Affinity Spaces: A Primer

A lot has been written about the purpose and perceptions of affinity spaces. Yet, critiques of affinity spaces easily arise in relation to *race-based* ones. Considering that Brock University has made a commitment to addressing racism by signing the Scarborough Charter, and by dedicating spaces to underrepresented and underserved demographic groups in the university, such as the Hadiya'dagénhahs First Nations, Métis and Inuit Student Centre and the Black Student Success Centre, it is important that Brock students, faculty, and staff recognize the functions of affinity spaces and be equipped to counter critiques about affinity spaces too.

Affinity spaces are allotted spaces and times in which people with shared backgrounds and experiences meet to support one another (Moore-Southall, 2017). While many people may think of race-based affinity groups when the topic arises, men's groups, support groups for newcomers, support groups for mothers, Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous are all affinity spaces too (Talking Together for Change, 2022). In affinity spaces, people can meet others who may have similar experiences, and ideally, build a sense of community. Sometimes people can bond with one another in affinity spaces (Hu, 2022), nurture and affirm one another (Talking Together for Change, 2022), educate one another, and/or celebrate their shared identity, culture, traditions, and communities (Hu, 2022). In some affinity spaces, participants build solidarity (Talking Together for Change, 2022), heal and build collective liberation (Racial Equity Tools, 2020), as well as encourage and empower one another (Moore-Southall, 2017).

Race-based affinity spaces are supposed to provide a safe space for Black, Indigenous, and racialized peoples who are constantly navigating racism in their daily lives. In many race-based affinity spaces, the participants come together to discuss how they are experiencing racism and/or the impact that racism has on their individual lives and communities. Too often, those who are excluded from these spaces and/or not invited to participate will claim that these spaces are divisive or even segregationist. The argument about affinity spaces being divisive completely overlooks (or misunderstands) the fact that affinity spaces are about promoting solidarity

between those with common experiences. They are based upon amplifying unity, not separation. Those who use the term "segregation" to describe affinity spaces are utilizing the term inappropriately, as segregation was a legally upheld system of power that kept races separated in public and private spaces to privilege White people (with better services, infrastructure, and resources) to the detriment of all other communities who were disadvantaged to maintain white supremacy. Affinity spaces do not alter white dominance nor white supremacy. Affinity spaces are not upheld by the law, and affinity spaces are not permanent. Overall, any comparison to segregation simply demonstrates that person's misinformation and/or ignorance of the system of segregation.

In addition, affinity spaces do not cause nor heighten racism. Race-based affinity spaces often focus on precisely the opposite: how to dismantle racism and heal from it. It is worth repeating that affinity spaces are a response to racism. Affinity spaces offer a temporary opportunity for racialized, Indigenous, and Black peoples to experience relief and respite from personal, interpersonal, institutional, and systemic racism. As Chong (2022) states, "the intention of these spaces is to offer safe containers for staff with shared racial identities to talk about race and racism without fear of judgment, or, in the case of non-white staff, without feeling an obligation to take on the emotional labor of explaining the oppression they experience to their white peers." Blackwell (2018), concurs and argues that:

> People of Color need their own spaces. Black people need their own spaces.
> We need places in which we can gather and be free from the mainstream stereotypes
> and marginalization that permeates every other societal space we occupy. We need
> spaces where we can be our authentic selves without White people's judgment
> and insecurity muzzling that expression. We need spaces where we can simply
> be—where we can get off the treadmill of making White people comfortable and
> finally realize just how tired we are.

It is critical that the Brock community meets its commitments to anti-racism education and equity work by embracing affinity groups, and by learning about various practices that promote critical dialogue in safe, critically conscious ways. Affinity spaces are used broadly by many groups of people seeking privacy and safety within their own communities. Race-based affinity spaces are merely one type of affinity space, yet it is an important one utilized in many

education systems for the purposes listed herein. Below is a list of resources that can further your learning in this subject area.

Resources

Blackwell, K. (2018, August 9). Why People of Color need spaces without White people.

The Arrow. https://arrow-journal.org/why-people-of-color-need-spaces-without-white-people/

Chong, L. (2022, May 31). Witnessing each other: Reflections on our Asian affinity space.

Compass Point. https://www.compasspoint.org/blog/witnessing-each-other-reflections-our-asian-affinity-space

Hu, S. (2022, November 18). *A guide to affinity groups: Building community through culture.* The Tower. https://thebishopstower.com/4495/campus/a-guide-to-affinity-groups/

Moore-Southall, T. (2017, November 27). *How racial affinity groups saved my life*. National Association of Independent Schools. https://www.nais.org/learn/independent-ideas/november-2017/how-racial-affinity-groups-saved-my-life/

Racial Equity Tools. (2020). Caucus and Affinity Groups.

https://www.racialequitytools.org/resources/act/strategies/caucus-and-affinity-groups

Talking Together for Change. (2022, August 12). *Are Affinity Groups Divisive?* https://www.talkingtogether4change.com/post/are-affinity-groups-divisive