

When White Disengagement Masquerades as White Allyship, We All Lose

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SOCIOLOGISTS WOULD ARGUE THAT, AS SOCIAL beings, we live our lives interacting with other people within our social groups. Ferris and Stein (2016) defined social groups as “a collection of people who share some attribute, identify with one another, and interact with each other” (p. 123). This is a pretty straightforward definition, as basic as one can get; however, it is one that needs to be understood if we are to put forth an honest critique of the consequences that occur when white disengagement masquerades as white allyship. For many people of color (PoC) in the academy—and in the larger society—too many of our white counterparts do not share any attributes with us, do not identify with us, and do not interact with us on any meaningful level beyond the superficial. Their allyship is based on an “I’m not racist!” mindset that they hold as liberal-minded intellectuals, when, in reality, true allyship should be centered on an “I am anti-racist!” approach. Such a posture would move so-called allies from being comfortably disengaged to actively engaged by requiring them to work toward “policies and ideas” that not only combat white privilege and white patriarchy but also redress racial inequality (Kendi, 2019, p. 13). Realistically, PoC do not expect white allies to understand our plight completely (as we can’t completely understand theirs); we are aware that everyone has a different lived experience. At the same time, if white people are not actively engaged and interacting with black and brown people in ways that push them to be more anti-racist and not just “not racist,” then the ability to be true allies is replaced by what can only be considered as white disengagement.

Lamiyah Bahrainwala (2020) challenges her white counterparts to shift the question from asking PoC, “How can I respond [...] in the future?” (which allows and encourages their disengaged approach because they are looking to PoC for the answers) to asking instead, “What does it take for me

to intervene?” (which requires them to look within for the approach) on behalf of those to whom they claim to be allies (p. 135). She recounts three specific instances in which apparent allies to PoC left their aggrieved colleagues feeling disheartened and unheard when their grievances and fears were made known. As well intentioned as these allies saw themselves, their efforts fell short and resulted in everyone losing, solely because of these allies’ inability to be comfortable with being uncomfortable in confronting individual and institutional racism, implicit biases, and pervasive patriarchy.

Unfortunately for many marginalized groups, this is a situation that we find ourselves in too often. We are targeted (in obvious and subtle ways) by the dominant group based on the racial and gender hierarchy that is kept in place because of our limited access to resources, such as power and prestige. As a result, we rely on allies from within the dominant group to help dismantle the status quo and combat the oppressions that we encounter on a regular basis. Yet, herein lies the problem. Many of those ostensible allies don’t necessarily consider us to be a part of their social group(s), so their allyship is not about active interactions and interventions; instead, it is about disengaged altruism that allows them to believe that because they treat us nicely and don’t do “racist things,” they have done enough to combat racist ideology and can now wear what I call the “ally badge of honor.” Furthermore, because many of those wearing the badge don’t share the burden of being oppressed, don’t identify with our pain and suffering as oppressed people, nor interact with us enough to understand and internalize our feelings of oppression, they are able to saunter through life reaping the external accolades of false allyship without fully understanding the danger of their white disengagement on our brown and black lives. White disengagement allows white people to walk with black and brown people *asking*, “What do you need me to do?”; however, true white allyship demands that white people walk with those same black and brown bodies *proclaiming*, “This is what I’m going to do!”

Michael Eric Dyson (2017), reflecting on social injustice in the wake of Colin Kaepernick, addressed what he called the “silence of white athletes” (p. 120). Dyson lamented the white agents who make their money off black folk without building genuine

relationships with them. Quiet athletes and exploitative agents both illustrate the lose-lose outcome when white disengagement masquerades as white allyship. About Kaepernick's teammates, Dyson states:

prominent white athletes shouldn't leave Kaepernick out on a limb by himself. Those who are socially aware should speak up and challenge the narrow perspective and white privilege that protects them. (p.120)

Similarly, in his analysis about agents, Dyson explains:

white agents who represent black athletes have often undercut the value of social activism too [...] a less charitable interpretation suggests that white agents who don't have deep investments in black communities are not motivated to address the plagues that black folk confront. (p. 122)

In both instances, when whites who view themselves as allies are in actuality allies in name only, they perpetuate the very systems and social institutions that benefit them and their privilege while destroying the very people that they claim to walk with. But again, when your connections to (or investments in) PoC are not deep because you don't share attributes, identity, or interactions, you are less likely to move from comfortable disengagement to active engagement and intervention. And as Bahrainwala (2020) succinctly states, "silence is the necessary precursor to disengagement" (p. 139).

So what do PoC need from white allies? And just as important, what do allies need for themselves? White allies need to understand that it's not enough to say they are here for PoC, or that they will do better next time. Embedded in the definition of *ally* is the assumption that white allies desire to advocate for racial equality. But they need to be more engaged in their approach and actions. PoC need white allies to act and intervene at the moment that something happens, just as white allies would expect if they were the primary target. Make the private support public and be intentional about it. Going back to the sociological definition that introduced this response to

Bahrainwala (2020), the challenge to those who want to be true allies begins by first engaging in true group membership with PoC (and other marginalized groups). Allyship is not paternalistic; it is egalitarian because everyone should be fighting for the same goal—racial equality for everyone. But this also means leaving the comfort of white privilege that protects white people and working to dismantle it from the place that privilege affords because simply acknowledging it is not enough. Any less sets us all up for failure and enables the system to remain unchecked and unchanged. And that is detrimental to all of us who truly believe that we are better together than we are divided.

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