Brief Peer Reviewed Article

OJED
OPEN JOURNALS IN EDUCATION

Volume 6, Issue 1 (2021), pp. 177-181
International Journal of
Multidisciplinary Perspectives in Higher Education
ISSN: 2474-2546 Print/ ISSN: 2474-2554 Online
https://ojed.org/jimphe

Managing My White Fragility: It's Not About Me

Katie Brkich
Georgia Southern University, Statesboro, GA, U.S.A.]

Abstract
White privilege, white fragility, and white systems of oppression, both in the workplace and in everyday life, function to cause white people desiring a more just society to stumble, even when they're aware of these obstacles. In this essay, I discuss my experiences, during the dual pandemics of 2020, in trying to manage my white privilege and my white fragility when thrust into a role for which I felt I was not qualified—teaching Culturally Relevant Pedagogy and Classroom Management—alongside a Black colleague who is an expert in social justice education. Contextualized partly in the police killings of Black people, I explore how white people like myself need to work consciously to always humanize people of color, especially when claiming racial justice allyship.

Keywords: apprenticeship model, co-conspirator, racial ally, white fragility

I am not an expert in social justice. I am an elementary science educator, with a focus on social justice within elementary science teaching and learning. I am a faculty member, in a College of Education, who has an awareness of my white privilege, of my white fragility (DiAngelo, 2018), and of the systems of oppression at work in my job and in my everyday life. But as a white person, trying to be a racial ally, one can get to a point where one recognizes and accepts that they have white privilege,

experience white fragility, and benefit from white supremacy, but become suspended in a state of inaction in that recognition.

I don't think I am naturally a good ally. Knowing when to speak and when to stay silent, knowing what to say when I speak, and knowing how to control my emotions either when I speak or refrain from speaking—none of these vital skills for effective allyship come easily to me. These are behaviors I am working on consistently and on which I am improving through practice, but I do so knowing I will fail again. I often cast myself as the leader—the first into battle to be seen and to take the hit, one of the loudest, most emotional, and most adamant and persuasive voices in the room, willing to act as a shield for those who need it. Acknowledging the thoroughly systemic nature of my overlapping layers of privilege as a White cisgender heterosexual woman with socioeconomic security, I try to wield my privileges as a weapon in the fight against social injustice. I am comfortable in that role.

However, this past summer I was cast into a role I was neither qualified to fill nor comfortable filling. I was assigned as an instructor in a course on Culturally Relevant Pedagogy and Classroom Management. I was assigned to teach one section of the course with Dr. Chelda Smith, a colleague of color who is an expert in social justice work. My being assigned to teach this course, which she had personally designed and taught previously, was an offense to her areas of expertise and an affront to her as the one now responsible for not only teaching her two sections of students, but also teaching me, her white colleague, what and how to teach my section of students. I felt like a burden placed on her without compensation or recognition of her role in supporting and educating me.

In preparing for and in teaching the course, we tried to take on an apprenticeship model for how I engaged. We chose this model as it was a useful metaphor for the asymmetrical relationship between Dr. Smith, one who has mastered the skills of the trade, and myself, one who is learning those same skills. This approach recognized that it was not just knowledge she would be helping me gain, but also skills, values, and dispositions that would allow me to help our students. Further, it required that I recognize that I was being educated, mentored, and scaffolded by an expert colleague who was willing to take on the work that was me.

I knew conceptually that the real work for systemic change is not done by coming to understand the systems of oppression from which you benefit, but rather what you do with that knowledge. But what does that look like in action? For me, it looked like me learning to manage my white

fragility and practicing treating Dr. Smith, as Zora Neal Hurston (2020) might put it, like she was white.

The course started on May 18, 2020. During our second live synchronous meeting with our students on May 25th, as we were discussing the murder of Ahmaud Abrey and Breanna Taylor earlier that year, Dr. Smith received a personal message that another Black man had been killed at the hands of police, this time in Minneapolis—a man we would soon learn was named George Floyd.

Following the egregious police killing of George Floyd, the Dean of our College dispatched an email entitled "Transforming Words into Actions". It had been more than ten days since Mr. Floyd's murder, with no comment made on the situation from either our University or College, so I worried about how my colleagues of color would experience both the email itself and the faculty's lack of response. As I mentioned before, I am usually one of the loudest, emotional and most adamant and persuasive voices in the room. Over time, that disposition has caused me to establish within our college a biased reputation that can undermine my efforts. Moreover, my reputation as one of the few non-Black champions for racial justice often left me as the sole voice speaking on the matter, absolving others from accountability. Therefore, when the call for "solutions" came from the dean's office, I had to balance my inclination with my reputation—in other words, my intent with the potential impact.

Under the advisement of my peers of color, I maintained my silence in the broader audience—as a means of not recentering the discussion on my words or experiences, but rather getting behind those who were being marginalized, listening to their voices and ideas, validating their existence as human beings and as professionals who belong in academia, and conspiring with them to plan an impactful response. Due to the global pandemic, and in the absence of direct opportunities to engage my colleagues of color face to face, I chose to demonstrate my support of them by giving them space to breath and feel. I suppressed the urge to reach out and overwhelm them with yet another call from a white person asking for validation through a veiled "how are you?" Instead, I sent cards that communicated that I was available but not requiring or requesting anything.

With my colleague Dr. Chelda Smith, I tried to be sensitive to the possibility that as a black woman who does social justice work, she was likely inundated with requests from white folks to be validated and affirmed. Therefore, when we connected, I focused on anticipating her

professional needs instead of pretending I could possibly be a safe haven for her racialized turmoil. As a result of my participation in this co-conspiracy, I have learned that part of being an ally is always humanizing people of color—especially in professional spaces, which are a historical and pervasive site of disenfranchisement and delegitimization (read "affirmative action hires" and tokenization). I imagine that the last thing a human needs during a time of crisis and trauma is to be invalidated for what they have rightfully earned and what they know. Additionally, I have learned that in working as a white ally, the very nature of my allyship is privileged. Challenging other white people—be they family, friends, professional colleagues, or students—poses the very real risk of damaging those relationships, possibly irreparably. This is not to say that I avoid these challenges. Rather, the process of deconstructing my own white privilege has made me fully aware that deciding when (or when not) to exercise this white privilege in challenging systemic racism at the cost of my own discomfort is in itself a privilege—indicative of the layered nature of systemic oppression. Allyship for white people like myself is akin to a jacket or a hat, it can be worn or removed with varying levels of ease or pain. In contrast, people of color do not have the privilege of this choice. Constant consciousness of this nature of allyship is needed to recognize the depths of my privilege as a member of a privileged group (Bishop, 2015).

I am learning to apply lessons from this one experience of humanizing my colleague of color by decentering myself to help other colleagues of color. I am trying to be an ally when I provide context regarding situations where I have insider experience and use that experience to provide affirmation for what they have chosen to do or validation for what they are experiencing. I am trying to be an ally when I meet individually with colleagues of color and co-conspire with them to better their situation or the broader systems. I have also worked to do this for my students of color. I am trying to be an ally when I listen to them when they simply want someone to know how hard what they are going through is and using that knowledge to leverage my privilege for others. I am trying to be an ally when I offer to provide deadline extensions and extra early feedback on assignments to those who might not have the privilege or agency to ask for it. I am trying to be an ally when I humanize both colleagues and students of color and account for their lived experiences, rather than expecting them to fit a one-size-fits-all box or holding them to traditional white standards of professionalism.

I am learning that the true value of doing this work is not about being seen doing the work. It's not about being recognized for doing the work. And it's certainly not about being thanked for doing the work. Showing up is a necessary but not sufficient condition. We need to stand behind people being marginalized, to listen to their voices and ideas, to validate their existence as human beings, and to conspire with them to disrupt and eventually dismantle white supremacy.

References

Bishop, A. (2015). *Becoming an ally: Breaking the cycle of oppression in people* (3rd ed.). Fenwood Publishing.

DiAngelo, R. (2018). *White fragility: Why it's so hard for white people to talk about racism.* Beacon Press.

Hurston, Z. N. (2020). The Conversion of Sam. In *Hitting a straight lick with a crooked stick: Stories from the Harlem Renaissanc*e. HarperCollins.

Authors Bio

KATIE LYNN BRKICH is a white, female, heterosexual Professor of Elementary Education with a focus in Science Education at Georgia Southern University in Statesboro, GA. She is the program director of the M.Ed. program in Elementary Education. Her research focuses on representation and positionality of women and people of color in STEM fields. Her email is kbrkich@georgiasouthern.edu