

My learning about how to be an anti-racism ally: Background

After the killing by white police officers of black people in the USA (e.g. George Floyd, Breonna Taylor) and in the UK (e.g. Joy Gardner, Sean Rigg), the Black Lives Matter movement, started in 2013, has recently gained in size and strength worldwide. In the UK, the Women's Equality Party formed a BAME caucus group. Since, as a white woman, I can't join the caucus, I elected to join the anti-racism Caucus Allies group. This group has a zoom meeting once a month, led by a woman from the caucus and with presentations and discussion on being an anti-racism ally.

Although I have always thought of myself as being fairly open-minded, and have throughout my working life worked with people from overseas and for black or international organisations, I have recently realized that I need to continue my education by reading, listening to, watching and reflecting on anti, white-racism resources so that I can become a better ally to those who experience discrimination from and by white people.

Most of us don't consider ourselves racist. But we live in a world where being white (and male), is still considered the norm. We are taught white male history at school. We are taught to revere white male painters, composers, musicians etc. Because of this, many historic and often unconscious words, deeds, attitudes, images, and artefacts prevail. For example, until recently, black ballerinas had to put up with wearing pink ballet shoes. All black people had to sport pink ('skin-coloured'!) plasters when they cut themselves. These are 'minor' irritations perhaps. The major examples of obstacles to schooling, training, jobs, housing, and justice that are in the way of BAME people mean they are, at every turn, faced with more problems than white counterparts. This is what I have been learning about.

People say that, by explaining what you have learned to others, you can better understand and remember the learning. The explaining to others may also be useful to them too if they are interested in the topic. So, with your permission, I propose to introduce in each newsletter a bite-sized chunk of learning on the topic of being an ally. Sometimes the chunk may be a question and response, sometimes a new piece of terminology, sometimes I'll give examples of a concept. My first topic, in the next newsletter will be, 'Who ME? (What is bias and how could I possibly be biased for white people, and against those of African, Black, Asian, or Minority Ethnic heritage?)'

If anything I write about my own learning is unclear or provokes comments or questions, I will be very happy to hear how you feel about things.

My learning about how to be a BAME ally. Bitesize One

Biased? Partial? Who ME?

We can understand bias or partiality as being, 'a prejudice for or against an idea, person or group.' Could I possibly be biased towards white people and against those of African, Caribbean, Asian or other minority ethnic heritage? Well, I need to consider this.

I was born into a white family. I lived in white towns in white counties. I went to an all-girls, all-white school in Devon. Our history lessons there were about white men, kings and battles. The literature we read was written, mostly, by white men. The only black person I ever remember seeing was on a

Christmas shopping trip to Plymouth. My Mother pointed the gentleman out. 'Don't look now but...' On our rented TV I watched mostly cowboy series like 'Laramie' where the heroes were white cowboys and the villains were the ones in black Stetsons or riding black horses or, of course, Indians. The only black people I saw on TV were my mother's favourite singers like Nat King Cole and Lena Horne, Mahalia Jackson and Paul Robeson. We did also watch the Black and White Minstrel show on Saturday nights where white men performed in blackface (actually red make up that looked black on a black and white TV) and the women singers showed a lot of leg. This was the world I grew up in. Luckily for me, my Mother was a feminist. She cared deeply about civil rights for women and often railed against unfairness and bias or prejudice against women. Like all women growing up in a sexist society though, she had nevertheless internalized some sexist views and, for example, felt that heavily pregnant women should stay home and not be seen in public.

Given my upbringing then, it is no wonder that I grew up thinking that white is normal and that male is normal. But it was not a case simply of there being an *absence* of black, Asian or minority ethnic people in my little world. Because, filtering through to me from the news....about the Mau Mau rebellion, about schools in the USA being segregated, the struggle of countries to gain independence from Britain, about Nelson Mandela being put in prison, about Martin Luther King being assassinated....was the realization that somehow there were problems in the relations between 'my kind' and 'others'.

Home, school, friends, the news, work, play....in these we are all of us socialized to expect certain things of women and of men. So much so that when, on board a plane in the 1980s, I heard a woman's voice coming over the speaker system and saying, 'Good Morning! This is your pilot speaking.' I did a double take. A woman pilot!

We are all of us in the UK socialized to expect certain things of black and brown people and of non-black people. So, I expect to see black singers and black athletes. But when I see an entire family, The Kanneh Masons, with seven siblings all gifted classical musicians or see Chineke, a majority Black, Asian and ethnically diverse orchestra, I am surprised.

So far I have just talked about 'normal' and 'other' and 'surprise' That doesn't sound too bad. But then I learn that bias means that:

- black women are given fewer pain killers after childbirth (despite high pain perception scores) than white women perhaps because medical staff have the belief that these women have a higher pain threshold or should not have access to opioids

- black children are much more likely to be excluded from school classes (for behaviour similar to white school kids) perhaps because they are expected to be 'trouble'

- black people driving decent cars are stopped by police much more often than white drivers perhaps because white police don't expect to see black people with enough resources to come by a good car decently.

Bias, I now see, can affect life chances in health, education, career choice and civil rights. I know it, as a woman, for gender reasons. Now I need to know it, as a white person, for heritage reasons. I need to get

a new view of myself that acknowledges the fact that my thoughts, attitudes, speech, behaviour, actions and decisions are biased.

My learning about how to be a racial equality ally. Bitesize Two

Moving out of the 'white=normal' mode.

In the October 2020 issue of this newsletter, I explained what triggered my decision to join the Women's Equality Party Racial Equality Caucus Ally group. In the November 2020 issue, I reflected on the fact that, given the country I was born in, my family, home, school, and social experiences, it's small wonder that I tend to be, consciously or unconsciously, biased towards those of my own skin colour and hair texture, seeing them/us as somehow normal and right.

The first thing I felt I could do about this partiality is to spend more of my time with people with a different skin tone and hair texture to my own. Since I am currently socially distancing and live in a tiny, very white hamlet in East Kent, it's difficult for me to get to know new people face to face who have a very different heritage to mine. And if I relied on Google, I'd find it difficult too since I am fed stuff that Google thinks I want to see, have seen in the past, and that fits my demographic. So, it took a while to figure out what to do. But it's simple really. Every day, yes EVERY day, I either read a book by a black author (e.g., Maya Angelou, Alice Walker, Zora Neale Hurston, Bernadine Evaristo) , or read a book about black characters (e.g., Andrea Levy's 'The Long Song') or watch TV programmes with presenters from diverse backgrounds (e.g., Emma Dabiri, Afua Hirsch, Samuel Jackson) , or scan the TV listings for interviews (e.g., the one with Alexandra Wilson black woman barrister). I Google '10 best black blogs'. Also, I am in a group of Women's Equality Party race equality allies all hunting for similar resources and we let each other know when we have found something interesting. One thing leads to another and so I have come across wonderful 'places' to 'go' to such as gal-dem.com, the independent British online and print magazine produced by and for non-binary women of colour.

And what has happened as a result of this deliberate, daily experience?

After some months, it now feels natural to me to read and hear and see people of African, Caribbean and Asian heritage. I'm moving out of my 'white = normal' mode. My new normal is bigger and more inclusive. I'm getting an insight into the issues that are specific to people of different heritages and which I have never had to think about or deal with. As a result, I am finding:

- new definitions of words (like 'racism') that I thought I knew how to define.
- words for concepts which are new to me (like 'micro aggressions' and 'micro interventions', 'racial profiling' and 'white fragility')
- new insights into old concepts (like 'reparation' and 'enslavement')

It feels good to be starting something interesting and important, and to feel that my world is expanding. In the next newsletter, I'll start unpicking my understanding of some of these new definitions, concepts and insights.

My learning about how to be a racial equality ally. Bitesize Three

A new definition of racism

In the October 2020 issue of this newsletter, I explained what triggered my decision to join the Women's Equality Party Racial Equality Caucus Ally group. In the November 2020 issue, I reflected on the fact that, given the country I was born in, my family, home, school, and social experiences, it's small wonder that I tend to be, consciously or unconsciously, biased towards those of my own skin colour and hair texture, seeing them/us as somehow normal and right. In the December 2020 issue I discovered ways to move out of the 'white = normal' mode that I had been in for a long time. In this issue, I'll start unpicking my understanding of some of the new definitions and concepts I have come across in this work. I'll start with the word 'racism'.

I used to think that white racism happened when appalling people enslaved black people or lynched them or set dogs on them or turned fire hoses onto peaceful demonstrators. I thought it was when black people were turned away from restaurants, refused accommodation and jobs by nasty white people. I thought it was when a country had laws that prevented people of colour from being in certain places, from owning property or from dating or marrying white people.

And since I do not regard myself as an appalling or nasty person or one who would intentionally hurt others and since, with some exceptions, I do not live in such a country, I thought I was not racist. I thought, rather, that I was racially progressive. In fact, if somebody had ever called me a racist, then I would have responded with outrage at the suggestion. I would have felt falsely accused of something terrible and would have wanted to defend my character from unwelcome insult.

But what if I understand racism as a system into which I have been socialized? What if I learn to see, as I have learned to see in gender politics, the lack of diversity in government, in boardrooms, in mass media, in 'good' housing districts, in 'good' schools? What if I learn to see the advantages I have had by virtue of my skin colour and hair texture, advantages that I have taken utterly for granted, since it has been my privilege never to have had to consider them? What if I learned to see that racism is not just about discrete acts committed by individual people but is, rather, a complex interconnected system in which I am located, and in which, if I do nothing and say nothing, I am complicit? Just as the policemen who watched George Floyd lying on the floor struggling for breath, were complicit in his murder and maintained the racial status quo.

If I understand racism this way, as a system in which I am located, then when somebody lets me know that something I have said or done is racially problematic, I can respond with gratitude and relief rather than anger and denial. If I accept that it will be impossible for me to completely escape my socialization, then these painful moments, when I am given information about my racially problematic words or actions, can be my chance to learn something valuable and then change my behaviour.

A big stepping-stone to this part of my understanding came when I read the book *'White Fragility: why it's so hard for white people to talk about racism'* by Robin DiAngelo. If you are intrigued but have no time to read the book, there is a video of an excellent lecture given by DiAngelo on June 28th 2018 at Seattle Central Library on this link:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=45ey4jgoxeU>

My learning about how to be a racial equality ally. Bitesize Four

A new concept, 'Micro-aggression'

In the January 2021 issue, I started unpicking some of the new definitions and concepts I have come across in my ally learning. I started with the word 'racism' and my new understanding that it is not just about discrete acts committed by repugnant individuals but is, rather, a complex interconnected system in which I am located. And in which, I may unwittingly think, say and do racially problematic things. And, I understand that if I do nothing and say nothing when others are racially problematic, then I am complicit. Understanding racism this way means that when somebody lets me know that something I have said or done is racially problematic, I can respond with gratitude and relief rather than anger and denial. If I accept that it will be impossible for me to completely escape my socialization, then these painful moments, when I am given information about my racially problematic words or actions, can be my chance to learn something valuable and then change my behaviour.

Here enters the term 'micro aggression'! A micro-aggression is a brief, commonplace, verbal, behavioural or mental event. Some examples? Well, let's imagine that I meet a woman of colour and say, 'That T shirt looks great on you! I could never wear that colour!' or, after hearing her speak at a meeting, I say, 'Well done! You were so articulate/eloquent!' or 'By the way, where are you actually from?' or 'Your name is so hard to pronounce' or 'Your hair is terrific! Is it real? Can I touch it?'

We could argue that some of these remarks are, on the surface, well-meaning and intended as compliments. But it is not the intention that is important. It is the unconscious meta-message, the fact that they communicate derogatory or hostile racial messages to the receiver that is important. It is not the **intention** but the **effect** that is important.

'Oh, come on!' we may say...'It was just a little remark. What's the big deal?'

But then we remember that if we are pinched once, it just hurts a bit. But if we are pinched again and again over days, weeks, years, on the same spot, we become sore and then wounded. A person of colour, out and about in the UK on public transport, at work and in their free time, may encounter many micro-aggressions in a day. They may be completely sick of them, tired of wondering where the next one is coming from. And if a person in this situation murmurs in dissent, they may well be accused of being touchy or having no sense of humour. If the person has the energy, they may try to explain why the unconscious message is hurtful. But they may have tried to explain in the past and got nowhere. They may be too exhausted that day to try to educate white people or those from a different heritage from themselves.

So, a first step for a person wishing to become a racial equality ally can be to unpick the conscious or unconscious offensiveness in our own potential conversational gambits. Below are some examples.

'Your name is so hard to pronounce.' (I find you a problem. I can't be bothered to get your name right)

'Can I touch your hair?' (Can I trespass into your personal space?)

'She's so articulate!' (I am surprised. It is unexpected)

'I'm colour blind. I don't see race' (I deny your identity and experience. And I have never had to think about my own colour or race)

'Where are you actually from?' (You don't belong. You are 'other')

'I'm not racist. I have a black neighbour/friend/colleague.' (I am immune to racism by virtue of proximity)

'I could never wear that colour!' (I am really noticing your skin colour and how different it is to mine)

'As a woman. I know what you go through as a person of colour.' (Your experience of racial oppression is the same as mine of gender oppression. Therefore, I am immune to any charge of racism)

So, my learning here is..... to make the invisible visible so that I become aware of being offensive. I have to move from the possible intention of what I say and do to its effect on the person I am with.

My learning about how to be a racial equality ally. Bitesize Five

A new concept, 'Micro-intervention'

In the last newsletter I looked at the concept of the micro-aggression. This is a brief, commonplace, verbal, behavioural or mental event that may, intentionally or unintentionally, communicate derogatory racial messages to the receiver. I gave some examples. One was of a person saying, after hearing a person of colour speak at a meeting, 'Well done! You were so articulate/eloquent! Your hair is terrific, by the way! Is it real? Can I touch it?'

I discussed the fact that though some of the example remarks I offered are, on the surface, well-meaning and intended as compliments, it is not the intention that is important. It is the unconscious meta-message, the fact that they communicate derogatory or hostile racial messages to the receiver that is important. It is not the **intention** but the **effect** that is important.

A person of colour out and about in the UK on public transport, at work and in their free time, may encounter many micro-aggressions in a day. They may be completely sick of them, tired of wondering where the next one is coming from. And if a person in this situation murmurs in dissent, they may well be accused of being touchy or having no sense of humour. If the person has the energy, they may try to explain why the unconscious message is hurtful. But they may have tried to explain in the past and got nowhere. They may be too exhausted that day to try to educate white people or those from a different heritage from themselves.

This is where an anti-racist ally can come in. When I am in the company of friends, family, colleagues or others, I may realise that someone has said or done something which is racially problematic. If I do and say nothing, I am in effect condoning the aggression. I am complicit. So, what can I do, as an anti-racist ally to interrupt the bias?

If I call a person out abruptly as a racist and take the high moral ground, I am likely to encounter defensiveness, upset and anger. Instead, I need to attempt to get the person to reflect, to learn, to empathise with the person attacked. I need to educate the person rather than lose them. This is where 'micro-interventions' come in.

I need to address the unconscious message in the micro-aggression, to make the invisible visible. This is because the perpetrator may be quite unaware that they have been offensive. I need to shift the focus from the intention of the remark or action to its effect.

Let's look at some problematic remarks and consider how we could interrupt the bias contained within them. It is sensitive work!

'Wow! She's so eloquent, so articulate!' 'Oh, what makes you say that? Are you surprised? What were you expecting?'

'White privilege doesn't exist. We all have problems in life.' 'That's true. But how often are we stopped by police when we are driving? Do store detectives follow us around when we go shopping? How often do people try to touch our hair? Do people clutch their handbags in fear when we pass them in the street?'

'All lives matter!' 'Absolutely! And all houses need to be protected. But if one house is on fire, don't we rush to protect that one first?'

'I'm colour blind! I don't see race!' 'I guess we don't have to see it! Everything is arranged for our benefit!'

'I'm not racist. I have a black friend, partner, neighbour, colleague...' 'That's funny! The other day, I heard a man say that he couldn't be sexist because he is a husband and a father of daughters!'

In this article I have assumed that we have been the ones to spot a micro-aggression and to want to do something about it by using a micro-intervention. But what happens if a person of colour calls us out and we realise that we have said or done something racially problematic?

That's my topic for next time!