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Q&A: Privilege and Allyship

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Q&A: Privilege and Allyship

Abstract

Question: I've always wondered about this: as a white, heterosexual male person who cares about the way minorities and marginalized populations are treated, what gives me the right to feel offended or call someone out on something they say that's a definite gray area when I don't belong to that group? I believe that as a privileged individual it is my responsibility to advocate as an ally but it would conversely be an exercise of my privilege if I were to be the one to decide what is and isn't offensive to a whole group of people I don't belong to. So my question is: what is the moral implication and the power dynamic of a privileged person being offended on a minority's behalf? Is it right? Is it privileged? Is it audacious? I need to know! [*excerpt*]

Keywords

Surge, Surge Gettysburg, Gettysburg College, Center for Public Service, ally, allyship, chescaleigh, discrimination, Franchesca Ramsey, Jonathan Lewis, Kingian nonviolence, language, nonviolence, Privilege, Social Justice, Solidarity, White Privilege

Disciplines

Civic and Community Engagement | Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies | Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Studies | Women's Studies

Comments

Surge is a student blog at [Gettysburg College](https://www.gettysburg.edu/) where systemic issues of justice matter. Posts are originally published at surgegettysburg.wordpress.com Through stories and reflection, these blog entries relate personal experiences to larger issues of equity, demonstrating that -isms are structural problems, not actions defined by individual prejudice. We intend to popularize justice, helping each other to recognize our biases and unlearn the untruths.

SURGE

[VERB] : to move suddenly or powerfully forward or upward

Q&A: PRIVILEGE AND ALLYSHIP

February 2, 2016



Question: I've always wondered about this: as a white, heterosexual male person who cares about the way minorities and marginalized populations are treated, what gives me the right to feel offended or call someone out on something they say that's a definite gray area when I don't belong to that group? I believe that as a privileged individual it is my responsibility to advocate as an ally but it would conversely be an

exercise of my privilege if I were to be the one to decide what is and isn't offensive to a whole group of people I don't belong to. So my question is: what is the moral implication and the power dynamic of a privileged person being offended on a minority's behalf? Is it right? Is it privileged? Is it audacious? I need to know!

Answer: First, let's distinguish between advocating as an "ally" and "deciding" what is or is not offensive.

Your responsibility as a person of privilege and an "ally" is to educate yourself on the words, phrases, and actions that the individuals in marginalized populations have themselves decided are offensive. Then, with what you've learned in mind, you can and should call people out when they engage in these behaviors. If you don't say anything or are not offended, you are allowing injustice to continue, colluding with the system instead of actively working against it. Be aware, however, that when you speak up you should not be speaking *for* a person targeted by offensive behavior. You should be speaking *with* them. Check out [this video](#) to see an example of how to properly step in without overstepping.

It is not appropriate for a person of privilege to decide what's offensive to a minority group to which they do not belong. This is not acting as an "ally"; to do so would be to reinforce the ally's privilege and the power dynamic that comes along with it. So, the bottom line is that you should not decide what is or is not offensive. That is for those in marginalized populations to decide. And to clarify, being offended is up to an individual, not necessarily a group. Two people may have similar identities yet aren't offended by the same thing.

However, individuals within marginalized populations do not always agree on which words and behaviors are disrespectful. This brings us to the “definite gray areas” that you’ve asked about. There’s no cut and dried way to respond to these situations. If someone uses a word that falls into this “gray area,” one possible way to respond is to mention to them that their language can be considered hurtful by individuals. You can say that while not all members of a marginalized population find that particular word offensive, some do; therefore, the person should think about refraining from the use of the word. This way, you’re not taking it upon yourself to dispel the gray area and deciding for people what’s offensive, but you’re acting as an ally by making the person aware that their language has the potential to be hurtful.

Concerning the idea of “being offended on a minority’s behalf,” consider this: You do not need to be offended on a minority’s behalf. You are offended on your own behalf. You are offended that other people are sustaining the kind of world you do not want to live in. These are your values that other people are undermining and those values may align with those of minority voices, but you should not feel you are speaking over or for them. You are speaking with them.

Finally, understand that “ally” is a complicated term. One of our own students, Beau Charles ‘17, [recently discussed](#) why they do not consider themselves an ally. Rather, they act in solidarity with marginalized groups. Jonathan “Globe” Lewis, an advocate of Kingian nonviolence, says of the word “ally”: “I don’t like to use the word ‘ally’ [it perpetuates a hierarchical network]. An ally means you need my help. I don’t do this for you. I’m selfish. I do this because this is what I want to see on this planet. I do this because I want to invest my time and my creativity into creating the world I want to live in.”

For a further understanding of how to be an ally, or, rather, act in solidarity with marginalized populations, take a look at [Franchesca Ramsey’s video](#) on how to be ally.