

“I’m Not Racist; Some of My Best Friends Are . . .”

Debunking the Friends Defense and Revisiting Allyship in the Post-Obama Era

Cherise A. Harris

Connecticut College

Of all the names White Americans could be called in American society, *racist* ranks as one of the worst. As psychology professor Beverly Daniel Tatum says, “The word *racist* holds a lot of emotional power. For many White people, to be called racist is the ultimate insult” (Tatum, 1997). One of the reasons why the term is considered anathema by most Whites is because of the images it conjures in the public imagination. For example, in Joe Feagin and Hernán Vera’s (2000) book *White Racism*, one of their White respondents referred to Blacks a number of times as “apes” and admitted that her parents “always instilled in me that blacks aren’t equal,” but she nevertheless maintained: “I don’t consider myself racist . . . when I think of the word racist, I think of KKK [Ku Klux Klan], people in white robes burning black people on crosses and stuff, or I think of the Skinheads or some exaggerated form of racism” (pp. 215–216; see also Ashmore, 2009; Culp, 1993). Essentially, many Whites are reluctant to admit their racial prejudices and instead believe that “racism does not exist among the people of goodwill in America, who include most Americans. Racism and white supremacy are relegated in our time to the David Dukes and the few white supremacists” (Culp, 1993, pp. 211–212; see also Feagin, 2013).

Yet the widespread support for former Republican presidential candidate and now president Donald Trump and his overtly racist and ethnocentric rhetoric indicates that much has changed in the post-Obama era. There is now a greater willingness among many in the United States to tolerate or accept the most blatant forms of racism while also continuing to ignore subtler and often more insidious forms like employment discrimination, funding inequity in schools, voter disenfranchisement, and

sentencing disparity. In the contemporary United States, it is important to understand that racism is frequently practiced by people of "good will" and in the contexts of both individual and institutional racism. Being a "mean" person or a "bad" or "evil" person isn't necessarily a requirement for participating in racist behavior. Racists are often people who go to church, do charity work, love their families, and generally experience themselves and are experienced by others as "nice people" or "good people" (see Feagin, 2013). However, under particular circumstances, they are willing to participate in racist, discriminatory behavior.

Writer Ta-Nehisi Coates (2013) gives an example of this in his *New York Times* op-ed piece "The Good, Racist People":

In modern America we believe racism to be the property of the uniquely villainous and morally deformed, the ideology of trolls, gorgons and orcs. We believe this even when we are actually being racist. In 1957, neighbors in Levittown, Pa., uniting under the flag of segregation, wrote: "As moral, religious and law-abiding citizens, we feel that we are unprejudiced and undiscriminating in our wish to keep our community a closed community." A half-century later, little [has] changed.

As Coates suggests in his recounting of the skirmishes over integrating Levittown, Pennsylvania (one of the now iconic post-World War II planned suburban communities), racism isn't limited to people many consider "evil" or "bad," like White supremacists, but is also the practice of everyday Whites who consider themselves "good" people, who don't see themselves as racist at heart or who believe their words or actions aren't intended to be racist. However, focusing on what's in a person's "heart" rather than the impact of that person's racist behaviors actually further perpetuates racism. It privileges White Americans' feelings and alleged intent over and above the harm to people of color caused by their behavior—behavior that frequently results in individual and institutional racism.

In large part, the distinction between intent and impact was at the center of the contentious 2016 presidential race. Trump and his supporters were often accused of racism but frequently countered that advocating for a candidate who declared Mexicans rapists and criminals, who encouraged supporters to physically assault Black attendees at his rallies, or who suggested Muslim Americans should be made to register didn't mean that Trump or his supporters were practicing racism or were racist at heart. Meanwhile, nonsupporters continued to stress the impact such attitudes and behaviors would have on these groups, particularly if they were coming from the president of the United States. Indeed, within 10 days of taking office, Trump signed an executive order immediately banning entry to the United States for citizens from seven predominantly Muslim countries, which also led to the initial detainment and deportation of thousands of people and families, including those with green cards who had already been living and working in the United States, visa holders, translators for the U.S. military, and refugees fleeing persecution (*Globe Staff*, 2017; Singhvi & Parlapiano, 2017).

When Whites are accused of racism, a common refrain is, “I’m not racist!” which is frequently followed by another popular refrain: “Some of my best friends are [insert targeted group here, e.g., Black, Latino, Asian, Native American]!” Whatever the content of a particular individual’s friendship group, this is clearly an effort to avoid the stigma that accompanies the term *racist*. Indeed, when public figures face accusations of racism, “friendship” with people of color or familiarity with their culture is one of the first defenses offered. For example, when accused of prejudice toward Latinos, Trump tweeted photos of himself eating tacos, with the accompanying text: “#HappyCincodeMayo! The best taco bowls are made in Trump Tower Grill. I love Hispanics!” (Parker, 2016). When skewered for proposing a ban on Muslims entering the United States during his campaign, he said in a December 2015 CNN interview: “I’m doing good for the Muslims. . . . Many Muslim friends of mine are in agreement with me” (Krieg, 2015). In yet another instance, right before his inauguration, Trump took meetings with prominent Black celebrities like Kanye West and Steve Harvey—meetings that many believed were photo ops designed to combat the notion that he was prejudiced against Blacks. Despite his “friendship” (McDermott, 2016) with West, when asked why West wasn’t performing during the inaugural festivities when the Trump team was struggling to find willing performers, the chair of Trump’s inaugural committee said, “We haven’t asked him. . . . [Kanye] considers himself a friend of the President-elect, but it’s not the venue. The venue we have for entertainment is . . . going to be typically and traditionally American, and Kanye is a great guy but we just haven’t asked him to perform” (Diaz, 2017). The snub and subsequent comments from the Trump team suggested that perhaps Trump and West weren’t really friends after all and that rap music, even from an alleged Trump friend, wouldn’t be “American enough” for an inauguration.

Trump’s use of the friends defense follows the pattern of many public figures accused of racism. For instance, when radio personality Don Imus was accused of being a racist after calling the Rutgers University women’s basketball team “nappy-headed hoes,” his defense was, “I’m not a white man who doesn’t know any African-Americans” (MSNBC, 2007). He went on to discuss his work with ill children and how he attends funerals for many of the children, not just the White ones. The friends defense was also used in the George Zimmerman case. After the White Hispanic man killed 17-year-old Trayvon Martin in his father’s neighborhood because he looked suspicious, Zimmerman “family friend” Joe Oliver gave interviews vouching for Zimmerman, saying: “I’m a black male and all I know is that George has never given me any reason whatsoever to believe he has anything against people of color” (Trotta, 2012; see also MSNBC, 2012). Yet, when pushed, Oliver seemed to know few other details about Zimmerman’s life (Agyeman-Fisher, 2012; Valbrun, 2012), thus ultimately casting doubt on their “friendship” and the extent to which he could vouch for Zimmerman’s racial proclivities.

In a noteworthy application of the friends defense, in 2010, singer John Mayer caused an uproar when, during an interview with *Playboy* magazine, he boasted about his Black friends (e.g., “Black people love me”) and wondered aloud whether those relationships made him eligible for a “hood pass” or “nigger pass.” He went on to make

several additional racist and sexist statements, including describing his penis as having White-supremacist tendencies, because he doesn't seek out sexual relationships with Black women (Tannenbaum, 2012). Mayer was trounced in the media and subsequently lamented his arrogance while vowing never to say the N-word again (see Harkness in this volume for further discussion of the N-word).

The friends defense is also used by college students to excuse racist behavior. Leslie Houts Picca and Joe Feagin (2007) analyzed journals from 626 White students at more than two dozen colleges and universities in several regions over a course of 6 to 9 weeks. The diarists were asked to record their observations of everyday events in their lives that "exhibited racial issues, images, and understandings" (Feagin, 2013, p. 123). Hannah, one of their diarists, discussed being out with three other White friends when her friend Dylan started telling racist jokes, including referring to Black people as "porch monkeys" and joking that the most confusing day of the year in Harlem is Father's Day. Despite noting her own discomfort about his "jokes," Hannah firmly maintained, "My friend Dylan is not a racist person. He has more black friends than I do, that's why I was surprised he so freely said something like that. Dylan would never have said something like that around anyone who is a minority" (Picca & Feagin, 2007, pp. 17–18, cited in Feagin, 2013). As Picca and Feagin's research suggests, in the minds of many Whites, social interactions with people of color frequently serve as proxy for racial tolerance and understanding. Yet Hannah's account reflects three important points: (1) how easy it is for Whites, like Dylan, to have friends of color and still make racist statements; (2) that for many Whites, like Hannah, such statements are not enough for them to label a person like Dylan a racist; and (3) that a good deal of racist commentary from people who allegedly have friends of color happens in the social "backstage," or areas where only Whites are present, and not on the "frontstage," where strangers or people from diverse racial backgrounds are present and might express disapproval (Feagin, 2013, p. 123; Picca & Feagin, 2007; see also Goffman, 1959). Moreover, that Dylan would make such racist comments about a group with whom he purportedly has friendships means that we must also look at how Whites often overestimate or in other ways mischaracterize their friendships and relationships with people of color and the subsequent way they conflate these relationships with being an ally.

The Friends Defense Debunked

When we take a closer look at the friends defense and examine its merits, several issues arise. First, there is considerable doubt over whether these friendships even exist. A recent study from the Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI) found that "fully three-quarters of white Americans report that the network of people with whom they discuss important matters is entirely white, with no minority presence" (Cox, Navarro-Rivera, & Jones, 2016). This finding suggests that many Whites don't have close relationships with people of color—a finding we might expect given extensive neighborhood and school segregation.

Research also shows that Whites tend to exaggerate the depth of their friendships with people of color. In his book *Racism Without Racists*, sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2010) used survey data from the Detroit Area Study to investigate the nature of White friendships. The data set included 323 Whites, 66 of whom were randomly selected for in-depth interviews. Of the 66, a little more than a third ($n = 24$) claimed that they had Black friends whom they characterized as “good friends,” “best friends,” or friends with whom they “hung out.” However, after probing a bit further, Bonilla-Silva (2010) found that the strength of these friendship ties was more tenuous than his respondents originally indicated. For example, White respondents tended to “otherize” their Black friends, using distancing terms like “these people” or “them,” and often didn’t (or couldn’t) identify them by their first names. Additionally, the contact with these friends proved very superficial and typically took place in the context of sports, music, or the occasional friendly talk with a fellow student or coworker; all of these were characterized as “friendships.” Yet, as Bonilla-Silva indicates, “missing from these reports of friendship with blacks is evidence of trust, of the capacity of confiding, and of interactions with these friends beyond the place or situation of formal contact (classroom, assigned roommates, or job)” (p. 111). Finally, these “friendships” tended to evaporate after the class, rooming experience, band season, or job ended (p. 111). Thus, the friendships proved to be rather shallow and incomplete, which casts doubts on whether or not having “friends” of color can really be used to prove one doesn’t have racial prejudices.

Moreover, even if one did have friendships or repeated interactions with people of color, research shows that when the stakes of social interaction are even higher, deeper racial prejudices emerge. *Social distance* is the level of intimacy a person is willing to accept in his or her relations with people of other social groups. The creator of the social distance scale, Emory Bogardus (1933), specified seven dimensions of social distance: (1) close kinship by marriage, (2) members of one’s club or personal friends, (3) neighbors on one’s street, (4) employed in one’s occupation, (5) citizens in one’s country, (6) visitors to one’s country, and (7) would exclude from one’s country (cited in Healey, 2012, p. 27). Frequently, racial prejudices surface the further one travels on the social distance scale. For example, while people might be accepting of a Latino person in their workplace (Dimension 4) or living in their neighborhood (Dimension 3), they may not be as accepting of a Latino person marrying into the family (Dimension 1). In these ways, those who might present or view themselves as racially tolerant frequently show signs of prejudice as the contact in question becomes more intimate. In *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria*, Beverly Daniel Tatum (1997) illustrates how this phenomenon is evident in the changing racial composition of children’s birthday parties as children get older, termed the “birthday party effect” (pp. 56–57). Tatum observes that in elementary school, birthday parties in multiracial communities reflect the area’s diversity, but as children get older, parents’ anxiety about puberty raises fears about interracial dating and causes birthday parties to become more racially homogeneous.

Indeed, attitudes toward interracial dating often expose hidden prejudices even among those who appear racially tolerant and open-minded. Erica Chito Childs (2005)

suggests that attitudes toward interracial dating and marriage serve as "a miner's canary, revealing problems of race that otherwise can remain hidden, especially to whites" (p. 6; see also Bonilla-Silva, 2003, and Khanna in this volume). Childs witnessed this firsthand in her own family. She married a Black man and noted that her sister and her family never expressed any opposition to her relationship and, in fact, appeared supportive. However, when her sister's daughter wanted to attend the prom with a Black schoolmate she was dating, the sister and her husband refused to let him in the house, claiming he was "not right" for their daughter (Childs, 2005, p. 4). Childs maintains, "It was clear to everyone, however, that skin color was the problem. To this day, my niece will tell you that her parents would never have accepted her with a black man" (p. 4). From this story, it seems that Childs's sister and brother-in-law were accepting of interracial dating in theory, but when it came to *their daughter* potentially becoming involved with a Black person, the stakes were much higher and hidden prejudices suddenly emerged. In these ways, Whites who are seemingly tolerant can hold racist views that become evident when put to the test.

Perhaps most detrimental is when this type of discrimination occurs within the context of more formal spaces like the workplace. Here, discrimination can be more than psychologically painful; it can lead to differential outcomes in hiring and promotion. For instance, legal scholar Jerome McCristal Culp Jr. (1993) offers several examples of how his family members have battled this type of discrimination. In one instance, he tells the story of a relative who worked in a state agency and finished first on the approved tests for a particular position but was still denied the position by her supervisors and was instead offered another position with equal pay but less flexibility. In another instance, he tells the story of how his uncle who served on a police force was at the top of the promotion list but was forced to take an additional test beyond those previously required of White candidates before he could become the first Black lieutenant on the force. As Culp explains about these examples, "In none of these situations were white people always evil or impolite to black people. Many of the supervisors thought they were true friends of my relatives, but they were willing to manipulate the situation to ignore the concerns of black people" (p. 241). While these instances may appear anecdotal, the presence of this kind of discrimination in the workplace has been well-documented (Bertrand & Mullainathan, 2004; Cose, 1993; Feagin & Sikes, 1994; Pager & Shepherd, 2008). In these ways, White Americans who are experienced as otherwise "nice" and "friendly" people may discriminate if it is to their advantage. The failure to acknowledge these more covert forms of racism results in a worldview where many may believe that racism no longer exists and that America is a meritocracy where the playing field is level and anyone who works hard can be successful (Bonilla-Silva, 2010; Gallagher, 2004; McIntosh, 2007; see also Ioanide in this volume). In these ways, the subtler forms of racism that are more prevalent and more destructive go undetected and remain unchallenged.

To be sure, avoidance of racial topics and issues fits well within the recent discourse on "post-racialism," where some have argued that race doesn't matter or carries much less importance than in previous moments in American history.

(For a debate on the term *post-racial*, see National Public Radio, 2010; see also Bonilla-Silva, 2010, and Wise, 2009, 2010, for critical responses to the term.) Use of this term became more frequent after the election of America's first Black president, Barack Obama. Social critics, political pundits, and academics alike asserted that his election wouldn't have been possible had the nation not been taking a gradual turn toward post-racialism.

Nevertheless, voter data show that it is entirely possible to hold racist views and still vote for a Black president (Pettigrew, 2009). For example, in his article "Racial Views Steer Some Away from Obama," Ron Fournier (2008) of the Associated Press (also cited in Pettigrew, 2009) found that a third of White Democrats ascribed one or more negative adjectives (e.g., *violent, complaining, lazy, irresponsible*) to Blacks, yet 58% of them still supported Obama in the 2008 election. Moreover, as Thomas F. Pettigrew (2009) pointed out, "while Nebraska voters gave one of its electoral votes to Obama, they also passed by 58% to 42% a ban on race- and gender-based affirmative action. Previously, voters in California, Michigan and Washington State had passed similar referenda, yet all three provided Obama wide winning margins in 2008" (p. 283). The ability of Whites to hold (or at least tolerate) prejudiced views and still vote for a Black candidate is also evident in the fact that some who voted for Obama in 2008 and/or 2012 also voted for Trump in 2016. *Washington Post* data (Uhrmacher, Schaul, & Keating, 2016) found that of the 700 counties that carried Obama in both 2008 and 2012, a staggering one third of them broke for Trump in 2016. *Slate* chief political correspondent Jamelle Bouie (2016) explains the seeming paradox like this: "In the same way it has always been possible for white Americans to love black individuals and vote for the subjugation of black people, it is also possible to like Barack Obama and also yearn for a return to [an] idealized past," one where "whites—and white men in particular—were the uncontested masters of the country." Clearly, the above evidence suggests that it is possible to support and vote for a Black president and still harbor and act upon racial biases.

To some degree, Obama's victories were based on a sense of "enlightened exceptionalism" (Wise, 2009), or a type of racism in which Whites show an affinity for "special" Black people whom they perceive as different from most Blacks. Citing journalism and academic research on Obama's triumph, Bobo and Dawson (2009) provide evidence of this:

One *New York Times* story reported on racial prejudice as a possible influence even among young voters. It quoted a White student from the University of Kentucky as saying: "I don't have any problem with a black president. I think it would be fine, because a lot of things people stereotype black people with, I don't think Obama has any of them" (Dewan, 2008). In short, Obama had "escaped" or transcended the stereotype. (p. 7)

Enlightened exceptionalism also often occurs with friendships, where one accommodates specific individuals of color without modifying a wider set of attitudes about

people of color as a whole. In these ways, it is possible to have friends of color and still be prejudiced toward that same group.

Likewise, it is also possible to express interest in or appreciation for aspects of a group of color's culture (e.g., music, food, language) without having a true awareness or understanding of the sociopolitical struggle that group faces. For example, feminist and race bloggers have been calling attention recently to cultural appropriation (see Dennis in this volume), often dubbed "hipster racism." Some define hipster racism as instances where college-educated Whites (many of whom live in gentrifying areas and claim to have friends of color) co-opt elements of various cultures that belong to people of color, like Native American articles of clothing or symbols or Asian cuisine, for the purposes of entertainment (West, 2012). Critical race theorist Patricia Hill Collins (2009) refers to such behavior as "voyeurism," where the lives of people of color "are interesting for entertainment value" and the "privileged become voyeurs, passive onlookers who do not relate to the less powerful, but who are interested in seeing how the 'different' live" (p. 104). Similarly, Black feminist scholar bell hooks (1992) refers to this phenomenon as "eating the Other," where some Whites believe that exposure to different peoples and cultures "will provide a greater, more intense pleasure than any that exists in the ordinary world of one's familiar racial group" (p. 24; see also Ott & Mack, 2010, p. 145). Many would point to the mass consumption of hip-hop music and culture by middle-class Whites as an example of these phenomena. Passing familiarity with people of color or mass consumption of their cultures rarely serves as proxy for racial understanding and, in fact, frequently reflects a covert form of "othering." For all these reasons, it is important to begin to shift our discourse away from appreciating diverse cultures and having diverse friends as evidence of support for groups of color and instead move toward a definition of what it really means to be an *ally*.

From "Friends" to Allies

Understanding Allyship

The aforementioned racial rationalizations in this essay are often the result of well-meaning Whites attempting to express support for and identification with people of color, albeit in a superficial way (Feagin, 2001). Typically, it's an attempt to present one's self as an ally to people of color. However, as White anti-bias educator Emily Chiariello (2016) says,

Over-familiarizing with people of color—[i.e.] "I hang out with people of color so I'm not racist"—reduces race to a lifestyle choice and can offer an easy way out of difficult anti-racism work. Appreciating a diverse group of friends or colleagues does not take the place of confronting white privilege, addressing internalized white guilt or responding to the biases of other white people. (p. 33)

The action-oriented nature of allyship is clear in various researchers' and thinkers' definition of an ally:

- According to Andrea Ayvazian (2009): "An ally is a member of a dominant group in our society who works to dismantle any form of oppression from which she or he receives the benefit" (p. 612). She goes on to say that being an ally means taking personal responsibility for the changes necessary in society and not ignoring or leaving others to deal with it: "Allied behavior is intentional, overt, consistent activity that challenges prevailing patterns of oppression, makes privileges that are so often invisible visible, and facilitates the empowerment of persons targeted by oppression" (p. 612).
- Sociologist Kristie A. Ford and co-author Josephine Orlandella (2015) define a White ally as "a person who consciously commits, attitudinally and behaviorally, to an ongoing, purposeful engagement with and active challenging of White privilege, overt and subtle racism, and systemic inequalities for the purposes of becoming an agent of change in collaboration with, not for people of color" (p. 288).
- Paul Kivel (2012) adds that there is no one way to be an ally, as each of us has different relationships to social organizations, political process, and economic structures. Nevertheless, being a racial ally is "an ongoing strategic process in which we look at our personal and social resources, evaluate the environment we have helped to create and decide what needs to be done" (p. 157).

Also important to note is that allies act on the basis of ethical commitments to a sense of justice and fairness, regardless of friendship.

Feagin and Vera's (2012) research on antiracist Whites lends further insight into the behavior of allies. Antiracist Whites, in particular, actively seek out interactions with people in other racial/ethnic groups and have cultivated *close* (emphasis added) friendships across the color line (Feagin & Vera, 2012)—friendships that often open their eyes to the realities people of color experience while also making them aware of their own White privilege (Cabrera, 2012). To be sure, awareness of White privilege alone is not enough; Whites must also be ready to explore their own complicity in racial oppression (Cabrera, 2012) to become allies. As Feagin and Vera (2012) find, antiracist Whites tend to be most aware of their own racism and the racism of others, and while they aren't certain they can really understand the experiences of people of color, they make an honest attempt.

Many Whites come to recognize their own racism after a critical event or experience. One compelling example comes from Feagin and Vera's (2012) "Confronting One's Own Racism," where they talk about a graduate student's project in which she interviewed Whites trying to overcome their racism. One respondent was a White teacher who noticed that she gave support and attention to Latino toddlers but not to Black toddlers where she once worked. She said:

And it was like I got hit with a bucket of cold water. . . . And I cried and I cried, because I realized that *I had a prejudice*. And I thought I was without it. . . . So

I went back and I picked him up, and I played with him. . . . I sat him on my lap, and we did these little cutey games, patty-cake or whatever. And I had to work myself into it, because it was hard to do. . . . I had to *make myself* do it. . . . It wasn't easy to do, [but] once I knew that I was acting in a way that was prejudiced, I had to work very hard to overcome that. (p. 153; emphasis added)

The authors find that this is a common quality among antiracist Whites, where they go beyond empathy and understanding for what people of color have experienced to taking "proactive stances to confront their own internalized racism and the racist views and actions of other whites" (p. 154).

The above example also suggests that White allyship requires reaching beyond any guilt one may have regarding one's racial privilege and one's own racism to do necessary social justice work. Tatum (1997) discusses the "guilty White liberal persona" (p. 106), where Whites in the beginning stages of developing a racial consciousness might become mired in guilt. This sometimes allows them to divert conversations on race toward how to deal with their own guilt (Apple, 1998; see also Cabrera, 2012). Fixating on guilt over racial privilege typically isn't enough to move one toward action (Cabrera, 2012; Gaffney, 2016; Smith & Redington, 2010). And since it is impossible for Whites to merely give up their racial privilege, "[they] have a responsibility to use it in the service of greater racial justice" (Owen, 2009, p. 203). In the next section, I discuss how Whites have done and are continuing to do this.

White Allies Then and Now

In order for today's White Americans to become allies, they must have role models who can demonstrate what real allied behavior looks like so they can enact similar behaviors and strategies. Essentially, the adage holds true: You cannot be what you cannot see. Ayvazian (2009) discusses how White allies have long played an integral role in social justice movements—allies like Laura Haviland, who was a conductor on the Underground Railroad and helped enslaved Africans flee to Canada; Sarah and Angelina Grimké, who were abolitionists who faced ridicule and abuse for their anti-slavery stance; and John Brown, who was hanged after leading a rebellion against slavery in Harper's Ferry, West Virginia. The civil rights movement includes more examples of White allies, including Virginia Foster Durr, who drove Black workers during the Montgomery bus boycott and, along with her husband, attorney Clifford Durr, and Rev. E. D. Nixon, bailed Rosa Parks out of jail; Rev. James Reeb, a Boston minister who was killed by segregationists during the voting rights march in Selma, Alabama; and Anne and Carl Braden, who fought for desegregated schools and open housing and even bought a house for a Black couple in an all-White neighborhood in Kentucky, for which they had their windows shot out, their house bombed, and a cross burned in their yard.

More recent examples of White allies include Morris Dees, who started the Southern Poverty Law Center and brings lawsuits designed to cripple White-supremacist hate groups; Dr. Laurie Olsen, who has spent decades working on projects designed to improve the treatment of immigrant students and protect the rights of Americans for

whom English is a second language; and Dr. Peggy McIntosh, who wrote the groundbreaking piece “White Privilege and Male Privilege: A Personal Account of Coming to See Correspondences Through Work in Women’s Studies” (1988) and consults with colleges and universities on creating multicultural and gender-fair curricula. The *actions* of these people are indicative of what it really means to be an ally and support people of color: to be willing to use one’s own privilege in the pursuit of social justice and to do so in the face of significant opposition.

White Americans are increasingly taking on the challenge of becoming allies. Social psychologist Kim A. Case’s (2012) interviews and observations of 21 White women antiracists has been particularly instructive in this regard. Case researched an organization called White Women Against Racism (WWAR), composed of White women from two universities in the Midwest. Among other things, the group endeavors to “bring White women together to do self-work around racism, privilege, and responsibility for helping effect change” while cultivating their anti-oppression skills in their personal and professional lives through “facing, examining, and decreasing [their] own racism” (Case, 2012, p. 82). Most of these women willfully identified themselves as “racists” or as people who had at least done racist things. While some said this was a difficult identification because of the idea that “you have to be in the Klan to be racist,” others embraced the identity, like Pauline, a respondent who said, “We are all so scared that someone is going to call us racist. I find one of the ways to get over that is to do it yourself first” (p. 84; see also Fair, 2015). Some in the group even found that admitting their racism made it easier to talk with other Whites about racism and call them out on their racism.

In her interviews, Case (2012) discussed how WWAR members attempted to be hypervigilant about their privilege, like noting when they were pulled over by police and let go without a ticket or when they were receiving preferential treatment from a landlord. WWAR members also felt that racial activism wasn’t limited to marching and legislation but included confronting family members or coworkers about their racism or intervening when a store clerk ignores a Black customer. In addition, a few members also found ways to support and advocate for people of color. For example, one respondent, Madison, who intentionally hired a diverse staff of student workers, searched for scholarships for students of color, and was planning to become a counselor for disadvantaged populations. Another respondent, Kitty, decided to use her business degree for a career in diversity consulting. As Case says, “these daily actions illustrate that these White women wove anti-racism into various settings in their lives” (p. 87).

Case’s research is also instructive because it suggests that being a White person with a disenfranchised status (in this case, a cisgender woman) doesn’t automatically translate into a greater understanding of racism. Some of her respondents even discussed how their focus on sexism and their identities as feminists kept them from critically examining their Whiteness because “there is an assumption that feminists ‘get it’” (Case, 2012, p. 86). Similarly, in his research on White men working through their Whiteness, Nolan L. Cabrera (2012), an assistant professor of higher education, found that White men who were also gay or Jewish were able to express greater empathy

toward people of color but that those statuses did not guarantee an understanding of how racism operates. Having that understanding is key to allyship (Smith & Redington, 2010; see also Cabrera, 2012).

The examples in this section suggest that White allies have maintained a constant presence in the United States, despite the lack of attention they have received. Key to all of their stories is a sense of action and an unwillingness to abide by racist practices and behaviors even if their group ultimately benefits from them. In the final section of this essay, I discuss concrete ways Whites can begin to practice allyship, while keeping in mind that allyship is more of "a personal striving rather than a goal with a definitive ending" (Case, 2012, p. 91; see also Ford & Orlandella, 2015).

Ways You Can Be an Ally

As the actions of White Women Against Racism suggest, there are *many* ways to be an ally. In "Ten Things You Can Do to Improve Race Relations," racial inequality scholar Charles A. Gallagher (2012) offers that while ongoing and pervasive institutional racism may lead us to believe that there is nothing that can be done to improve race relations, "at the individual, interpersonal, and community level you can engage in activities to promote equal opportunity while building bridges between people from different racial backgrounds" (p. 401). Below is a list of ways to fight racism, from leading scholars, thinkers, and activists (Cabrera, 2012; Case, 2012; Fair, 2015; Gaffney, 2016; Gallagher, 2012; Smith & Redington, 2010).

- Respectfully engage friends and family in what you learn in your race classes, including politely and nonjudgmentally asking them about the origins of their racial prejudices.
- Correct outdated language like *colored* or *Oriental*.
- Stop others from telling racist jokes.
- Challenge commonly held stereotypes of groups of color so folks of color don't have to continuously educate their oppressors.
- Be introspective and honest enough to examine why you act or behave in a certain way toward someone of a different ethnic or racial group.
- Step out of your comfort zone and involve yourself in situations where you will be exposed to people of different racial and ethnic backgrounds.
- Be a positive role model to younger people in your life who look up to you, and explain what it really means to live in a multiracial, multiethnic society.

Also of great importance is remembering that as an ally, "your voice should never be louder than that of the people you are supporting" (Fair, 2015, p. 85). As Deen Fair says in her piece "An Open Letter to 'White Allies' From a White Friend," "think of it this way: You are a backup singer to the movement. Your voice should merely serve as a part of the chorus, supporting the leading roles in the play" (p. 85). In addition, Whites should not expect credit for being an ally and should be ready to thoughtfully accept any criticism for how they may be practicing allyship (Gaffney, 2016, p. 36).

To be sure, allyship can be challenging. People who practice it admit that sometimes they remain silent because they are avoiding disapproval and conflict, because of power differences between them and the person participating in racist behavior, because they fear that they won't be able to effectively confront the behavior, or because they are simply exhausted (Case, 2012; see also Smith & Redington, 2010). White women in Case's study also talked about the gendered pressures of the "good girl" persona, where girls and women are often taught to "be nice, good, don't start trouble, [and] be tactful" (p. 88). Yet Case rightfully notes that none of these women acknowledged the tension and unpleasantness that was already present for them as soon as the racist remarks or behaviors occurred. Essentially, we have been socialized to accept racism as the norm, and openly rejecting it is perceived as deviant behavior.

Indeed, being an ally is risky, as it may result in losing friends or relatives who aren't like-minded. As a result, it may be difficult to enact or practice with a great deal of consistency (Ayvazian, 2009; Case, 2012). The level of discomfort involved in understanding privilege can itself be enough to put off Whites who are considering becoming allies. As psychologists Laura Smith and Rebecca M. Redington (2010) claim, "newcomers to multicultural and social justice training often find the path challenging as they are called upon to examine previously unquestioned assumptions" (p. 547). For example, for many White students who first begin to engage with a definition of racism that moves beyond the individual to the systemic, understanding dynamics of power and privilege can be quite difficult. They may feel a sense of embarrassment, guilt, compassion, or even obligation (see Hardiman, 2001; Tatum, 1997) toward people of color and may want to act out of empathy. When students of color are on the receiving end of this behavior, they may react with frustration toward yet another well-meaning White person who "doesn't *really* get it" (see Tatum, 1997) or in other ways exhibit what White students might perceive as a lack of proper appreciation. While this may cause White students to become angry at not being seen as individuals (Tatum, 1997) or as "one of the good ones," coming to terms with the challenges of social justice is part of the racial identity development process for Whites in a racialized society (Hardiman, 1994; Helms, 1990; Tatum, 1992). Furthermore, Paul Kivel (2012) notes in "How White People Can Serve as Allies to People of Color in the Struggle to End Racism" that the point of being an ally isn't necessarily to curry favor with people of color: "We are not fighting racism so that people of color will trust us. Trust builds over time through our visible efforts to be allies and fight racism. Rather than trying to be safe and trustworthy, we need to be more active, less defensive, and put issues of trust aside" (p. 160). Thus, being a true ally requires some "unglamorous" work and often the help and support of like-minded others (Ayvazian, 2009; Case, 2012; Ford & Orlandella, 2015; Kivel, 2012; Owen, 2009; Smith & Redington, 2010; Tatum, 1997; Welp, 2009). And while all this may be hard work, it is important to realize that on the other side of the struggle to become an ally is "a joyful feeling of connection to humanity and a sense of integrity that comes with translating one's beliefs into action" (Smith & Redington, 2010, p. 547).

Cherise A. Harris is an associate professor of sociology at Connecticut College. She specializes in race, class, and gender, and teaches courses on the sociology of ethnic and race relations; the sociology of inequality; race, gender, and the mass media; and middle-class minorities. Her book, *The Cosby Cohort: Blessing and Burdens of Growing Up Black Middle Class*, was published in 2013. She is also on the editorial board of *Teaching Sociology* and has been published in other journals, such as *Sociological Spectrum* and *Journal of African American Studies*.

SUGGESTED ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

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Websites

- Alliance of White Anti-Racists Everywhere—Los Angeles (AWARE-LA): <http://www.awarela.org>
 The group's mission is "to work toward the abolition of the white supremacist system and all systems of supremacy through building communities of Radical White people in solidarity with people of color in the larger movement for racial, social, economic, and environmental justice."
- Safehouse Progressive Alliance for Nonviolence: <http://www.safehousealliance.org/index.cfm>
 The website also offers extensive information on racism and antiracism in the organization's manual, *Tools for Liberation: Building a Multi-Ethnic, Inclusive & Antiracist Organization*.

Training for Change: <http://www.trainingforchange.org>

Provides activist training for groups standing up for justice, peace, and the environment through strategic nonviolence

White Anti-Racism: Living the Legacy: <http://www.tolerance.org/supplement/white-anti-racism-living-legacy>

From *Teaching Tolerance*, published by the Southern Poverty Law Center

White Men as Full Diversity Partners: <http://www.wmfdp.com>

Audio/Visual

Mulholland, L. (Director & Writer). (2013). *An ordinary hero*. United States: Taylor Street Films. (Film documents the story of Joan Trumpauer Mulholland, a White antiracist who spent months in prison during the Freedom Rides and fought alongside leaders in the civil rights movement.)

Wah, L. M. (1994). *The color of fear*. United States: Stir Fry Productions. (Film features a multiracial cast of men discussing the state of race relations and the challenges of allyship.)

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

1. Do you think it is possible to have friends of another race and still hold racist attitudes? Why or why not?
2. Do you think it is possible to oppose interracial dating and not have racist attitudes? Why or why not?
3. What aspects of other cultures have you embraced? Do you feel equally as comfortable with the group of people who consider that culture their own?
4. Often in popular media, celebrities and artists co-opt parts of a racial or ethnic group's culture (e.g., Madonna, Gwen Stefani, Miley Cyrus). What do you think about the way some celebrities co-opt Asian or Black culture, for example? Is this racist? Is it similar to or different from the use of Native American culture in the naming of sports teams (e.g., Washington Redskins, Atlanta Braves, Cleveland Indians, Florida State Seminoles, etc.), as Williams discusses in his essay in this volume? Debate your classmates.
5. Consider Bogardus's scale. List the major racial and ethnic groups in America and apply them to each dimension on the scale. As you travel up the scale, how do you feel about increased contact with a particular racial group? What do you make of your findings? Now think about yourself as a parent and do the scale again. Would your level of comfort toward particular racial or ethnic groups change if they lived in your neighborhood and could play with your child or date your child when he or she became a teenager?
6. If you're still struggling with issues of race and racism, with what do you struggle? What are your hang-ups around this issue?

REACHING BEYOND THE COLOR LINE

1. If you are a White student, think about the people of color whom you consider friends and examine the depth of your friendship. Do you know their last names? Do you know how many brothers or sisters they have? Do you know where they grew up? What is their experience of being students of color on campus? Consider finding out the answers to these questions if you don't already know them.
2. If you are a student of color, think about the White people whom you consider friends and examine the depth of your friendship. How much do you know about them? How much do they know about you? Do you ever hold back on telling them things about your life? Why or why not? Do you feel that White people will ever be able to "get it"?
3. Given the information above on being an ally, what are you committed to do to promote greater social justice? And what else do you need to move forward (e.g., greater education or knowledge, the support of like-minded others)?

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