

'CliffsNotes' Book Club Recap

DO YOU LOVE BOOKS ON LEADERSHIP, NEUROSCIENCE, AND BUSINESS, BUT NOT HAVE TIME TO READ ALL THE BOOKS?

Join the '**CliffsNotes' club**—where there's no pressure to pre-read the book, no membership required, no cost, and lots of discussion in just 90 minutes. Each month, you will hear a **summary of highlights** from a recently-published business book. This discussion summary is intended to provide a recap of the conversation at Book Club, rather than serve as a thorough book summary. We'll keep you "in the know" on the latest and greatest concepts and models. **Register here** for upcoming events.



June 2023

The Sum of Us: What Racism Costs Everyone and How We Can Prosper Together

By Heather McGhee

Discussion Highlights

Presented by Kari Uman

Heather McGhee is a public policy researcher and author. Her specialty is the American economy – and the mystery of why it so often fails the American public. McGhee starts with the assumption that the majority of Americans are suffering economically due to policy that benefits only a small segment at the top of the social hierarchy. When she was the Director of Demos, a cutting-edge policy research organization, she became increasingly frustrated with looking at economics only from a policy making lens, which postulates that people operate in their own rational self-interest.

From the financial crisis to rising student debt to collapsing public infrastructure, she found a common root problem: racism. But not just in the most obvious indignities for people of color. Racism has costs for white people, too. It is the common denominator of our most vexing public problems, the core dysfunction of our democracy and fundamental to the spiritual and moral crises that grip us all.

Her underlying framework starts with how Americans, particularly white Americans, buy into the zero-sum paradigm – the common but false idea that any gains for Black Americans must mean losses for white Americans. This understanding of the world is deeply embedded in many white Americans' psyches, in part because it dates back to the early days of America, when the nation depended on catastrophic losses for certain groups, like the theft of land from Indigenous groups and the enslavement of Black people. What's more, this understanding has been perpetuated for generations by wealthy individuals with something to gain from dividing the public into a racial hierarchy. McGhee illustrates how this zero-sum thinking plays a damaging role in all sectors of American life, including education, housing, labor, political representation, and the environment.

McGhee notes that Black people do not share this framing and do not see their gains as coming at the expense of white citizens.

McGhee looks at what we lose when we buy into the zero-sum paradigm—of how public goods in this country—from parks and pools to functioning schools—have become private luxuries; of how unions collapsed, wages stagnated, and inequality increased; and of how this country, unique among the world's advanced economies, has thwarted universal healthcare. *The Sum of Us* is a brilliant analysis of how we arrived here: divided and self-destructing, materially rich but spiritually starved and vastly unequal

Her most poignant example of how racism and the zero-sum paradigm hurt everyone is public pools, which once hosted hundreds if not thousands of (white) Americans. Having public pools in communities across the country was an attempt to level the playing field by providing a good that was equally available to everyone. But once “everyone” came to include Black people, due to legislation requiring the desegregation of pools, many communities chose to drain and fill in their public pools rather than have white and Black residents swim together. In a parallel way, over the latter half of the 20th century, conservatives cut back public benefits in general, with consequences for middle- and working-class Americans, regardless of skin color. Racism played a role in this, in that it made white Americans reluctant to support government programs, lest these programs help “undeserving” racialized people as well.

McGhee examines the role of racism in influencing policy on issues like postsecondary tuition, health care, banking regulation, and unionization. While these systems have broad public benefits, and once helped establish a robust, white middle class through policies like the GI Bill, which paid tuition and living expenses for white World War II veterans, they were undermined and eroded throughout the 20th century, in tandem with the rise of the civil rights movement. The loss of these public goods has disproportionately affected Black citizens, but most of the people impacted are white.

In the book's final chapters, McGhee explores how the ongoing existence of racism harms white people on an emotional and psychological level, due to the consequences of living within and perpetuating an unjust system, and how working together to dismantle racial hierarchies can address the suffering that all Americans experience due to racism and create a healthier, fairer society.

In seeking answers for how to address the situation, McGhee looks at campaigns that specifically address racial divisions and, in doing so, advance policies in the public interest.

McGhee finds proof of what she calls the Solidarity Dividend: gains that come when people come together across race, to accomplish what we simply can't do on our own.

About the Book Club In this monthly club, a presenter shares highlights from a book related to leadership, business, neuroscience, or coaching. Membership is not required, and there's no obligation to pre-read the book. This discussion summary is intended to provide a recap of the conversation at Book Club, rather than serve as a thorough book summary. [Register here](#) for upcoming events. For the full set of discussion summaries, [click here](#).