

The Wisdom of Caucusing for People of Color

Why do we caucus? The short answer is “we come apart, so that we can come back together, better.”

Here are some specific values for people of color when it is time to caucus.

Broadly speaking, separate space is needed as a retreat from the white gaze, and more specifically speaking to the dynamics of an antiracism training.

The logic of the social construction of race dictates that racialization happens only to people of color. White people often don't think of themselves as having a race, or, they may have a race 'label' but it really doesn't mean anything. People of color are the ones with the race. Of course, this is not true, but people who are just beginning the journey of understanding how race was created and how it functions may especially operate under this assumption. With this dynamic, a mixed race room can take on the function of a fishbowl, with white people observing people of color and leaning on them heavily for explanation instead of doing the work of investigating the meaning of whiteness and the role this identity plays. Caucusing allows people of color a respite from this dynamic. It also allows the opportunity to vent about this reality in a private, protected space.

People of color in a racist society can become very adept at reading white people and responding; often the learned response is one employed for safety. For instance, if a white person becomes offended and/or hurt at the notion of being thought to be racist, often the safe response from people of color is to assure the white person that they are 'good,' not racist, and to tend to their hurt feelings, perhaps by apologizing. Our common socialization is that whiteness must be protected. There is a lot that is wrong about this response, but we know that it is often necessary – to keep the job, to stay in the relationship, to make tensions in the classroom/workplace dissipate.

Racism tries to teach people of color to think of ourselves as inferior. Internalizing this message serves to normalize the idea of a hierarchy of races. Resisting and overcoming this message is critically important. Caucusing offers a protected space in which we can learn how to and practice loving ourselves and each other. In caucus, we can share the stories of how we learned to devalue ourselves. We learn that our stories have many similarities and many differences.

When people of color caucuses are comprised of people from diverse racial/ethnic/cultural groups, it is an opportunity to learn each other's stories and to resist the ways we have been taught to mistrust each other. We learn the ways we can become stronger together. It is an opportunity to unlearn racism's lesson of our supposed inferiority.

Finally, because caucus time allows people of color to let down our guard, it is an opportunity to laugh and celebrate the beauty of ourselves!