," (Payne, p.14) emphasizes this idea. The way of seeing is understanding my ignorance towards the racism in my school and how that is not a root cause of racism. A way of not seeing is ignoring the fact that ignorance is an action that majorly contributes to racism on a day-to-day basis. Using Payne's attribute theories, I can use new lenses and ideas to analyze my own experiences of ignorance along with better understanding how certain factors can influence and contribute to racism.

In terms of my praxis site, using this attribute theory can be helpful when understanding the systems of oppression that the students face on a daily basis. Not only does it allow me to understand my own privilege and how my actions directly affect students.

Personal Theory of Change

Since I left home in Sandy Hook, Connecticut, I have found it difficult to have normal conversations with Clarkies about where we are from. When someone asks me where I am from,

I usually say Connecticut because I do not want to have *that* conversation about the shooting on December 14, 2012. It is such a downer and is not something people want to talk about when they get to know you. It is always uncomfortable and usually someone asks something insensitive without realizing it. Unfortunately for me, so many Clark students are also from Connecticut, or know of different places in Connecticut and ask the question, “where in Connecticut are you from?” After telling them I am from Sandy Hook, most people tell me where they were and how they felt when they learned about the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting. For many people I have talked to, and many Americans overall, Sandy Hook was incredibly shocking, saddening, and was a turning point regarding the debate and issue of guns in America.

The conversation that I had and still have about being from Sandy Hook has always made me uncomfortable because of the reactions I would get. I frequently feel isolated because people and my even my friends would say insensitive things when gun violence is being discussed. Although we all share similar political and moral beliefs, I still hear comments and jokes about being shot on the street or during school—this past weekend a friend joked about a mutual friend being the type of person to shoot up a school. I do not think people realize how much those comments can affect others, whether they have been through an event where there was gun violence, or not, many people become disturbed and triggered.

As I am starting to seriously think about what exactly I want to do when I graduate, I remind myself that I want to work with youth, do violence prevention work, and do something that teaches the importance of kindness, empathy, and compassion. Although I genuinely have no idea where those criteria and passions will take me, my only goal is to help people by one, seeing a future for themselves, and two, help them achieve their goals that they set for

themselves. I want to play a supportive role that can assist individuals with their struggles, whether it is a personal or more systemic struggle. Although I am one person, I hope to have the resources to point individuals in the right direction if I am unable to or if there is another person/organization that is more suited for the help someone needs. If I can do that, I will feel that I did my part in making the world a more peaceful and welcoming place. Over the years, I have learned that individual changemakers and even small nonprofit organizations may not have the largest impact on the world, but they have the power to bring immediate change into communities and individuals' lives. Something that I always try to remind myself is that while I may not be able to literally change the world, there are small (and large) actions that can change an individual's world and to me, that is more important. Even if change seems small for one person, it can have an enormous impact on another person.

I also think it is important to know my place and where it is and is not appropriate for me to create change. As a white woman, I do not want to take up space that would be better used by a person of color or someone affected by a social issue that does not affect me. Violence is a very intersectional matter and making myself aware of when I should and should not take up space is something I want to be mindful of. I want to uplift important voices but also be a listener. I believe that learning and listening are vital to any movement, and it is not always appropriate to be speaking and taking up valuable space.

Because of the shooting, I have been lucky enough to have experiences and connections that many people do not have following a large tragedy. An organization, The Avielle Foundation (TAF), was founded after Avielle Richman was killed in Sandy Hook and focused on studying the brain and biological reasons for violence while also teaching the importance of compassion. My parents became very close with Avielle's parents, Jenn and Jeremy, the

founders of TAF. Their foundation had events called Brainstorm Experiences where they would have speakers talk about issues that affected them, overcoming hardships, and experts like Brené Brown to teach important life lessons. The first Brainstorm Experience TAF hosted had two men, Arno Michaelis and Pardeep Kaleka, who shared their unlikely friendship with the small audience. Arno is a former white supremacist who was one of the founding members of the largest racist skinhead organization in the world. Though he stepped back from the group after realizing the damage he was doing, his organization inspired the person responsible for the shooting in Oak Creek, Wisconsin at a Sikh temple. Pardeep's father was one of the victims and after the shooting, he became best friends with Arno. They started an organization called Serve 2 Unite (which is now an initiative of Parent For Peace) which helps steer individuals from extremism and radicalization. Learning about how Arno and Pardeep were able to connect with each other and have so much compassion inspired me greatly.

Recently, I started an internship with Parents For Peace and have really gotten to see how much of a difference the small organization makes. Although most people have probably never heard of it, the impact they make in the communities they have affected has been monumental. This has been a reminder to me about how it is more important to focus on change on a small scale instead of a large scale. I can have a larger immediate impact in violence prevention by working with individuals on a smaller and more personal level. Of course, this is not the only work that needs to be done, work on large scales is also essential, however, I see myself thriving mostly while working on a more personal and individual level.

I have begun to realize that although I do not know the exact setting that I want to work in after I graduate, I do know that I want to work with youth in a way that supports them emotionally, mentally, and academically. In a mentoring program I participated in throughout

high school, Jeff, the Mentor Coordinator, told me that even though it felt as if I was not doing anything to help my mentee, I was making a larger impact than I could ever imagine. Simply showing up, being consistent, and being invested in my mentee was what leaves the biggest impact on individuals. That idea has always stayed with me and continues to remind me while change is not always immediate and visible, I am doing everything that I can, and it is making a difference. Change is not always visible, but the smallest of actions can have long lasting impacts. I try to remind myself of this important idea every day.

Reflections on my work—Submitted in May 2022

Positionality and Identity

Reflecting on this piece that was written over a year ago, I still hold many of the same values. I think what has changed the most for me is that I would no longer say that my job and responsibility in life is to be a support for someone. I want it to be an element of my job, because it is incredibly important but I think having that mindset of wanting to be that support and only that goes into “savior territory.” I never want to be any type of savior or have a savior mindset. It is incredibly harmful and I want to do what I can to listen to the needs of people and help them that way. Listening to individuals and their feedback (and applying it) is the only way I feel like I would be able to do my job without causing harm to individuals or a community.

Theory of Social Inequality

The largest change made since I wrote this was the inclusion of social justice education in my praxis project/site. This was something I wanted to include originally but we simply did not have the time to plan and implement it into the curriculum. Our curriculum was already very busy and had enough information to cover but if there was a way to combine everything we did in the College Knowledge program and also teach students about social justice in a way that is applicable to the program, I think it would be a very effective program.

Personal Theory of Change

Having completed my internship with Parents For Peace, I have had the privilege of learning about the impact they are having with families around the country. They recently had a few members speak at a Congressional testimony on extremism in the military. Watching their work be recognized on such a large level was really exciting for me. Their mission and work is incredibly important and I am very proud and honored to have played a part in Parents For Peace.

I also still think about what Jeff told me; the most important things I can do for someone/in any situation I am in is to show up, be consistent, and stay invested. I have applied

this guidance to many aspects of my life and I believe it is part of the reason why I have ended up with the opportunities I have and have had in the past. I hope to continue to embrace Jeff's ideas and continue to use them in whatever work setting I end up in.