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Good Girls Make Bad Allies: How Well-Meaning White Women Perpetuate Anti-Blackness in Student Affairs

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In total, about 51% of student affairs professionals are white women, making us the largest race/gender demographic in the profession (Pritchard & McChesney, 2018). Even on teams that aren't led by a white woman, the behaviors and attitudes of white women strongly influence the dynamics of student affairs teams due to both the large numbers of white women in the profession and the privilege afforded to us by virtue of our whiteness. Despite the lofty promises many of us made back in June 2020, we are still failing to leverage that influence in support of antiracist praxis. Instead, white women in student affairs have continued to engage in ways that actively impede the liberation of our Black students and colleagues in this field.

I write this reflection as both an observer and a perpetrator of the behaviors I'm describing. As a cisgender white woman, I have certainly been complicit in the perpetuation of white supremacy and weaponization of white femininity. As an educator, I also believe that any of us are capable of changing our behavior if we are willing to sit in the discomfort of the harm we have caused and learn to do better. And so, with love, I invite my fellow white women to join me in this reflection and commit to real changes in attitude and action that will contribute to a more liberatory and equitable environment in our offices and universities.

Obstacles to Antiracism

In the workplace, white women engage in a variety of behaviors that present direct obstacles to antiracist work in student affairs. Most of these behaviors connect back to white supremacy culture, yet are inextricably linked to not only the race but also the gender of the perpetrators. In this section, I explore the roots of some of these behaviors, how they manifest in higher education, and their impacts on Black students and colleagues.

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Prioritization of Niceness

As a young professional, I have learned that if I smile, make friends, act like a "team player," and accept the decisions of those in authority, I am spared gendered critiques of my work style, such as "bitchiness" and "pushiness." Niceness can be a protection against misogyny. But in antiracism work, niceness is a stumbling block that we must let go of to be better allies and advocates for our students and colleagues.

Social constructions of niceness penalize those who are disruptive or who cause conflict or discomfort. People who are invested in seeing themselves as nice avoid potentially unpleasant interactions or experiences, choosing instead to focus on the positive. When an uncomfortable truth must be addressed, nice people will repackage it to be as pleasant and comfortable as possible (Castagno, 2019). The concept of niceness is also connected to fear of conflict, which Jones & Okun (2001) highlight as a characteristic of white supremacy culture. Generally speaking, it would not be considered "nice" to state bluntly in a divisional meeting that structural racism at your university is the reason Black students are not being retained at the same rates as their white peers. Instead, we should repackage those comments: "I think retention is a question of resources and grit. If we get those students to more appointments at the advising center, that should fix things!" Niceness at best obscures and at worst ignores inconvenient but nonetheless self-evident truths which must be explicitly named, acknowledged, and accepted before any sort of liberatory praxis can take root.

When we choose to say what is nice instead of what is true, we prioritize our comfort and reputation over the safety and freedom of Black students and colleagues. Being nice makes us "good girls," but it makes us bad allies. Instead, we must exchange niceness for compassion. Where niceness glosses over the suffering of others to maintain order, compassion calls us to fully see the totality of hurt that exists in our communities, to bring it to light so that we might alleviate it, and to seek out the source of that pain so we can eliminate it. Niceness may be rewarded in the short term, but only compassion will result in long-lasting change.

Centering Our Emotions

I started my first full-time role in student affairs in June 2020, just as nationwide protests in response to the killing of George Floyd were beginning. On my third day of work, the director of my new department hosted a Zoom call for the entire team to "come together amidst the current state of affairs." This meeting ended up being dominated by several white women on the team who took the opportunity to express how badly they felt about the "current state of

affairs," tears and all. Meanwhile, I think I can count on one hand the number of times my Black colleagues spoke in that space. This meeting was reminiscent of many others I have participated in - in feeling the need to prove how much we care, we prioritize expressing our own emotions rather than leaving space for those who are harmed by anti-Blackness to talk about what they need. We may believe that we are being brave or supportive by sharing how we feel, without considering that every minute of airspace we take up to vent our emotions is one less minute for those who are most harmed by the topic at hand to speak. When white women center our emotions in conversations about race, we silence the voices of BIPOC participants, especially colleagues and students who are women of color. Without listening to voices at the margins, there is no way forward for antiracist work in student affairs. Until white professionals, especially white women, are willing to listen far more than we talk and follow far more than we lead, we will continue to stand in the way of progress and liberation.

Refusing Accountability

On the other hand, when white women do sit and listen to the voices of Black students and colleagues we are quick to refuse accountability and instead demand absolution without accepting responsibility. Accapadi (2007) writes that because white women hold both a dominant and a marginalized identity, we can be simultaneously helpless (by virtue of our womanhood) and powerful (by virtue of our whiteness). However, we are quick to disregard the power we wield and situate ourselves as helpless victims when conversations about race get uncomfortable.

As women who have entered a helping profession, we become very invested in the idea that we are competent, compassionate helpers and we interpret any challenge to this self-concept as an attack, even if the challenge is really a call-in to accountability. Jones & Okun (2001) call this characteristic of white supremacy culture "Right to Comfort," or the belief that those with power are entitled to emotional and psychological reassurance. Instead of accepting responsibility for our shortcomings and harmful actions, we demand that the person who has pointed it out make us feel better about it. When that person is a BIPOC individual, we redouble the oppression they experienced by invalidating their expression of hurt. And, when we refuse to accept responsibility, it is likely we will continue doing the very thing our colleague or student has tried to re-educate us about.

Our BIPOC colleagues and students are under no obligation to bear their trauma and educate us when we have hurt them. So, when someone chooses to expend their time and emotional energy explaining to us how we have messed

up, we owe it to them to at the very least listen with an open mind and an inclination to believe them. Emotional responses are deeply ingrained in our socialization, so it will take a conscious effort to choose to respond with openness rather than defensiveness.

Conclusion

At the outset of this article I invited my fellow white women to join me in a reflection. As I conclude, I want to emphasize that this reflection is a beginning and not an end - as with all aspects of antiracist work, changing the response patterns I have explored here must be an intentional practice. For those of us who have grown up steeped in white supremacy, antiracist praxis requires unlearning deeply ingrained patterns of behavior and making the conscious choice to change our words and actions. The urgency of this decision cannot be understated: the longer we wait to make a shift, the more hardwired our responses become and the more difficult they are to undo. And the longer we wait, the more pain, trauma, and distress we cause our Black colleagues and students. Tomorrow is already too late - the shift in white women's behavior and mindset must happen now.

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