

Mike Domitrz: (music)

Mike Domitrz: Welcome to the RESPECT Podcast, I'm your host Mike Domitrz from Mikespeaks.com where we help organizations of all sizes, educational institutions and the US military create a culture of respect and respect is exactly what we discuss on this show so let's get started.

Mike Domitrz: Welcome to this week's episode of the RESPECT podcast, I want to get right into it so we can meet our guests and get into this conversation. Our guest this weeks is Teri Yuan, Theresa Yuan. Do you prefer Teri or Theresa?

Teri Yuan: Teri.

Mike Domitrz: Teri, I noticed that when we were communicating back and forth, it was Teri. So but yes, Teri Yuan is the host of the Engendered Podcast, a weekly show that explores the systems, practices, and policies that enable gender based violence and oppression and the solutions to end it. And uses gender as a lens to better understand power and oppression and its impact in the private realm.

Mike Domitrz: So as the better recognizing it in the public sphere. So, Teri, thank you so much for joining us.

Teri Yuan: Thank you for having me.

Mike Domitrz: Oh, our pleasure. What do you think is the place respect has in our current political environment and how does civility play a role in this?

Teri Yuan: I think one of the underlying causes of oppression and abusive power is the fact that there is no common definition of what respect and civility and the role of both of those should be in civil society. There's no recognition of the humanity of other people and there's no common definition of what equality and freedom means.

Mike Domitrz: So that's a great point. So how do you define equality and freedom?

Teri Yuan: Equality is where everybody has access, regardless of your gender, race, class, physical ability, etcetera, to all of the rights and privileges and opportunities that should be afforded to all human beings. And then respect, I think, is recognizing and treating other people with understanding, kindness and compassion. And seeing them as whole human beings.

Mike Domitrz: And do you think that part of the conflict that occurs out there is that in your definition of equality, that you said that all people deserve, do you think that's where the conflict occurs? That some people think, "No, not all people, we don't deserve this treatment. Like you earn respect." Now I don't believe that statement, I talk about it a lot on the show. Talk about it when I'm working with corporations and organizations.

Mike Domitrz: You don't make somebody earn respect, that is a level of arrogance to think, "You have to earn my ability to treat you with respect." But so how do you explain that to people when they say, "Well nobody deserves anything except the basic right to be alive and breathe?"

Teri Yuan: I think that it's innate in us to actually treat each other with respect when we're young, when we're babies. Babies have been known in experiments to really show compassion to other living animals, to living beings, whether it's animals or other people that have been hurt. And so I think what happens is over a time, society sends us messages that create a hierarchy of who deserves more respect or less respect. Or no respect. And those messages then become ingrained in us and reinforced and even if we may not innately believe it, we might not have started out believing it, over time we are rewarded for reinforcing those messages based on who we are.

Mike Domitrz: Can you give us an example, Teri, of where that happens in society?

Teri Yuan: So I think in my most recent podcast for example, I talk about the construction of gender. I think it's a myth for people to think that feminism is only for women and that it's not for men. And people don't recognize that feminism is about equality of all genders, right? And men think that feminism is something that's a threat to their place in society but the issue is because when we're young we're taught that being a boy means being strong and being powerful and exerting our strength, potentially through violence. Through domination. Those are aspects of our being that may not be natural and yet we are going to be rewarded or punished for not being able to adhere to those norms.

Teri Yuan: And so people, boys, young boys who might be not interested in sports or not watch, whatever, the NFL. Might be interested in music, you know, the stereotypes of being interested in drama or creative arts. Those are stigmas that we create for our young boys for not really expressing themselves and exploring their creativity and their passions in a different way than what and how society deems is worthy.

Teri Yuan: And so what happens is over time those boys potentially could be targets of bullying. They could not be encouraged by their parents or other members of society to really explore those innate aspects of who they are and what they're interested in. And then as they start repressing those aspects of themselves, it creates an imbalance that may lead to potential health risks, they might seek coping mechanisms that are unhealthy that might lead to addiction. Or maybe exerting their frustration in an unhealthy way in their relationships.

Teri Yuan: And so that's an example where equality and feminism actually benefits all of us. Women as well as men. And if we can see that and how the system of male supremacy is actually there to control all of us, then I think that's something that can actually garner more desire and the ability to learn how to communicate with each other respectfully.

Mike Domitrz: Yeah there was a video recently of, if I remember it was four or five people, most were actors or performers in Hollywood. One was not, Tony Porter and they're around a dinner table having a conversation, and it was released around the world, and it went viral. People could look it up, I don't remember the exact name of it. But Tony Porter's in it, if they want to look that up.

Mike Domitrz: And it's men talking about all the different aspects of sexual violence, society and how we treat respect. But they also talk about the pressures they felt as men growing up. That speak 100 percent to what you're saying right there. That this masculinity that I was supposed to be whether it fit me or not. And how dangerous that can be. And so you do the Engendered Podcast, you're the host of that. You facilitate that conversation.

Mike Domitrz: When it comes to gender specifically, what do you think is the biggest misunderstanding that's out there?

Teri Yuan: The biggest misunderstanding is that identity in general of all aspects is a binary. That gender is a binary. And that is has to be either or, you're either male or a female. And there are traits that are specific to being, the same trait can exist in both genders, and it could be perceived in different ways. Usually positively, like being assertive can be positive for men. And if you're assertive as a woman, then you could be seen as dominating. You know, as a supervisor, as a manager.

Teri Yuan: And so there's a value laid in dichotomy, you know, binary that cuts it in two. And it's really a continuum so I think that's the biggest myth. That gender is a continuum, race is a continuum.

Mike Domitrz: So I want to pause there because a lot of people push back on this part of the conversation which is, how is it a continuum if, and I'm not asking as myself, I'm saying this is what we have as the pushback. You know, you hear what I'm about to say all the time.

Teri Yuan: Sure.

Mike Domitrz: "If somebody is born biologically with a penis and this person over here is born biologically with a vagina, how is there a continuum." "The penis is the male, the vagina's the female" is what we often hear as pushback.

Teri Yuan: Well first of all, biology itself or how it's expressed and its possibilities, aren't necessarily binary as well. So for example, the question of just genitalia, you know lots of babies are born without the full expressed genitalia that we attribute to being a boy or a girl. Or the hormonal corresponding, hormones.

Teri Yuan: And as you grow older, for example as a woman, if you were to get a hysterectomy, taking away your reproductive organs, does that make you no longer a woman? I mean obviously culturally, society actually deems that's the case. And attaches certain value to women who can no longer bear children.

Teri Yuan: But what if you were like, you were born that way? From the beginning. Does that make you less of a woman? Because it's not the vagina or the, that's not the reproductive organ. It's really everything else, the uterus and the fallopian tubes, etcetera. Right?

Mike Domitrz: Well let's say somebody makes that argument then. "Okay, if the body has the reproductive possibilities, that's a female. If the body does not have the reproductive capabilities, that's a male." Let's say somebody makes that argument, now what's the discussion?

Teri Yuan: People don't necessarily identify with their reproductive capabilities. You know, there could be women who don't want to have children, does that make them less of a woman? You know because does that make them not a woman because they choose not to express the full potential of their reproductive organs?

Teri Yuan: And similarly a man may have the desire to give birth but that doesn't mean that he can and does it make him a woman? And so biology is also different from sexual desire and your identity. So one can identify male or female right? And be born in a different body. Which is what transgender is.

Teri Yuan: But then you can also have different sexual desires so regardless of whether you're a male or female embodied, you may have an attraction to male or female traits or people. And so there's so many layers of gender identity that I think the whole thing is a continuum. Even if people who are biologically expressed very much one or the other, it doesn't mean that they have fully those traits that we have identified as belonging to those genders.

Mike Domitrz: I think we [inaudible 00:10:53] so brilliant in that. Why do we think that genitalia is the marker? Or why do we think that reproductive parts are the, actual biological body parts are the marker? What if the marker is the brain? And this is where people can get confused, and they go, "Well wait, if you're born with this body, but your brain's saying this, then you need to convert to your body."

Mike Domitrz: As if the brain's not as important, like they choose the judgment of which is happening here. The chemical, what they'll say, "imbalance," right. The chemical imbalance versus the just a different chemistry than they have.

Mike Domitrz: But so they say the body, the physical being must be what you convert to which is interesting to go, "Well what about the heart, the soul, and the brain. We have to ignore all those and make them something they don't fit in." Is what you're saying, correct?

Teri Yuan: Exactly. Yeah and ultimately it does have to do with the brain. And so if our brain is the organ that controls all of these things and the expression of all of them, our brain is not gendered. And so what does it really matter? You know.

And I think the main issue is not trying to reinforce these sort of myths of identity in gender but to really go beyond it and to come to a place of acceptance and back to your show, respect. That people can choose to express themselves and define themselves any way they'd like.

- Teri Yuan: And it's not just gender, it's with race or whatever, you know. National identity, citizenship, you know, etcetera. So that's obviously one of the common challenges that we have in our day politically, right?
- Mike Domitrz: Right, absolutely. And when it comes to gender, some people who may be listening, going, "Are you implying there's more than two genders?" Is a question and I've had that in audiences when I say, "Hey, inclusive means all genders." And people go, "Whoa, whoa, whoa. All? You mean there's more than two?"
- Mike Domitrz: So can you explain that? Are there more than two? Are they defined or because there's a spectrum when we say all, we're leaving the possibility open?
- Teri Yuan: I am not an expert on being able to sort of, I'm not an LGBTQIA expert, so I also want to say that beyond male and female, there's also intersex and obviously asexual. And so how you express your gender, it's the performance of the basically.
- Teri Yuan: It could be the the physical performance in terms of how you dress, it could be gestures, it could be the things that you like in your sort of day to day activities, that you enjoy doing and how those are associated to particular genders. But ultimately the combination of those three things really determines what your gender identity is. And that's why so many people, even who are heterosexual, they might now consider using the "they/them" pronoun because they're tired of being pushed in this box and trying to fit in.
- Mike Domitrz: So let's go there because for some people listening, they'll go, "What, did you just say the "they/them" pronoun?" Now for those of us who work in the field, if you work in college campuses, you're aware of what we're discussing right now. Or you may be aware of what we're discussing. Which is when somebody meets someone, they may say, "By what pronoun do you go by?" Or, "I go by this pronoun." And that way people will sit there and go, you know you get the stereotypical, "Is it a "he" or "she?"
- Mike Domitrz: Which is horrible statement because it's an "it." Right? Versus our "they." Do they identify as a "he" or "she" or "they?" They might identify as they. And people say, "Well why is this?" It allows somebody to be respected in the way they see themselves, it the way that they know themselves to be true of.
- Mike Domitrz: So this is not uncommon that somebody says, "Well how do you identify?" So for my case, it would be a "he/him" because that's how I identify. But somebody

else could be a "her," could be a "they," could be all different possibilities but it's just saying, "How do I see myself."

Mike Domitrz: It allows people to be treated right from the start within their identity, is that correct?

Teri Yuan: Yes. And I think it's similar to when the Ms. Phrase came out, was it in the 70s? I can't even remember, right, when Ms. Magazine came out, and it was a response to, it was basically Mr. or Mrs. You could only be those two. Or Miss, I guess. So you had Mrs. or Miss. And you were either married or unmarried. And there was nothing in between, and I think-

Mike Domitrz: And yet Mr. was always consistent. And that was the argument that, "Hey how come the person that identifies as the male can always be treated the same with Mr.

Mike Domitrz: But the woman has to be identified by marriage or not," right.

Teri Yuan: Right, right. And then based on whether you're a Miss or a Mrs and it actually helps people calibrate their treatment of you. Right? Which why should that be the case, it should be uniform regardless of your marital status.

Teri Yuan: And similarly with they/them, I think what it represents to me is the plurality of identity. You don't want to be boxed into, again, a "she" or "he." And for me especially as someone with, who's Asian American, who's a woman, who has all these other identities that I'm not going to share with you right now. But those other identities aren't necessarily visible and being able to be called they or them, it elevates those other identities in a way that one word and gender would not.

Mike Domitrz: Do you think we're moving to the place or do you think it would be more ideal if we move to the place where we're removing gender from the conversation?

Teri Yuan: Well I mean I think the goal of equality itself is eventually to make it irrelevant, what you're fighting for, once you get there, right? I definitely don't think we're there at all. We're at the beginning stages of opening up the conversation, and I think we can both recognize from the national climate and how polarized we are that it's going to be a struggle. But I think one of the benefits of having your podcast and this conversation is hopefully to bring other people, regardless of their political affiliations, you know, where they grew up and all the elements that make up their identity that come and see that there are different ideas and opportunities for personal growth.

Teri Yuan: And recognizing why people feel certain words are offensive or not, or more offensive or less offensive. And the historical implications of it is something that can really open up dialogue for getting to know each other and hopefully being more compassionate and understanding.

Mike Domitrz: Yeah I think it's a really important discussion for people to have. If somebody's listening right now and let's say you're pushing back going, "Whoa, whoa, whoa, you're going against genetics." And actually what we're saying is we're incorporating more genetics. We're taking the genetics of the brain, the chemistry, everything not just the pure physical genetics that people tend to refer to. But if somebody's pushing back right now, I just want to ask you to pause and think, "Why do you need them in the box? Why do you need each of us to fit into a drawer?"

Mike Domitrz: Because I know that history will tell you, "Because I can then know where my world is. This is where I learned my world is, and you're saying my world is different. And we don't like change. So let me just put people back in the box."

Mike Domitrz: But what value is there in putting people in a box, what value is there in straight categorization of people. It actually places some value higher than others when we do that. It's just a matter of fact. The moment you categorize, that means certain categories are different than others. And therefore we tend to treat differently.

Mike Domitrz: So I just throw that out to someone listening right now going, if you're struggling with this, just think why does it matter to you that Jordan identifies this way. Or that Chris identifies this way. And yes, I'm being intentional about the names I chose because then people want to go, "Which are you talking about?" That's the point. Why does that matter if Chris or Jordan are brilliant, if Chris or Jordan bring value to this world, why do you need to know what category they have to fit in in this one area?

Mike Domitrz: That's sort of what we're saying here, correct?

Teri Yuan: Yeah. I mean I think, you know, it's too long for our discussion, for us to get into now. But I think historically our country was built on basically a colonialist mentality that hasn't really been addressed. And so all of the historical repercussions of white washing and erasing that part of our historical identity has in some ways both rendered it invisible to all of us. Whether it's whatever race or gender we are, we are unaware of our full history.

Teri Yuan: And yet at the same time because it's rendered it invisible, we've also had no place to have a discussion for it. And so what it's done is it's created a system where people are trying to connect with one another based on superficial identity constructs, rather than on more deep meaningful values. And the reason people try to put other people in a box is because they crave connection, they crave community. They want to find their tribe.

Teri Yuan: And they think that their tribe is based on these things of, "Oh we like to," I'm going to use the sports analogy again, right? "We like to watch the Super Bowl together and have a tailgate," you know, or whatever. But that's just an activity,

why do you like that activity? You like it because there's community, there's over time you've built a set of rituals that people engage in, so it's predictive.

Teri Yuan: You know that every, I don't know football so well, but every year there's a football season that you can rely on that you could always be able to connect with other people and see. Similarly, people go to church but if we can like look at all of these cultural institutions. And see them as just that, you know, they're just cultural institutions, and peel away the onion to get to who we are as core people, then we don't need to have those sort of artifices to connect with one another.

Teri Yuan: We can connect with one another on a deeper level. You know, I care about getting to know you because you and I share the value of treating people with respect and with equality. And that matters to me more than what you do on your weekend or after work, right? And there's a commonality there.

Mike Domitrz: Yeah and that's what I always find intriguing. Every now and then I'll meet someone who says, "Mike, hey, one of your best friends is so polar opposite you politically, I don't get that." And I think that's because they're only seeing the political aspect not all the other aspects I see in that person.

Mike Domitrz: And that that person brings to this world. And that's true on so many levels. Whether it be gender, sexual orientation, racial, cultural. That when we actually drop the "I identify this way," and walk out as an, "I always have to be connecting with my same identity," I don't have the chance to learn about other people.

Mike Domitrz: I don't have the chance to connect on the multiple layers that we are as human beings. And so the more that we're able to drop the, as you said, the institutions, the cultural institutions and just be able to connect on a sincere one on one level. Like, "Hey, what drives you? What inspires you? What angers you?" And be able to have those conversations where real connection happens. It's so powerful.

Teri Yuan: Yeah. How do you want to see the world?

Mike Domitrz: Yeah. And identifying that way. Right? Like identifying yourself as a loving person. Well see, because if you say, "Well I'm a loving person but those people don't belong," that doesn't sound loving. So are you identifying yourself as a loving person because do your actions then back that up. Now that doesn't mean that I'm not going to be loving to those people who say they don't, they aren't loving because I believe I'm a loving person, I have to be loving to all people.

Mike Domitrz: I'm just going to be aware of what energy I let into my life. What I intentionally spend time with energy wise.

Teri Yuan: Yeah and I think one of the challenges that we have today that obviously the 2016 election has really exposed, is that people are more willing to remain in their tribe and remain in their community even at the expense of what the values of those communities espouse. Or purportedly espouse.

Teri Yuan: And to me, that's very disappointing because there's so much more that they're missing out on. And it's kind of like holding on so dearly, there's also research and I'm sure you've seen these articles recently around how, I don't know if it was just white Americans. But I think it was white Americans who really seek community and sort of defending their white privilege. You know, they're more willing to accept authoritarian rule and they're more willing to give up democratic principles and benefits in their society.

Teri Yuan: And that could mean access to facts and access to true values of kindness and empathy and compassion and treating people with equality even though all their lives, they have been engaging in at least in rhetoric, in promoting those values. But now they're willing to give it up because their white privilege is at risk.

Teri Yuan: So that's, I think, something that we need to really talk about.

Mike Domitrz: Personally I don't know that specific research. That's interesting because you do see it on all, and we do see it on all sides. We see grouping occurring on all sides that say, "Lockdown over here. I'm going to go this way and you're over there and now we're against each other." And neither make sense. Because neither are about love, respect, it's all about my way or the highway which is dangerous when extremes do that.

Mike Domitrz: And so, I do not want to imply in any way that one side here is less culpable for their actions than they are. So that's really important but I think it's important for all of us to step back and go, "Where am I potentially lacking living with respect by this choice I'm making?"

Mike Domitrz: I think that's an important question.

Teri Yuan: Well Mike, I do want to address that point because I think that two often that one of my complaints about the media, mainstream media, is that they're constantly putting forth a false equivalence.

Mike Domitrz: Right.

Teri Yuan: And I do feel that in some ways, that analogy may be so. Because when someone is doing something, this happens within gender based violence, that community, the violence against women community. Like people, when someone does something wrong, if someone is abusive to their partner and their partner is acting in self defense and happens to use violence in self defense as a response, they are not equally culpable. You know?

Teri Yuan: So when you are resisting and trying to defend yourself, that is not the same as the person who actually initiated it and what the intention of that person was. And in the eyes of the law, they both may be treated equally because they both engaged in, based on statutes of assault, they may be actually treated the same way. And so I think similarly when people are trying to sort of erase or minimize our democratic ideals of freedom and equality and the value of fact, and you know, all of our first amendment rights. And others are responding in defense of those, which are the founding principles of our country.

Teri Yuan: They are not the same thing.

Mike Domitrz: No I'm so glad you brought this up because that's what I was trying to reference. You did it much better than I did. Which is that false equivalency discussion. Which is, yeah that's what we have to be careful of. Not doing that. And I think it's so important. I think we need to have both conversations.

Mike Domitrz: Be able to say there's problems on both sides politically right now. In grouping and how people are behaving in groups at times. Especially extreme sides. But at the same time that also means, I should say and at the same time, that does not mean that's okay to use false equivalencies. And that's why I think it's brilliant, the example you gave.

Mike Domitrz: That defense from the person in power is different than the person in power causing, starting the harm in the first place. There is a huge difference there.

Teri Yuan: Yeah and I think also what happens is, I mean you see these in memes on Twitter all the time with regard to responses to the administration. The best example that I give is someone causes a problem, let's just say the migrant crisis and then they try to minimally address it but not really fix it. And then all of a sudden they get credit for it.

Teri Yuan: So it's basically like giving an arsonist credit for trying to put out the fire but not successfully but out the fire that they started. So why are we giving that person credit for something that they actually created but then never fixed.

Teri Yuan: And so that's kind of the situation that happens again and again, that I see. And I think it's important to be able to distinguish the person who's trying to put it out because they didn't start it and they're trying to put it out and save that house. Versus the person who's trying to put it out because they realize that people are upset at them for starting that fire and they want to get into everybody's good graces again.

Mike Domitrz: That's brilliant. Thank you so much for sharing that. You have three books you recommend. One's Feminist Theory from Margin to Center by Bell Hooks. Another one is Love and War by Tom Digby. And the last one is You're More Powerful than You Think by Eric Liu.

Mike Domitrz: We're going to have all of those links for our listeners and viewers to be able to find at respectpodcast.com. We'll also have that obviously in the show notes if you're listening on iTunes. We'll have that available for everybody.

Mike Domitrz: Teri, I want to thank you so much for sharing your insights, and your brilliance today.

Teri Yuan: Thank you so much Mike for having me.

Mike Domitrz: Absolutely. For everyone listening remember you can join the conversation on Facebook in our Facebook discussion group which is the RESPECT Podcast Discussion Group.

Mike Domitrz: Look that up on Facebook, join the conversations, after each episode I typically throw a question out so we can all keep the conversation going. And of course, you'll also on our show, respectpodcast.com, learn all about Teri, find out how to connect with Teri and all of the links.

Mike Domitrz: Thank you for joining us for this episode of the RESPECT Podcast. Which was sponsored by the Date Safe Project at datesafeproject.org. And remember, you can always find me at mikespeaks.com.