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What conditions enable senior, white women to show up as anti-racist in their organisations?

Carolyn Parker

Abstract

This study seeks to explore the conditions that enable senior, white women to show up as antiracist in their organisations by utilising an Action Research methodology, specifically Cooperative Inquiry.

Over the course of four inquiry cycles the author and her co-inquirers, five other senior, white women from different organisations, explored the inquiry question "What conditions enable senior, white women to show up as antiracist in their organisations?" in conversation and via shared journaling, reflecting on the actions that they were able to take and the conditions that enabled those actions or hindered them. In collaboration, we identified five conditions, namely:

- *Knowledge and confidence*
- *Having a platform*
- *Organisational context*
- *Living with discomfort and personal risk appetite*
- *Reflective space and support*

This paper concludes with a discussion of the practical implications and recommendations derived from the research.

Key words: Antiracism, Action Research, race, cooperative inquiry

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What is known about the topic?

As beneficiaries of a racialised society, white people have an integral role in anti-racism work, which requires reflexivity and being the change.

What does this paper add?

The paper explores the specific role of white women in contributing to anti-racist practice in organisations, and underlines the significance of an inquiry question to shaping leadership practice and third-order change.

Who will benefit from its content?

Leaders, OD practitioners and academics interested in the theory and practice of anti-racism.

What is the relevance to AL and AR scholars and practitioners?

The paper emphasises the importance of establishing co-inquirers to sustain focus, practice and courage. It also demonstrates the potential to generate depth of insight with short, focused cycles of inquiry.

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Introduction

The inquiry question was borne out of the author's personal desire to move from listening and learning about race and racism, to taking action that would have a practical impact on racial equality in the spaces that the author occupied. In speaking with others, the author noticed a common theme amongst white people - that we didn't know what to say and we were afraid to get it wrong. The author became curious about why this was and what would enable a shift.

Originally, the research was submitted as part of a dissertation in part-fulfilment of the Master of Science in People and Organisational Development at Roffey Park Institute, which is located in the United Kingdom. However, the author believes this line of inquiry is both necessary and relevant to other practitioners and organisations.

This paper will turn to examine some of the key contextual factors that gave rise to this line of inquiry, before sharing the relevant literature within which the author's understanding of race, racism and anti-racism is situated. Next the paper will explore the

findings from this inquiry, before discussing the practical implications and limitations of the research.

Context

In 2020, a series of events took place that acted as a catalyst for this research. Within the space of four months three Black people were killed in America, two by police and all by white people. Their names were: Ahmaud Arbery, who was shot and killed whilst out jogging in February 2020; Breonna Taylor, who was shot and killed by police who had mistakenly entered her home as she slept in March 2020; and George Floyd, who was killed in May 2020 by a police officer who knelt on his neck for over 9 minutes as George repeatedly said that he could not breathe. The last of these events was caught on camera. These deaths aren't the first of their kind, but they took place at the same time COVID-19 was becoming a global issue. The timing of the pandemic, the senseless nature of the murders, together with the irrefutable evidence of George Floyd's murder in particular, sparked a global conversation about race. This author, like other white people, was moved to act.

Literature review

Race

Whilst race is defined in the Equality Act 2010 as an objective and identifiable phenomenon, there has been much debate in the sociological, anthropological and geneticist fields as to whether it is a biological or social construct. For the purposes of this research, race is considered a social construct (Mitchell, 2012). That is to say, the variation that we see between people, which includes intelligence, physical characteristics, and personality traits, etc. that some may attribute to race (skin colour, nationality, or ethnicity), is not adequately accounted for in biological variation, nor do those differences show up consistently within and between races. We can instead then understand that the notion of race, if it is not biologically based, serves a different purpose and has been created thus. The notion of racial superiority and inferiority has

historically been advanced to support colonialism (HoSang, 2014). It served those who had power, and wished to capitalise on it, to propagate the notion of racial inferiority for anyone who was not white. It sought to legitimise abhorrent acts, creating a racial hierarchy, and instilling the idea that such acts were in the best interests of the very people most harmed by them. And that if it were not in their best interests, then it did not matter since it likely served the interests of white people who were superior and therefore any suffering was negated by the benefits to wider society and civilisation.

Omi and Winnant's (1986, pp. 183) definition speaks to this: 'race is a concept which signifies and symbolizes social conflicts and interests by referring to different types of human bodies'.

Racism

Definitions and models of racism have been rightly criticised for over-emphasising individual prejudice, whilst underplaying the significance of power in the expression and impact of racism (Bonilla-Silva, 1997). To address such concerns, Bonilla-Silva (1997, pp. 469) put forward the notion of racialized social systems, which he defined as: 'societies in which economic, political, social and ideological levels are partially structured by the placement of actors in racial categories or races'.

The placement of these actors in racial categories involves a hierarchy, in which the race placed at the top of the hierarchy and therefore considered "superior" generally enjoys benefits as a result of their placement. That is, they tend to have higher economic status, by undertaking better paid occupations and having greater access to job opportunities, hold a primary position in the political system and are more highly regarded socially (e.g., considered to be better looking, more intelligent and more law-abiding citizens). Certainly, in the UK we see differential outcomes for white people versus Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic[1]

1 In using the term Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic I recognise the limitations of language, and the relevant and warranted critiques that this terminology serves

communities. Runnymede (2021) reports Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic people have higher levels of unemployment, are lower paid than their white counterparts for similar roles, are more likely to be excluded from school, experience health inequalities, and are over-represented in poor housing and homelessness. According to Bonilla-Silva (1997) this is evidence of a racialized social system, and the more dissimilar the life chances are, the more racialized the social system.

The nature of how this racial hierarchy can be seen and understood, as well as how it is upheld is open to change according to the prevailing economic, social, political, and ideological conditions at that time. And the corresponding behaviour and attitudes can be more, or less, overt, depending on the societal norms expressed. In this way, Bonilla-Silva's (1997) framework of racialized social systems acknowledges how and why the expression of racism can change over time and invites a more critical analysis than the mainstream idealist perspective on how a reduction in overt, racist behaviour does not necessarily equate with a reduction in racism in society. And importantly, Bonilla-Silva (1997) is explicit in his view that racist ideology, in and of itself, is not sufficient to create and uphold racial hierarchies, although it does play an important role at a collective rather than at an individual level consciously or otherwise.

Bonilla-Silva's (1997) theory of racialized social systems places an emphasis on what we might more commonly understand as institutional and structural or systemic racism. Institutional racism refers to the racism that is perpetuated by organisations and institutions through their policies and practices. It frequently does not explicitly set out to achieve racial disparity in its effect and outcomes but is rather a consequence of a failure to recognise a) that racism continues to be an issue, and therefore is within the

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to homogenise a diverse group of people and situate their identity in contrast to White people. However, this is terminology that is widely understood and readily used in the UK and as such I use it despite its limitations. With thanks to Shereen Daniels (2021) for the provocation to acknowledge this tension.

individuals who work in any given organisation, and b) that the decision makers in many of these organisations and institutions, who are responsible for setting policy, are disproportionately white (Ray, 2019).

Meanwhile, structural or systemic racism can be understood to be the ways in which racism at an institutional level interacts in such a way as to intensify racial inequalities. An example of structural or systemic racism relates to the disproportionate impact that COVID-19 has had on Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic communities. Haque et al. (2020) report that these communities have been over-represented in both severe illness and death caused by COVID-19. The report states that a key factor has been the barriers that these communities face in shielding because they are: over-represented in frontline roles, which cannot be undertaken from home; more likely to have to use public transport; and more likely to be living in multi-generational and overcrowded homes. A further contributory factor may be the reluctance of these communities to seek timely care, based on prior poor experience within the healthcare system (Public Health England, 2020). It is through this example that we see the interaction of multiple institutional domains including housing, education, employment, and healthcare. Each institutional domain alone wouldn't necessarily account for a disparity on the scale that it is reported, but together combine to create a significant racial inequality.

However, Bonilla-Silva (2015) acknowledged that his work had underplayed the importance of racist ideology at an individual level, and as such, I add the definitions of internalised and interpersonal racism to round out this section. Internalised racism relates to privately held beliefs, assumptions, and prejudices. Both white people and people of colour can experience internalised racism. For people of colour, it can manifest as internalised oppression, an acceptance at some level (conscious or unconscious) of the limitations and negative stereotypes that persist regarding their race. For white people, it manifests as a belief in the superiority of white people (Pyke, 2010). Meanwhile, interpersonal

racism is the expression of internalised racism between individuals, it makes the invisible, visible. This can be seen through micro-aggressions, which are often indirect, subtle, and sometimes unintentional manifestations of privately held beliefs and stereotypes. It can be seen in the issue of colourism that exists within communities of colour, where it is desirable to have a lighter skin tone over darker skin (Grant, 2020). And it could be more overt and conform to the notion of racism that many of us hold in our minds, for example the use of racial slurs (The Anti-Racist Educator, 2020).

Anti-racism

Anti-racism is the active expression, through words and actions, that an individual rejects racism and is an advocate for racial equality. It requires individuals to move beyond a passive 'not racist' stance, where racist ideas, behaviours and policies may go unchallenged, to one where people speak up and out about racism as active allies. Kendi (2019) draws a more direct distinction between being anti-racist versus not racist – noting that the latter is in fact racist, since through inaction an individual becomes complicit and colludes with the prevailing norm.

The active aim of being antiracist spoke to the active aim of this Action Research inquiry.

Womanhood

The initial interest in womanhood for this inquiry was related to the ways in which gender might shape the ability of the author and her co-inquirers to show up as antiracist in their organisations. However, the literature review demonstrated the intersection of gender and race in ways that influence racialised narratives, how white women have been used to amplify stereotypes to the detriment of Black women in particular, and the role that white women play in actively upholding white supremacy and weaponising their tears when white fragility is evoked (Hamad, 2020).

To legitimise the enslavement of Black and Brown people, they first had to be dehumanised and cast in a category of 'less than' in relation to their white counterparts. On one level there were common stereotypes for Black and Brown men and women. They were considered less intelligent, less civilised, and less attractive than their white counterparts (Golash-Boza, 2015). However, their dehumanisation was also gendered, with a particular focus on the subjugation of Black women in contrast to white women. bell hooks[2] (1987) sets out clearly how when enslaved Black women were expected to work in the fields and undertake the same physical labour as enslaved Black men, this served to stereotype them as masculine. And so, they found themselves 'lacking' in two ways, their race and their gender. Additionally, Black women were denoted as highly sexual, and lacking in the virtues and morals that were so becoming of white women.

When white women could no longer oppress Black and Brown people through enslavement, they relied on their femininity and the need to protect their chastity. Their delicacy and powerlessness were (and are) white women's strength, and they use it to invoke white men's anger directed at Black and Brown men (Phipps, 2021a). From the razing of Greenwood, Tulsa in 1921 to the murder of Emmett Till in 1955, and the case of Amy Cooper (a white woman) calling the police on Christian Cooper (a Black man, of no relation to her) for the crime of birdwatching and requesting that she place her dog on its leash, white women's false allegations and our white tears have been dangerous and often fatal (Phipps, 2021a and 2021b).

These weaponised white tears are equally effective against Black women. The masculinisation of Black women is significant, because it perpetuates a stereotype of Black women as strong – physically, mentally, and emotionally. Contrasted with white women, and our delicacy, it has been used by white women to silence Black women, to centre themselves and their hurt when

2 Lack of capitalisation is deliberate and in keeping with how the author chooses to spell her name

accused of racism resulting in the potential for Black women to be seen as the aggressor.

And it has impeded the feminist movement. Whilst there were some tentative collaborations between white and Black women during second-wave feminism, Black women were advised to keep race out of the agenda and accused of being divisive when they reflected their racial and gendered oppression. Kendall (2020) argues that underpinning this is the belief that white women's need for equality is stronger than Black women's, who can withstand the oppression they face due to their strength. This socialisation of Black women is embedded in hegemony such that we become desensitised to their wants and needs. This is further evident in the phenomenon of 'missing white women syndrome' (Conlin and David, 2015, pp. 37) 'whereby news outlets report more extensively on missing persons' cases that involve young, conventionally attractive, middle- to upper-class white women.' Contrast for example the news coverage of Sarah Everard's murder earlier this year (a white woman, whose name I don't need to Google) versus the murders of Nicole Smallman and Bibaa Henry in 2020 (two Black women, whose names I did have to Google), who were later dehumanised when serving police officers took photos of their dead bodies.

And whilst emotional outbursts from women of any race are viewed less favourably than those of their male counterparts, with one framed as hysterical and another impassioned, Black women carry the extra burden of the 'angry Black female' trope.

All this builds to paint a picture that is more nuanced than the author had initially contended. In this inquiry I may find that I am oppressed due to my gender, and I might equally be the oppressor due to my gender and my race. This is confronting for me. I entered this research motivated to find my voice to speak up and out on the subject of racism. And now I need to consider how I might be at risk of perpetuating it myself. My voice, which I had considered might be silenced due to my gender, carried a weight I hadn't appreciated due to my race. If it wasn't already, the significance and highly personal nature of this inquiry was starting

to weigh heavily. As Accapadi (2007, p. 208) notes: 'White women can also be so invested in our oppression as women that we resist addressing our privilege as white.' This quote acted as a cautionary note for me as I entered this inquiry, I recognised I had already fallen into this trap in conceiving the research and I would need to be alive to this as the inquiry progressed.

Action - What we did

Why Action Research?

Action Research (AR) encompasses a broad range of approaches to undertaking research, with some common characteristics and principles that give a shared sense of DNA, and hence is described in the literature as a family of disciplines (Bradbury, 2015). It has a dual aim to know more about the subject being studied (an inquiry aim) and to create meaningful change (an action aim) (Coleman, 2017). The dual aims of AR were complementary to the intent of this inquiry. The author selected to undertake a Cooperative Inquiry (CI) approach.

Cooperative Inquiry has two foundational principles that guide participation. The first has an epistemological basis and holds that to generate meaningful knowledge about the inquiry question one must personally be inside the experience. The second is political in nature, asserting that participation is voluntary, guided by members' personal interest and that power is shared (Kasl and Yorks, 2010). This frames participants as co-inquirers who have shared responsibility for framing the inquiry question, determining how the inquiry process will work, sense-making their shared experiences and agreeing if and how findings are shared beyond the group (Bray et al., 2000).

Finally, this quote from Reason and Bradbury (2001, p. 9) really gets to the heart of why CI felt appropriate to this inquiry:

> This political form of participation affirms peoples' right and ability to have a say in decisions which affect them and which claim to generate knowledge about them. It asserts the importance of liberating the muted voices of those held

> down by class structures and neo-colonialism, by poverty, sexism, racism, and homophobia.

This liberationist foundation is key to the motivation for this research – it was this author's hope that through this research myself and my co-inquirers would become empowered and emboldened to show up as anti-racist in practical ways that create meaningful shifts in our organisations and for the lived experience of people of colour.

Establishing co-inquirers

The inquiry group for this research was established in two ways. Firstly, the author outlined the intent of this research to a colleague in the system and asked for recommendations on who to approach. Secondly, the author put a tweet out on Twitter, which stated:

> I am looking for white women, who are senior in their organisations, to participate in a collaborative inquiry into the conditions that enable us to show up as anti-racist in our organisations. If you're interested, DM me and we can arrange a chat.

In total, 18 women expressed an interest via these two routes and were sent an email outlining how the research would be conducted, both methodology and time commitments. This resulted in 11 women opting out of the research at this stage. Of the seven remaining women, all were invited to a conversation with the author. Ahead of these conversations, the author shared suggested pre-reading regarding different levels of racism, antiracism, white privilege, and white fragility. The intention was to ensure that potential co-inquirers had a basis of shared language. During the conversations, as part of the ethical considerations for this research, the author discussed the risks associated with this research and invited a discussion on how these could be mitigated. All seven women confirmed their commitment to participate in the research. However, once inquiry sessions were diarised, two women withdrew based on availability. The core inquiry group became six women, the author and five other co-

inquirers, each working in a different organisation across the public sector.

Cycles of inquiry and research analysis

The inquiry group met four times, over a period of eight weeks, for two hours at a time. All inquiry sessions took place via MS Teams, and sessions were recorded and transcribed using MS Teams functionality, and with express permission from co-inquirers.

The first inquiry session focussed on creating a communicative space (Habermas, 1987), which meant building trust, getting to know one another better and contracting for the work as a group. This included explicit expression of the voluntary nature of the research and the fact that co-inquirers could opt out at any time. The inquiry group also established a Google document to capture reflections between inquiry cycles. The second, third and fourth inquiry sessions followed a broad pattern of check-in, reflections since we had last met, exploration of actions which we had or hadn't taken in our pursuit to show up as antiracist and discussions about why that might be.

In our final session together, we did some shared sense-making of the conditions that had emerged as important, having undertaken free-writing prior to that session with the prompt: 'So far, the conditions emerging as important to me are….' This helped us to collaboratively identify the conditions that had emerged as important to us in the inquiry. The recordings and transcripts of each session were then analysed, by the author, to identify how those conditions had been expressed during the inquiry sessions using direct, non-attributable quotes to bring these to life.

Findings

As an inquiry group, we identified five conditions that we felt were important in enabling each of us to show up as antiracist in our organisations. They were:

- Knowledge and confidence
- Having a platform

- Organisational context
- Living with discomfort and our personal risk appetites
- A reflective space and support.

Taking each in turn, this paper will expand on what was meant by the condition and share quotes that offer an insight into how this showed up in the inquiry. To protect the anonymity of my co-inquirers, their quotes are denoted by the first letter of their first name.

Knowledge and confidence

This inquiry question was shaped in the aftermath of George Floyd's murder in 2020 and something that the author noticed was showing up for herself and others that she spoke to in her organisation at the time was a sense of not knowing what to do and what to say and feeling ill-equipped for conversations about race for fear of 'getting it wrong'. This is not surprising, since the subject of race, racism and antiracism together with the implications for white people and white women in this inquiry, is nuanced and complex. A well-intended individual can perpetuate racist behaviours and actions, simply due to a lack of knowledge. It was therefore anticipated that knowledge and confidence would emerge as a condition, and indeed it was mentioned first in many of the free-writing excerpts.

A acknowledged the need for

> "Understanding and thoughtfulness on the topic of institutional and structural racism - the need to reflect, to amend, to revise, to try to be true to my values." And P reflected that "I had to do quite a lot of learning around what anti-racist really meant."

However, having knowledge is only part of this enabling condition. The ability to feel confident in that knowledge and the language we use, and to build confidence around the subject of race and racism emerged as important. P articulated this as a need for

> "Confidence - in my knowledge and understanding of both racism and anti-racism, and also confidence in the words that I say... Probably also a way to build confidence, such as this research."

It was also about having the confidence to risk getting it wrong, which L expressed as:

> "I think that for me, the conditions include giving myself and others permission to talk about race - tentative uncomfortable conversations are better than no conversation at all, and I think that if I apply 'making every contact count' I will come to be recognised and trusted as authentic."

Having a platform

The notion of having a platform was expressed in two ways during the inquiry. The first related to seniority, and the power and influence we hold as senior people in our organisations. Predominantly, this was because it gave us access to meetings, to people, and organisational policies and processes. It offered us a level of influence that is not afforded to everyone.

A expressed it as: "But it is right that when I'm in a privileged position as a senior woman with a level of freedom that my seniority gives me that I can stamp my feet and I do so." Similarly for P it showed up as: "Seniority - maybe the wrong word - but something about having a platform and some kind of requirement for colleagues to give me some space to speak or do, outside of the organisational norm."

However, having a platform also came through as having organisational credibility or a trusted relationship that enabled you to say and do things that you otherwise might not do.

For example, K realised that her long service and good standing in her organisation presented her with an opportunity:

> "I'm really well thought of in the organization I work in and therefore my ability to make change is way more than I realise. And so I'm just feeling quite empowered after this conversation."

Meanwhile, A was able to leverage the trusted relationship she had with a member of her team to hold a challenging conversation and provide space for reflection:

> "I don't know what I would have done if I hadn't had my relationship and my personal rapport with him to rely upon. I know he thinks I'm a good thing. Yeah, that was what mitigated the risk……So I was glad that that for me was one of the enabling facts. We knew one another well enough, and in our team, we call them brave conversations, we try to have brave conversations with each other and normally they're about work and this one was about work. But it was also very personal, and we still managed to do it and he and I are, we are in a good place."

Having a platform was therefore a combination of both the privilege seniority affords you in your organisation, together with building the trusted relationships required to hold challenging conversations.

Organisational context

For two of the group, their organisations had made explicit statements about becoming antiracist organisations. And this proved to be an important condition for those women. A described it as

> "Grounding the work that we're doing to lead anti-racism in our organisations in the stated aims, intentions, processes, procedures of our organization where they're on our side, even if they're not always implemented, gives us lots of safe ground to speak from."

It was the basis from which L was able to challenge her Line Manager:

> "So I said I'm just not comfortable. But this is where I wasn't as brave as you A. So what I said was, having been on my anti-racism training, I think it's really important that we live those values through everything we do. I will know that we haven't done this properly and other people will know that too and we may not get the outcomes that we desire as an organization."

Having this 'safe ground to speak from' minimised the perception of risk, both personal and professional and gave the two women who had it, express permission to challenge the status quo. However, it created a different concern, which was that there was a gap between organisational aspiration and reality. And both A and L expressed concerns around this, and the potential consequences for Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic colleagues in particular who were being recruited as part of diversifying the talent pipeline in their organisations. This is exemplified in L's story here, where she is talking about being approached by a newly recruited Black woman in the team who was

> "Really tearful sobbing and she just said, you know you tell me and the organisation tells me that you're anti-racist but I don't know if you are now. She said, like I think you are as an individual, but I don't know if this organisation is, because I don't understand why this is happening to me."

For those of us whose organisations had not made explicit statements about being anti-racist, it could be more difficult to find our 'hook' for this work as P describes: "And I'm not really seeing anything happening and I don't, I'm sort of just looking for a hook. I'm looking for a way to be able to do something, and I haven't found one yet."

And some of us find that 'hook' where we can, albeit it can feel manipulative as I describe here:

> "It feels Machiavellian almost to say it, but then my mind goes well that's an opportunity, isn't it? Because here's some really damning evidence of the need for us to do some of the work that I would like us to be doing."

I think that one of the things P and I were grappling with is that our organisations are not committed to being antiracist and are perhaps stuck in the place that being not racist is good enough. And this is where organisational context meets knowledge and confidence as enabling conditions. If the organisation does not understand or seek to understand race, racism and antiracism in the way that has been set out here, then that impacts on the 'permission' you have to do good work in this space and on the

time that it will take to do it, since building awareness and understanding takes time.

The significance then of organisational context, within this inquiry, was the extent to which race, racism and anti-racism were understood and explicitly identified as areas for focus.

Living with discomfort and our personal risk appetites

This condition had multiple elements to it. The idea of discomfort was both one of feeling uncomfortable and doing the work anyway, which K expressed as "being ok with being uncomfortable." However, it also spoke to a fear we had about whether what we were doing was enough and generating sustainable change quickly enough. N articulated this as

> "The fear is that we need to go a lot faster than we already are, but change takes time to work its way through….need for speed is in tension with the necessity to greet people where they are on their journey, as they are, wherever they are on that journey. And those two things don't sit comfortably."

In both there was a sense of the need to persevere and have resilience since the work was not always linear and any shifts were not immediately apparent. I acknowledged this in an inquiry session when I said

> "That's a question I'm holding all the time, is what I'm doing enough? Is it good enough? Is it fast enough? Is it impactful enough? I don't know, but that's probably what stopped me doing this work before because it's all too challenging to my fragile ego, because I'm not as good as I want to be, or I'm not as brave as I want to be, or there's times when I don't show up in the way they want me to."

My reference to my fragile ego evokes DiAngelo's (2019) notion of white fragility. And also highlights the discomfort of not feeling 'good enough' if we don't consistently show up in the way that we say we want to. And that generates an ongoing choice for white women – discomfort due to a gap between what you say and what

you do, or discomfort because you do what you say, and that challenges the status quo?

The statement above acknowledges that there is discomfort in both choices. However, what came through for us in our inquiry was that it went beyond discomfort – there is an element of risk, real or perceived, in showing up as antiracist or trying to do so. That risk can be to one's own sense of self, as L acknowledged when she described feeling "Slightly nervous about learning about myself and doing that publicly." Or it can be related to getting things wrong and harming others in the process, as P described: "But there's a fine line. There's a risk you could get it wrong you. There's, I think there's a risk that by showing up it could make things worse." And it can be professionally risky too, if you are deemed to challenge the status quo too hard or in ways that those who seek to uphold the status quo don't like. N referenced this, albeit not directly in relation to antiracism, when she shared that "In the senior [leadership][3] they called me trouble. I was totally trouble, but also like that's very difficult to be labelled as trouble. You don't really go anywhere after that." And that left us, as a group, with a sense that we need to be clear on what we were prepared to risk in pursuit of this work as N described:

> "This was something, you know, you constantly ask yourself - what am I prepared to suffer through and what am I prepared to lose? And when, when you can get to some level of comfortability in the response then quite freeing in what you go out and do as a result."

At the same time, recognising that the answer would be different for each of us, as would our perceptions of risk as I articulated:

> "That risk will be different for each of us and it will be perceived differently by each of us as well. So even if all things were equal, which they won't be, and we all had the same risk level in how showing up would affect each of us, we will have a different appetite for or perception of that risk."

3 Language has been changed to prevent N or her organisation being identifiable

A reflective space and support

One of the things that drew people into this research was the opportunity to work in collaboration with others. K described in our first inquiry session the "hope to be challenged, at the moment I'm the one in my organisation doing the challenging." Similarly, L expressed: "Hope for myself - opportunity to learn together, stretch my thinking, to challenge my thinking."

And it acted as an important space for sense making, as expressed by K: "It's become very quickly [a] really important structure for me for helping me make sense of things that are going on."

And more than this, gave us impetus to act. As K reflected: "I'm sitting here thinking to myself, I need to do, just this reflective conversation is making me feel I'm not doing enough or I am allowing other stuff to get in the way." As we inspired each other with the stories we shared and the courage we demonstrated.

Importantly, having experienced the power of the reflective space, it encouraged people to open these up for others. Whether this was hosting Let's Talk About Race sessions as I did, emailing colleagues to share our participation as K did, or sharing learning with the team as L plans to do. In each of those moves we were able to extend our research beyond ourselves and move from first- and second-person inquiry, into third-person. And whilst not every move we made was deemed successful, as K recounts:

> "Our first session really left an imprint on me….I wrote a note to my peers….sharing this because it is really important to me, if you're curious, if you're interested, get in touch. And I've just had resounding silence….So at the moment, I feel genuinely angry."

Being able to share the ups and downs with a group of like-minded women helped us not to become despondent and to remain focussed on what we were trying to do rather than getting lost in our thoughts, as I expressed:

> "For me at least, the joy of this group is this place to go 'Oh, I did this and I'm really pleased with how it went. Or I did this and I'm really not sure if it went as well as I would have

> liked.' And you know how do I make sense of that, with other people who grapple with this stuff because otherwise the thing I find is I'm just in my own head."

Getting support wasn't constrained to the co-inquiry group either. A was able to discuss something she was facing with a trusted colleague and take the time to reflect on what she wanted to say, to ensure it went as positively as she could plan for.

> "I spoke to a senior colleague who basically is like a coach to me….and I literally wrote out what I wanted to say, and that's not like me at all. I busk everything. Right, but I literally wrote out what I wanted to say in order that I used the words that I wanted to use."

Conclusion

The author advocates that white women who wish to show up as antiracist take the time to ensure they fully understand what they are entering in to, and to have an awareness of how this might affect them and the strategies they can deploy so as not to be derailed. Further, that they commit fully to developing their own understanding of race and racism, together with a critical examination of what it means to be white in their particular context. Where possible, white women need to recognise the platform(s) that they have, whiteness being one of them, the nature of their relationships and personal and professional credibility being another, and seniority if it is applicable. Having recognised their platforms, they must leverage them to the best of their ability and not become too disheartened when this doesn't always play out in the ways that they might hope. If an anti-racist stance is proclaimed in their organisation, then white women can seek to leverage this as a useful way of aligning their personal actions with the stated aims of the organisation and using this to challenge discrepancies. Finally, white women must acknowledge there is a potential cost (as well as huge benefits) to doing this work and be clear on what they are prepared to give up in order to achieve racial equality. And crucially, you must have a support network. That doesn't need to be in the form of an inquiry group per se,

however having people who share your commitments and who can act as a role model and mentor are key to sustaining effort in this work and keeping yourself honest about your impact.

Limitations of the research

The first limitation of this research relates to the partial nature of this account – both due to the write up being the work of one member of the inquiry group, rather than a collaborative effort with the inquiry group, and the limitations of capturing within a defined word count the richness of our conversations.

The second limitation relates to a fear that I expressed in our first inquiry session, which was

> "My slight fear is if we are not careful we create an echo chamber of white women in organisations talking to one another, and this is my, you know this is linked to my previous experience congratulating myself for having done something, rather than thinking about whether that's enough, or whether it's really had an impact."

The limitation being that as white women we were talking about racism, which we have not been victims of. And we will have therefore missed opportunities to intervene or to be critically reflective about our actions, because we have not had a person of colour in the room to help us see our blind spots and/or challenge us to notice the ways in which our own actions were upholding the very systems and structures we are seeking to challenge and dismantle. Further, collectively we may have colluded to believe in our 'white exceptionalism', congratulating each other for what we did do, rather than challenging each other to do as much as we can do.

A final limitation was the limited duration of our inquiry. In total we spent 8 hours together across an eight-week period. As six women who had never worked together, let alone on something so nuanced and complex, we rightly spent the majority of our first inquiry session getting to know one another and building trust with the aim of 'starting well'. This proved to be important, and I

think was a key factor in ensuring that we achieved a level of depth in our discussions and thinking, despite the time limits. That said, I can't help but wonder where our conversations might have taken us if we had been able to complete further cycles of inquiry.

The limited time means that the conditions we have identified are based on our initial reflections and observations. Further cycles of inquiry would have enabled us to reflect on whether particular conditions were more or less important, and whether one acted as a precursor to others.

A limitation often associated with AR and Qualitative Research more broadly is the fact that the findings are less generalisable than those generated by Quantitative Research. Whilst I recognise that this is often the case, I do hope that the nature of our inquiry group, six women drawn from six distinct organisations, and the nature of our findings, five broad conditions, means that these themes will have some resonance for organisations and white women beyond those represented in this inquiry.

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Biography

Carolyn Parker is a HR and OD professional, with over 15 years' experience across private and public sector. Her passion is creating inclusive workplace cultures where people can thrive and realise their full potential.