NOTES FROM THE FIELD

Becoming an Anti-Racist White Ally: How a White Affinity Group Can Help

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INTRODUCTION

Navigating aspects of personal identity within American social institutions, such as schools and workplaces, is often challenging and complex. Affinity groups are an effective means through which people can reaffirm and explore aspects of their identity, as well as provide each other guidance and support for interacting with those who might not share, understand, or respect that identity. This article examines ways in which one such affinity group, White Students Confronting Racism (WSCR) at the University of Pennsylvania's Graduate School of Education, helps white students understand their racial identities and work to become effective anti-racist allies.

Affinity groups are not new in race education. Many people of color, especially race educators, are familiar with the term "affinity group" (or its more alliterative cousin, "safe space"). In this context the term, borrowed from political and business contexts, describes an assembly of people gathered with others who share a common element of identity in order to explore, celebrate, sustain, and process their experiences around that identity. Naturally, there are as many affinity groups as there are identities: multiracial, Asian American, Catholic, Black, first-generation Mexican immigrant, female engineer of color... The possibilities are endless, but the objective remains them same: for people with some shared experience to have an opportunity to collectively reflect on their realities.

Affinity groups can have as few as two or more than 50 members, although 12 is probably a good maximum to ensure meaningful discussions. Groups might gather every couple days, once a week, biweekly, or every few months. Some groups discuss an article or book about race or racism at each meeting, while others use movies to focus their dialogue. Some groups preselect discussion topics and bring in outside speakers. But many groups simply meet to discuss individuals' personal experiences of race and racism, to talk (or practice talking) about race, and to learn more about what others have to say about race.

In what follows, we describe White Students Confronting Racism (WSCR), an affinity group for white people who have passion for ending racism, who have anger and confusion about institutional racism, who have guilt and hope about internalized racism, and who have questions about race that they are afraid to ask. It is a place for white people to examine what it means to be white, to critically reflect on themselves and their actions, and to work to identify and confront racism in schools, in society, and at the University of Pennsylvania's Graduate School of Education. By sharing our experiences of WSCR, we hope to enhance the reader's understanding of affinity groups in general, and their potential benefits for white educators specifically.

WSCR'S HISTORY, DYNAMICS, AND NORMS

A white affinity group can take as many different forms as do affinity groups as a general category. The only requirement is white people who want to take an anti-racist stance in learning about race and whiteness, and who are willing to face their discomfort, uncertainty, or anger in the process. Today our white affinity group is much different than when it started in 2006. Originated by four doctoral students as an informal space for the continuation of conversations begun in a shared seminar, WSCR is now an official GSE student organization that meets biweekly and has over 40 members. It draws students from across programs and divisions at GSE, and includes a few students from other colleges at Penn as well. We have allies of color among our members, but most members identify as white or multiracial. Meetings consist primarily of discussions led by volunteers on topics of their choice, but each session begins with introductions, clarification of the group's norms, and personal remarks on what brings each person there that day.

Topics of discussion have included: giving up privilege; avoiding collaboration with institutional racism; talking to family members about race; and mentoring for anti-racism. In addition

THE SEVEN NORMS OF WSCR

- Respect confidentiality
- Speak from the "I" perspective
- Listen to each other
- Embrace discomfort
- Monitor your own participation
- None of us are experts—be open, avoid judgment
- Focus on whiteness as a racial category

to regular dialogue meetings, a book discussion group meets the first Friday of each academic semester; books selected in 2008-2009 were Tim *Wise's White Like Me: Reflections on Race from a Privileged Son* (2004); Paul Kivel's *Uprooting Racism: How White People Can Work for Racial Justice* (2002); and Mica Pollock's *Colormute: Race Talk Dilemmas in an American School* (2004). WSCR has also co-hosted a mini film festival with Students of Color United and the Association of African American Graduate Students of Education, screening the documentaries *Traces of the Trade* and *Meeting David Wilson*, and hosting a presentation by "The Minority Reporter."

DISCUSSING RACE IN THE ABSENCE OF PEOPLE OF COLOR

Members of WSCR have complained that they never quite know how to describe our meetings—"I'm off to my white group tonight!" The thought of white people convening to discuss race conjures images of the KKK and other supremacist organizations. How ironic, given that white people routinely gather in monochromatic groups to discuss just about everything—except race—in our segregated society. Somehow, white people discussing race together can seem wrong or threatening.

Because of this inherent fear, white people often wait to talk about race until we are in interracial dialogues. This is problematic, however, as many white people are frequently hindered in such conversations by our inexperience discussing race, ignorance about the legacy of racial injustice in the US, and underdeveloped racial identities. Many people of color, on the other hand, arrive at interracial dialogues with an intimate understanding of racial dynamics and experience talking about race with friends or family. They may not necessarily have spoken with many white people about race, but people of color often do have a sense of their own racial identity, of how society identifies them as members of a racialized group, and of where they stand on questions pertaining to race.

Bringing white people and people of color together to discuss race can be like placing pre-algebra students in a calculus class. The people of color are often so far ahead of the white people that they would have to slow down in order to let us catch up. And since "catching up" involves extensive emotional processing, it does not happen quickly. This can be endlessly frustrating to everyone involved. People of color may feel cheated out of their own growth around race while white people may shut down or feel inadequate, scared, and intimidated. Consider this narrative from a WSCR member:

> When I found my principal waiting outside my classroom early one morning, I expected she had come to congratulate me. My fifth grade students and I had orchestrated a school-wide celebration the evening before for Martin Luther King, Jr's birthday that had an unprecedented parent turnout. Instead, I followed her to a dimly lit conference room where several African American parents sat around a table, their rage palpable. One father immediately said: Did you realize that the white students had all the significant parts? Then a mother asked: Did you realize that the Black students were relegated to the margins while the white students were front and center? I sat in silence. I hadn't realized either of these things. I grew defensive and uncomfortable. I made a million excuses. The kids chose their parts. I was, in fact, accommodating the shyness of some of the African American students. Why couldn't their parents recognize my decisions as a mark of sensitivity instead of an unexamined act of racism? I decided, within minutes, that it wasn't my fault. I moved on. In the ensuing months, I thought little about this aggression against students and families.
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> Race was a frequent topic of discussion in my classroom. My students and I analyzed and critiqued all the injustice that occurred out there: in the world, in history and in our communities. Together we spent a semester exploring civil rights in the United States. We conducted case studies of resistance movements, translated the Bill of Rights into our own words and sacrificed our collective rights for a day in solidarity with "oppressed" people everywhere. We wrote persuasive letters to government officials. We protested gender-based violence and an unregulated international arms trade. I thought I was doing everything right. The culmination of our study was the Martin Luther King, Jr. birthday celebration. For many years, I deemed these thematic units and the conversations they inspired the measure of success for a white educator. I never paused to consider the notion that the injustice we discussed might also exist within the classroom, or worse, within me.
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> When I returned to graduate school last year, my studies required me to re-visit these memories. I attempted to do it alone. I spent many nights journaling about Whiteness and privilege, topics that had previously felt remote or irrelevant. I tried to make sense of who I had been as a teacher. As I reflected critically on my practice, I began to consider myself an imposter who had no business pursuing an advanced degree in education. I attended my first White Students Confronting Racism meeting from this unsteady location. There, I found a group of students committed to self-examination and the open discussion of race. I also found a new way to make sense of my experience. I no longer had to frame my teaching as "good" or "bad." I acknowledged, instead, its complexity and nuance. I shared my shortcomings, my blind spots, and my resistance to change. I listened as others did the same. I felt the stirrings of transformation. Mistakes became a lot less scary and over time, I became less afraid. And as the fear gradually evaporated, I find myself changed.
>
> *- Katherine Crawford-Garrett*

Many white people benefit from a space where we can practice talking

about race—a space in which we can be honest, ask possibly ignorant questions, and process our deep emotions around race, while also challenging ourselves to do better, to examine and engage our privilege more critically. In order to be full participants in interracial dialogues and multiracial communities, white people need to understand how racism privileges us, to recognize how racism injures our colleagues of color, and to consider our responsibility and role in responding to racism in our environment. Much of this work can be done in a white affinity group so that, in time, white people can be productive members of interracial conversations on race, rather than requiring constant and remediated attention.

REFLECTION AS A FORM OF ACTION

Facilitating candid, constructive reflection on our position and privilege as white people is WSCR's primary responsibility and goal. We believe that reflection is a form of action. This is especially true for white people as have spent our lives internalizing the structural racism that surrounds us. Dismantling these racist structures and replacing them with healthy, anti-racist counternarratives requires hard daily work.

Upon initially learning about oppression, many people ask instinctually, "What can I do?" This is especially true for white people who, unfamiliar with the dynamics of oppression, generally feel empowered in our society to make change and fix what is wrong. Take, for example, this reflection from a WSCR member on her initial approach to teaching in an urban school:

> I entered education with the expectation that I would be helping poor students of color "rise up" from their circumstances. I began my first job at a predominantly Black school with a combination of arrogance and ignorance that is born of privilege. As a result, I privately agonized over my students' disadvantages, but made few or no connections with community members, parents, or even students themselves who were already engaged in longstanding efforts to fight systems of oppression. Instead I muttered to myself about how things should be done, somehow imagining that because I read the "right books" and had the "right politics" I was qualified to design a plan to end institutional racism.
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> After a few years, I entered graduate school slightly more humbled, but no more certain about the role I could or should take in fighting racism. I hoped to use research to shed light on injustices, but I was losing confidence. I wrote in a response journal early in my graduate school career:
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> I feel strongly that issues of race, culture, and class are inherent in the research questions I wish to pursue. To what extent does my identity as a white middle class woman preclude me from writing critically about these issues? I once had a Black colleague say that even her most well intentioned white friends did not "get it." Who am I to write about race?
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> Troubled by how my "savior" approach had unwittingly patronized so many colleagues, parents and students, I felt paralyzed.
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> I now see that what was lacking in both of these approaches was a realization that race and racism are not things that occur outside of me. Working toward racial justice by "helping" others ignores the ways in which I, as a white person, continually benefit from systems of oppression and privilege. To ask who am I to write about race implies that I have no racial identity and that I am somehow outside institutionally racist systems. White Students Confronting Racism has provided a space for me to reconsider what it means for whites to engage in anti-racist work. I do have a role to play in the fight against racial injustice; the first step in assuming that role is to engage in self-education and self-reflection about systems of race in America and my place in them.
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> *- Susan Bickerstaff*

WSCR helps white people—especially white educators—understand that the laudable instinct to "fix things" is also highly problematic. This is the case because it undermines the work that people of color have been doing for hundreds of years in this country, and the work that is already underway in our particular institutions. It is also problematic because white people who are newly acquainted with racism and its many complex tentacles do not yet have sufficient resources to fight against it. They often still harbor racism or an internal sense of superiority that makes them inadequate allies to people of color. Stories abound in which purported white allies join an anti-oppression movement and quickly take over, dominate the conversation, control the agenda, put people of color at undue risk, and ultimately destroy the coalition (Kivel, 2002).

When WSCR takes action beyond "reflection as action," we follow the lead of people of color in our institution. It is important to remember that anti-racist action often has negative repercussions for people of color locally. It is necessary to have a coordinated strategy in order to do anti-racism work that does not end up hurting people of color in our institutions more than it helps.

BENEFITS OF A WHITE AFFINITY GROUP

Our group is not only a setting for learning and reflecting—it is also an important public declaration of white anti-racism. WSCR is a visible presence to white students at GSE in particular, and to our faculty and community overall. This serves both white people and people of color in our institution in different, valuable ways.

First, we are a resource for white people who seek further knowledge about race, or a space in which to process their thoughts and feelings around race. Classrooms often fail to provide the appropriate mechanisms, opportunities, or room for this to happen—our group fills the gap. WSCR is a place to which faculty or students can refer white students who feel confused, angry, or dissatisfied with their learning about race.

WSCR as Practitioner Inquiry

Although I studied urban education and thought I knew a thing or two about power, race and culture in schools, it wasn't until being mentored by a white woman during my first year in the field that realized I was marginalizing students of color by holding a subconscious deficit standard in mind. Rather than scolding or "retraining" me, my mentor supported me in my questions, providing a critically conscious lens on my own privilege. She caught my presuppositions in midair, and held them out for me, nonthreateningly, to examine. My fellowship as a Teach For America mentor has crystallized my belief in the importance of mentoring towards critical reflection. I'm passionate about supporting new teachers; however, I strive to approach my role as a tenuous guide. I question, "Who am I to mentor towards this goal?" and seek to bring a practitioner inquiry stance to my mentoring. But I lack the ability to do it alone.

Thankfully, within WSCR we have formed a space for individual inquiries. I wonder, for instance, how I might address differences in race and cultural background between the first-year teachers I mentor and their students? This problem is the heart and soul of my mentoring inquiry, within this critically conscious group. Without this group membership, I would likely be grasping at these problems of practice ineffectually on my own.

In both my classroom and my research, the model of personal movement toward reflective inquiry within a group of practitioners has been challenged by day- to-day reality. Teachers typically don't have the time or resources to undertake such inquiry, and when we do, our findings are often hard-pressed to find respect from administration and academe. Yet, I am hopeful. As Gerald Campano (2007) maintains, practitioner inquiry is taking place—in brief minutes in the faculty room or during shared prep periods—even though it isn't titled 'teacher research.' The power may be in the naming, he suggests: by giving a name to what it is many practitioners do – that is, inquire about our own practice – one may provide accessibility to practitioner research.

- Ellie Fitts Fulmer

Second, we offer "a fourth path" for white people. Beverly Daniel Tatum (2003) talks about the three white identities available to white people: the overtly racist white person, the guilty white person, or the colorblind "I don't see race" white person. Larger society does not portray many other models for white racial identity. WSCR helps white people approach Tatum's fourth white racial identity path, that of a white anti-racist ally. History books and popular culture do not teach us about white people who have allied themselves to the struggle for anti-racism throughout our history (Loewen, 2007; Tatum, 2003). And yet our history is full of white people who skillfully and successfully fought racism in their time. We hope that WSCR offers white people a way to be white while also being anti-racist.

Third, this work is critical for white educators who are preparing to work in, conduct research on, and understand multiracial settings. Educating, particularly classroom teaching, is an all-consuming effort that leaves little energy left over to reflect on one's own practice, especially in the first few years. Yet it is essential to continually examine one's race and its role in schools. (Indeed, avoiding this path is part of the dangerous lethargy of white privilege.) WSCR serves as an organic inquiry group, where our practice is the discipline of engaging in life as researchers, students, mentors, and teachers. Our inquiry is a two-fold challenge: How we might examine our participation in these activities thoughtfully as white people? And, more importantly, how might we catch, provoke, and guide one other as we work to align our learning, teaching, and research practices with principles of social justice?

Fourth, our group is a symbol to people of color at our school that there are white people who want to collaborate to end racism in our institution and in ourselves. No person of color asked us to form this group, and we certainly do not participate in it in order to secure thanks, appreciation, or approval. We do this work because we believe that we need it and our school needs it. However, we can also be a resource when other student groups and people of color ask us to work together with them as allies on anti-racism projects. Speaking out about race is often much less risky for us than it is for people of color, and we can therefore be useful and strategic as allies in classrooms. Having a white affinity group on campus means that when students of color are mobilizing around issues of race, they know where to find willing white allies. WSCR's visible presence helps make such partnerships possible.

WHITE ALLIES IN THE STRUGGLE FOR RACIAL JUSTICE

Unfortunately, we cannot guarantee that we will always be perfect allies. Given the way that whiteness has been rendered invisible in our society, much of our training as white people has taught us to see racism and racial hierarchies as normal. This is probably our single greatest challenge as allies. Even as we work to end racism, it is constantly cultivated in the world around us and in ourselves. We need to persistently root it out. Simultaneously, we must approach our allyship with humility, recognizing that we are fallible and remaining open to feedback and critique. In his talk at Penn as a part of the visiting Scholars of Color series (2008), Dr. Derald Wing Sue said that white allies can be the biggest barrier to racial justice because of their belief in their own superiority and their tendency to dominate the agenda, even within

the struggle for racial justice. This is one of our primary concerns as a group and we work to keep one another and ourselves accountable on this point.

White allies are not just allies to people of color. We are allies to each other.

It is extremely difficult to stay engaged in anti-racism work as a white person. There are many institutional forces telling us to butt out, or questioning the legitimacy of our stake in anti-racist work. People (mostly white) question our motives, claiming it is racist or supremacist—or just plain silly—to have a separate group. It can be hard to explain to family and friends. Yet a group like this is critical for identifying the other white allies in our environment who will challenge us and support our growth as anti-racist white people.

At each of our meetings, it is inspiring and sustaining to see the number of white people at Penn who choose to engage honestly and painfully in the work of self-reflection in order to be better white allies. Now we know whom we can count on to confront words or deeds of racism inside and outside of classes. We know whom we can approach when we are confused or dismayed by a conversation in class and need to talk about it. And most importantly, we know that there is a small but critical mass of people in our institution who are working to actively resist the racism and white superiority that surrounds us.

CONCLUSION

As an affinity group, White Students Confronting Racism provides a space for white people to develop our racial identity while simultaneously becoming effective anti-racist allies to people of color. "White" is often ignored as a racial category, yet its members wield considerable power within American social institutions, including schools. Understanding white identity within the context of immigration is also important, as American whiteness is arguably unique. Both white and non-white immigrants to the US may find themselves assumed to have racial identities they have never before experienced. White affinity groups can help white American teachers become competent and comfortable with racial issues, so that they can better support their students as they navigate racial structures that constrict opportunities for immigrants of color if they do not recognize them.

It is especially imperative that white educators work to identify and understand our privilege so that we do not perpetuate racial injustice. Doing this hard work with and among other white people is critical—not only for support and sustenance, but also for accountability and caution against co-opting the efforts of people of color. In short, we need to know our racial selves better before we can fully participate in anti-racist work, as understanding how race works enhances our ability to counter racism in ourselves and our environment.

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