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A Review of *Nice Is Not Enough: Inequality and the Limits of Kindness at American High*

As “kill them with kindness” dominates mainstream mindsets, C.J. Pascoe’s *Nice Is Not Enough* (2023) demonstrates the danger this culture of kindness poses to progress. Through a two-year ethnographic study, Pascoe studies how this ideology, at best, limits the address of systemic inequalities, and at worst, perpetuates them. Pascoe’s investigation is ultimately a call that with a reformed, institutionalized approach to issues of inequality, schools can foster communities conducive to social change.

Pascoe highlights the damage that a mindset centered around acceptance can wreak on change-making efforts. She observed that societal issues at American High were addressed through defensive measures and individual kindness. Students advocating for gun control were punished in favor of the continued practice of lockdown measures. Issues like racism were reduced to a lack of loving one another. This behavior underlines a central dichotomy: as much as kindness appears positive, when issues concern social inequality, this regime of kindness only provides a temporary solution and a way to “avoid the political” (Pascoe, 2023, p.39). In promoting this evasive behavior, productive dialogue is lost, and the means to effective change are lost with it.

Using ethnographic study, Pascoe details her observations of American High with insight and depth, elevating her argument. Through field notes and 51 interviews with parents, students,

and staff, Pascoe highlights the disparity between administration and student attitudes; where the administrators made issues concerning spirit days and graduation adornment about avoiding “hurt feelings, rather than inequality” (Pascoe, 2023, p.82), students prioritized action-oriented strategies, organizing walkouts and Black Lives Matter showcases. By integrating into the community for two years, Pascoe was able to observe and emphasize the continuity of this politics of protection; this ideology is no one-off instance but a longstanding issue, and thus, necessitates change.

Even as Pascoe identifies the issues in this ideology, the feasibility of her solutions remains questionable. Pascoe’s suggested reforms — including a more equitable redistribution of resources, opportunities, and support — require change on a structural level. Public institutions like American High are limited by state and federal law, not to mention the community at large; enacting such changes would take commitment that may not be possible if schools are to drive change while also fulfilling their educational responsibilities. Instead of altering the entire system, Pascoe could consider changes that act within the system; Valley High’s adjusted bell schedules allowing students to participate in walkouts without being penalized are a prime example of this. Modifications like these work to “build systems that support young folks in their demands” (Pascoe, 2023, p.47) while still retaining some practicality within the context of the school system.

As politics continue to play an active role in our everyday lives, *Nice Is Not Enough* illuminates the limits of a culture of kindness at a time where change is more essential than ever. Pascoe’s message is clear: if we are to ensure a progressive future, it is time to stop “killing them with kindness” and start facing the political music, paving the way for systemic action.

References

Pascoe, C.J. (2023). *Nice Is Not Enough: Inequality and the Limits of Kindness at American High*. University of California Press.

Book Discussion Questions

1. Are there any parts of the book that you didn't quite understand and that you want to discuss with your peers?
 - How to define politics of care vs politics of protection
 - What actionable steps can be taken to establish a politics of care?
2. What were some of the most compelling stories or accounts in the book?
 - Teen Action Committee (ignoring or brushing over the racial dimensions of mental health): interesting perspective on ways that the school community can both hurt and help in addressing issues like mental health
 - Eagle Pageant: different lens on how the foundation for future inequalities is laid through systemic practices, access to resources, development of particular skills, exclusionary even if not explicitly so
 - Drag show: how different issues are/can be framed as issues of "offense," highlight the mentality of school administration
3. How did this book relate to your personal experiences?
 - High school (CB South): censorship issues, lack of dialogue on global issues, offense concerns, 4Way Speech Pledge of Allegiance (not selecting topic out of concern for audience despite relevance, avoiding the political out of politeness), debate class (students "checking out" of discussions)
 - "I Really Don't Like Talking About Race" mindset is often reflected in student body, leads to avoidance of the "tough" conversations when it is those conversations that are the most necessary for change & learning to occur