

Episode 236: How White Millennials Really Think About Race

Lisa: Hi, I'm Lisa Hernandez.

Lizzy: And I'm Lizzy Ghedi-Ehrlich.

Lisa: And we are your hosts for Scholars Strategy Network's No Jargon. Each month, we will discuss an American policy problem with one of the nation's top researchers without jargon. And this month we are going to examine setbacks for racial attitudes in the United States.

Lizzy: Well, I'm a white, older millennial. So my racial attitudes are correct. And I'm the best.

Lisa: Oh, really?

Lizzy: The least racist, the most –

Lisa: Oh,

Lizzy: culturally aware people. And it's all boomers, man. That's all I have to say about that.

Lisa: Well, they, you should definitely listen to this conversation

Lizzy: Oh yeah. Am I about to get schooled?

Lisa: Let me tell you, you will get school like all the way through. It was really interesting because so many of our conversations, as far as generations go is like the next one will be it. That next generation is going to change everything.

Things are going to be so much better as far as their attitudes and worldviews. And, oh boy. I mean, I guess we forget that. Past generations. So the ones also raising and educating the newer generations. So of course things are going to get passed down.

Lizzy: Well, I'll tell you one thing that I am aware of, for the professor you're about to speak with – her research, uh, which is that the way we work. Questions and polls and the responses we get that drive so much of our public conversations around what people actually think and feel matter a lot are often not great.

And, uh, I agree with that, no matter what it says about me.

Lisa: And Candis Watts Smith definitely has a lot of input into how we can try to examine people's attitudes better and get them to answer more honestly. So let's get into our

conversation here for this week's episode. I spoke to Candis Watts Smith, Associate Professor of Political Science at Duke university.

Professor Smith's expertise highlights race and ethnicity's role in shaping the American political landscape. She focuses on individuals and groups, policy preferences, particularly around social policies that either worsen or minimize disparities and inequality between groups here. Here's our conversation.

Lisa: Hi, Professor Smith. Thanks for coming on No Jargon.

Candis: Thanks for the invitation.

Lisa: Of course. So you have been observing and studying what you call a stagnation in racial progress in our country in recent years. And you co-wrote a book, *Racial Stasis* with another professor at Duke, Christopher Desante, that takes a deep dive in examining this and establishing that this stagnation is very much real and using your research to explain why it is happening. So as you do in your book, could we, um, establish this problem? Like in what ways has racial progress flat-lined in recent years?

Candis: Sure. So I should say that when we talk about racial progress, we can talk about a lot of things. We can talk about any qualities and wealth, health, you know, housing, education, so on and so forth. But this book focuses on attitudes, you know, which is just kind of one, part of a larger set of questions around racial inequality.

So Chris and I, we're inspired to write this book in part, because we are both millennials and, a lot of people had a lot to say, I guess, you know, maybe 10 years ago when we were young. And I'm saying that because, you know, the eldest millennial is like in their forties, right. They have kids, have a mortgage, they have college debt, so on and so forth, but, At the time people were just saying, you know, millennials are going to be so progressive.

They're going to do so much work to move the needle. And, given that we have the occupation. And so we have the task of determining whether our assumptions are true. And so we went on this journey to say, look, let's measure attitudes over time to see if they change. And if they do change, hopefully they're changing in a more progressive direction. That would be ideal. and if they're not, then let's try to figure out why. And that's where we ended up with *Racial Stasis*.

Lisa: So the racial stagnation, as opposed to – I guess there was a time before, when there was progress in racial attitudes. Could you give some examples of a time when racial attitudes were actually moving forward?

Candis: Sure. So this question, Lisa, all of these things are like, everything's more complicated when you look down deep into it. So, there used to be questions on surveys, like, would you live

next to a Black person, or do you think that black people are inherently inferior or would you allow your child to marry a Black person?

And, from the 1940s to the 1980s, those attitudes. over time became more progressive. but after the civil rights movement, scholars noticed the way that people were willing to talk about racial issues changed. So asking someone, do you think that Black people are inherently inferior is not – no one's going to say yes because they're not allowed to say yes.

And of course there's some people who like, just didn't believe that to be true in ways that they did. and so around the 1980s –, late seventies, eighties – political scientists started asking a different set of questions that were kind of more. more subtle ways to ask about the extent to which you think that Black people are not doing their part.

Maybe that's the way to say, to live up to the American dream. And those questions are called the racial resentment scale. And we've actually seen that since those questions have been used since, before I was born, there's actually been very little change in people's responses to those questions.

Uh, there's a little dip in 2016, which seems probably counterintuitive, but overall for about 30 or 40 years, flatlined, in a way that didn't really match with people's kind of ongoing narrative about inevitable racial progress.

Lisa: I see. And as for the research that you conducted, how did you determine how you were going to measure racial attitudes within your subject group?

Candis: Yeah. So first we want it to look at the way that people have been doing that, which has through this racial resentment and the registries in Moscow asked questions like the Irish, Italian and Polish immigrants work their way up without any help in blockchain to, or, um, there's another question like generations of slavery have made it hard for Black people to improve their status or something like that.

So we use those same questions to see like, hey, are millennials answering these questions, in the same way. And so we find on some level, know that if we were going to use that battery of questions, we would see that they were slightly more progressive, like very slightly more progressive, but then we thought to ourselves like...okay, well, I don't know, Lisa, when you hear these questions, I don't know, do they sound weird to you?

Lisa: Yeah. *(Both laughing)*

Candis: Yeah. Yeah. So we figure like, look, people of our generation are not thinking about the same questions, that those questions don't bring to mind the same issues that they might bring to say, Boomers.

And what if we ask them a different set of questions, then what. If we could ask them a question that mimics the way they're thinking and talking about racial matters, could we get a better measure of where they are? So, we just asked people what they thought and we wanted to tap into and map how people were talking about race. So we asked about 35 people, you know, white millennials, just, we just had conversations with them. And by we, I mean, I hired young white women to have conversations with other young white people.

And we look to see patterns around how they were talking and thinking about race. And then we made an effort to create a new measurement to, what we think and hope does a better job of speaking to the kind of multi-dimensional nature of racial attitudes. Not just do you not like someone. But what's your stance on institutional racism? How do you feel about it? Are you angry? Does it make you upset? Are you even willing to admit that racial issues are structural? And not just mere incidents, for example?

Lisa: That's really interesting, especially the part that you mentioned that you had young white women conduct the interviews, which I'm guessing was done purposefully to have folks feel more comfortable to answer, honestly. So, that's a really interesting way to make sure that, you're trying to get the most like accurate vision that they have of like what's going on in the country and how they're feeling about it. Um, so I'm gonna ask you a little bit about white millennials. Specifically, you mentioned that you focused a lot on them. How are their attitudes on racism kind of stagnating a little bit. because of course, as you mentioned, we often think that they're going to be moving forward.

The next generation is supposed to be more progressive and it's kind of shocking to hear that it's pretty much right on par with the past generations. So how are they stagnating in a way?

Candis: So the thing that we find is that almost for every, let's say bonus point that you would get, there would be a minus point. So an example, there is no millennial that we interviewed that was okay with being called a racist. They didn't want to be seen as a racist. They didn't want to be viewed as a racist and you know, that's good.

But then if we ask them, okay, well, what is racism? Their ideas about what that constitutes is actually very narrow. And so what that means is that there are people who are really devoted to having a very kind of, upstanding presentation around being, you know, being anti-racist without actually knowing what it is that racism is.

Right? And so one of the things that we see is that people do not want to be called a racist, seen as a racist or viewed as a racist. But when we ask them how they understand racism, they have a very narrow understanding of that. And so what we find is that even if someone is kind of, a really – they want to be anti-racist, but how can you be anti-racist if you are unsure of how racism works?

So that's one of the kind of stagnations is you want to move forward and not be a racist. The back step is, you're not able to pinpoint the dynamics of racism in the United States.

Lisa: Right. So it sounds like it's more of, um, the recognized racism on a superficial level of things you can't say, but far as, um, knowing like the economic standards that play into racism, et cetera, that part is missing. It seems like.

Candis: And so like that's one example. And so we call this kind of like a countervailing force. Another countervailing force is around diversity that, you know, I'm sure if we walked into any room anywhere and ask people, if they value diversity, everyone would raise their hand. But then we find that among millennials, they have a tension with diversity.

One, they sometimes see. let's say more air quotes, diverse candidates as being mutually exclusive from being meritorious candidates, for example, or that they want diversity, if it means that they can learn. But if it means that the candidate pool is more competitive, then they're like, well, do we really need diversity?

These are the kinds of tensions that we see with this group that, you know, we have the one step forward love of diversity on that back is that, it doesn't really mean that there was a reallocation of power or resources to our more diverse democratic. and then another countervailing tendency, I think that we see, or another countervailing force is that, I, I think that we tend to think that like generations are like aliens that show up on earth with their own ideas.

And we forget that people still inherit their ideas from parents and from their grandparents. So sure millennials are different in many ways, but when we ask them questions about diversity and you know, where should we have it in all of these kinds of things. They sometimes kind of step back and, and use these kinds of tropes that are very common from previous generations.

So, you know, we don't see like a wholesale difference from previous generations in the way they talk about things. For example, like affirmative action. And they're like, well, quotas are bad. Well, quotas are illegal. and they've been illegal for as long as any millennial has ever been alive.

So that kind of old way of thinking and talking and old racial logics still kind of, um, filter through the way that we see white millennials think and talk about race.

Lisa: That's very interesting, especially like when you're talking about, we always have this idea that the next generation is somehow going to be so far removed and different from the one before 'cause I was just about to ask you, do you think this is going to continue with gen Z and the following generations and now I'm realizing, Yeah. it's probably, we're going to maybe see a lot of the same, but I also want to get your opinion on.

Um, there's obviously a lot of legislation right now, attacking education on the country's racist history. How do you think that's going to affect any sort of progress?

Candis: Yeah. So that's the thing is that, you know, that, third countervailing force that I talked about, this kind of the, inherent tense, you know, the thing about cohort changes that cohort change provides a potential for change, but change is not inevitable. And one of the things that hinders potential progress is that, you know, we should be giving the next generation tools to be better than we are.

And, you know, I think what you're pointing out, Lisa, this legislation that we're seeing across the country just kind of sweeping across local school boards is that we are taking away tools from our, you know, from young people to understand, have a better understanding of the dynamics of structural inequality.

And so how can we expect them to be better than us and do better than us if they don't have the history, the analysis, the critical thinking, the skills, to assess and dismantle those things.

Lisa: One thing that I'm always hopeful about, but then on the other hand, get maybe a little bit scared about us, a millennial gen Z cusp, and myself is social media, obviously, getting information from social media. And of course we saw a lot of protests in the last couple of years, like Black Lives Matter protests and protest in favor of racial justice as a result of videos being shared on social media and even, last week, like another fatal shooting of a Black man, like a video of Patrick Lyoya was being shared on social media. Do you think that white millennials' perspective changes through actually seeing these videos? Is that something that has actually motivated folks to change their own perspective or work on their own perspective of racial attitudes within the United States, especially within the younger generations?

Candis: Okay. I think I may be getting...I'm going to get on my high horse,

Lisa: Yeah.

Candis: So, okay. I think that we can just look at the data. And, Jennifer Chudy and Hakeem Jefferson, I think in the Washington Post earlier this year, I think it's hard to know what day it is on any given day, these days. But it was a little while ago that they did an assessment to see, hey, you know, everybody watched a nine minute video in May of 2020, and that sparked out like the second wave of the Black Lives Matter movement.

Did we see those attitudes persist over time and more or less the answer is no. That there was a, you know, a peak where people were kind of like, hey, like we should do more. We should do better. And that declined rapidly, for white millennials and, for white folks, generally speaking, white conservatives, especially.

You know, the fact of the matter is, is that – and what kind of, irritates me, makes me feel pessimistic is that, you know, we have to wait for the egregious moments, show up on social media before people take note and even want to do something. And so then we have the problem of what about in places where you have violence like in schools or, you know, in segregated neighborhoods or in people's bank accounts or in wage theft or so on and so forth. And so, you know, I think even just kind of, depending on a video to change people's attitudes is already saying a lot about where we are.

Lisa: And then the solutions that specifically like white millennials engaged in when they're like, okay, we're going to fight back against these horrible things. I will place a black box on my Instagram and this will move us forward. It's, it's it goes in line with the superficial understanding of racism consists of.

Candis: Yeah. Yes, exactly. Which goes to that first countervailing force, right? Is that like, you don't want to be racist, but if we don't understand racism as structural, then the solutions that we present, um, are going to be narrow and superficial. And that's what we see is that when we ask, millennials at that time, when we were first writing the book, um, there's a lot of talk about stop and frisk.

And so, you know, it was like, what do you think about stop and frisk? And people were like, well, I mean, if you're from a demographic that tends to, you know, do. Then maybe you should be stopping for us or like, what do you have to hide? You know, like all of these kinds of tropes, like, you know, if it's for their safety at TSA, I don't mind that they all check us, even though, you know, it's really Muslims that need to be checked, but I'm okay with going through this process, if that means that we're all going to be safer.

Right? And so, you know, there's a very, like, I think that it's really important for us to keep our, you know, finger on the pulse of how people are thinking about questions of race, because that helps us to understand what people are likely to do, uh, and support in their preferences and their policy preferences.

And, you know, I think what we're seeing is that people are aware that there are egregious racial inequalities. but a lot of the times our preferences become very superficial.

Lisa: And since, um, you have researched this, I kind of want to ask you a little bit, if you could give advice to researchers who are planning to conduct research on racial attitudes, based on your experience like doing this yourself.

Candis: So. I think that one of the things that we need to do is have a kind of wider array of questions that will be asked people. There are scholars that are doing really good work to just, really highlight how multi-dimensional racial attitudes are.

We tend to think about and tend to measure racial attitudes in terms of say stereotypes or in terms of racial resentment. But there are other ways that people orient themselves toward racial matters. There's empathy, there's apathy, there's knowledge, right? Or how to, what degree are you knowledgeable about structural inequality?

To what degree are you willing to admit that structural racism is a way to understand inequality in the United States? So I guess I am making a pitch in Racial Stasis. In part it is a pitch to actually start a conversation about bringing in new, fresh questions that, map onto the way that people are talking about race right now.

And that includes, like, for example, white grievance, right? That, you know, another thing that we found is that they're like, yeah, like I think that Black people and Latin X people are discriminated against, but white people are just as discriminated against. I mean, that's a thing that we should know.

And that we should have a better sense of the extent to which people feel aggrieved, and feel that, you know, changes that may produce, more equitable outcomes, feels like oppression to some people. I think that is a thing that is worthy of mention.

Lisa: How do millennials who are not white, like people of color and black folks, how, How are there racial attitudes and moving forward, do you think that they're going to be the ones to provide more steps forwards than backwards than their white counterparts?

Candis: So this is complicated. And to be honest, we focus on white millennials, because of their status in the racial hierarchy. My sense – and I think this is, you know, there are two books that people ask Chris and I to write. And one is about Gen Z. And one is about Black millennials, Black and Latin X, and Asian-American millennials and gen Zers.

But my sense is that one of the things that we see and I, and I always kind of caution people is that when we look at those trends that lumped millennials together and we see progress, if we dis-aggregate it by race, we're not going to see the same trend. We're going to see that given the fact that millennials are one of the most diverse generations that the people of color in that group are going to be pulling, their group in a more progressive direction,

Lisa: Great. Well, um, I want to keep on keeping on with like, talking about white millennials here. So, um, what are some ways that we can help white millennials see and take ownership of their harmful racial attitudes and move forward?

Candis: Whew, Lisa.

Lisa: It's a lot, huh? I figured this, this question. We could talk about this for 14 hours at least, probably

Candis: So, you know what I will say, Lisa, is that one of the things that stood out to me about the interviews that we did is that people did admit, like, I might just not know and they didn't and, you know, on the one hand that suggests that if we taught people more, which is the opposite of what's happening at, you know, local school boards, in this kind of like anti CRT rage, you know, is very much undoing knowledge [or preventing people from gaining the right kind of knowledge.

I do think that that could shape the way people think about matters and that matters a lot. And that's actually one of the reasons why I wrote Stay Woke. So I wrote a different book that's kind of like a guide, after writing Racial Stasis, right. That people said like, I wish I knew more or I wish I had a better understanding.

And so I said, okay, well, if you wanted to know more, if you wanted to have a better understanding, what would those things be? It would be worthy of study to know if people did learn more. I don't know. And I'm not really sure there's a great deal of information out there about racial learning. I think that's an area that we need to do more and do better with.

Lisa: So let's talk a little bit about, Stay Woke: A People's Guide to Making All Black Lives Matter. And I guess it's a good guide for millennials who are trying to become more self-aware that they're part of the problem and want to participate in some solutions.

Can you share a few lessons or takeaways that you think, um, the generation could benefit from?

Candis: Yeah, I guess I would say, well, one, I would say that Stay Woke was definitely inspired by our white millennials, but is for everyone. And, you know, I think about even kind of like my woker than thou students who, you know, they are in the mindset that if you don't know the right language, then you are not in the club.

And I think that is dangerous in and of itself. It's a different kind of dangerous, you know what I mean? But you know, I think that one of the things that I saw and notice, and I noticed at the end of my classes or toward the end of my classes, is that people feel overwhelmed. That once you kind of understand that in almost every domain in American life, there are racial inequalities

It feels like you can't do anything. And my sense, and I hope the thing that people take away from Stay Woke is that we can all use our skills, resources, and talents to do what we can do within our sphere of influence. You know, so, you know, there are some people who are artists, you know, use your art to do that work. Some people are business people, some people are doctors, ensuring that among your patients as the racial gap in care is closed, would be doing a lot of work, for example. So I think the main takeaway I hope is that people can see that where they are, where they work, where they live, there are inequalities and that they have skills and know how to do a little something to mitigate, and maybe even, you know, work to dismantle those inequalities.

Lisa: That's fantastic. And before we close this out, I know that you have a podcast. So could you share a little bit about it, and where folks can access it.

Candis: Oh yeah. So, I was invited to be a co host alongside Michael Berkman and Chris Beam. on the Democracy Works podcast, which is housed at Penn state and the McCourtney Institute for Democracy. And every week we interview someone really smart, um, about, you know, some aspect that we need to kind of be thinking critically about, to understand.

The workings, the mechanisms and the failings of democracy, mostly in the US, but sometimes, in other countries. So for example, this week, we're interviewing Josh Mitchell about student debt. And what does it mean for citizens, to both need the education to be informed citizens. But for that, like what does it cost them to get those things, for example.

Lisa: Oh, wow. Well, that's actually our next topic for No Jargon. Look at us go!

Candis: We need to talk about debt.

Lisa: Yes. It's a very timely and important issue. So thank you so much for talking with us today for sharing so much of your information, advice, expertise and I'm looking forward to hearing your podcast.

Candis: It is my pleasure to be here with you, Lisa. Thank you.

Lisa: And thanks for listening for more on Professor Smith's work. Check out our show notes at scholars.org/no-jargon. No Jargon is the podcast of the Scholars Strategy Network, a nationwide organization that connects journalists, policymakers, and civic leaders with America's top researchers, to improve policy and strengthen democracy.

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