

# Kindness-informed allyship praxis

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Kristin S. Williams

*Department of Innovation Management, University of Eastern Finland,  
Kuopio, Finland and*

*Rowe School of Business, Dalhousie University, Halifax, Canada*

Heidi Weigand

*Rowe School of Business, Dalhousie University, Halifax, Canada*

Sophia Okoroafor

*Saint Mary's University, Halifax, Canada*

Giuseppe Liuzzo

*Munich Business School, Munchen, Germany, and*

Erica Ganuelas Weigand

*Marbella University, Marbella, Spain*

1

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – This paper explores intergenerational perceptions of kindness in the context of Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement and the COVID-19 global pandemic. The purpose of this exploratory study is to investigate perceptions of kindness in the context of traumatic events and its potential value in authentic allyship in organizational environments.

**Design/methodology/approach** – Authors interviewed 65 individuals (31 self-identifying as non-racialized and 34 self-identifying as Black, Indigenous and People of Colour aka BIPOC). Participants included Generation Z (Gen Z; born between 1997–2012/5) and Generation Y (Gen Y; also referred to as Millennials, born between 1981 and 1994/6) across North American, Europe and Africa. Millennials currently represent the largest generation in the workplace and are taking on leadership roles, whereas Gen Z are emerging entrants into the workplace and new organizational actors.

**Findings** – The paper offers insights into how to talk about BLM in organizations, how to engage in authentic vs performative allyship and how to support BIPOC in the workplace. The study also reveals the durability of systemic racism in generations that may be otherwise considered more enlightened and progressive.

**Research limitations/implications** – The authors expand on kindness literature and contribute theoretically and methodologically to critical race theory and intertextual analysis in race scholarship.

**Practical implications** – The study contributes to the understanding of how pro-social behaviours like kindness (with intention) can contribute to a more inclusive discourse on racism and authentic allyship.

**Originality/value** – Authors reveal the potential for kindness as a pro-social behaviour in organizational environments to inform authentic allyship praxis.

**Keywords** Kindness, Millennials, Generation Z, COVID-19, Black Lives Matter, Allyship

**Paper type** Research paper

## Introduction

When we conceived of this paper, we were at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic and long exhausted by isolation, continuous lockdowns and fear for ourselves and our families. At the same time, the #BlackLivesMatter (BLM) movement had been reignited by the murder of George Floyd in Chicago by Derek Chauvin, a police officer with the Minneapolis Police Department. At the nexus of these two world-changing events, our thoughts turned to how



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we might find hope in these times. Inspired by reports early in the pandemic of kindness – expressed as a balm to the beleaguered souls contending with uncertainty – we mused about the stories of neighbours reaching out to neighbours, balcony concerts, FaceTime family time, painted rocks with sweet messages left on walking paths and virtual game and movie nights. People trying to connect and show kindness amid these two events is the inspiration for this research. We wanted to understand what inspired kindness and how it might represent a possible agent of change in the creation of a more humane society.

We ask the question: what is the potential role of kindness in organizational allyship praxis? In answer to our question and to explore applicability in an organizational context, we interviewed two cohorts of individuals: Generation Z (Gen Z; born between 1997–2012/5) and Generation Y (Gen Y; also referred to as Millennials, born between 1981 and 1994/6). Ultimately, we spoke to 65 individuals from Gen Z and Gen Y across differing regional and cultural contexts (North America, Europe and Africa). These generations represent those entering the workforce in the largest numbers in history and those coming into leadership roles in organizations. Although not everyone born in a generational period shares the same values or experiences, they do share a common context that shapes their worldview. Our study is not a comparative study about generational views, but we do believe that generational research provides valuable information for organizations that deal with differing generational cohorts and, among other things, reveals their attitudes towards leadership, humane organizational practice and the potential for social change (Gregory *et al.*, 2016).

Our study fits into the ongoing discourse on the value of kindness to reduce racial bias (e.g. Stell and Farsides, 2016). Specifically raised as current concerns within the literature is (1) how to talk about BLM in organizations (Opie and Roberts, 2017), (2) how to engage in authentic versus performative allyship across the backdrop of racially traumatic events (e.g. police racially driven violence and brutality) and (3) how to support Black, Indigenous and People of Colour (BIPOC) in the workplace (McCluney *et al.*, 2017).

## Background

The BLM movement rose to international prominence in 2014 when Michael Brown, an unarmed African American teenager was killed by White police officers in Ferguson, Missouri (Clark, 2019). George Floyd's death by White police officers in 2020 in Minneapolis restated the global profile of the movement and led to public protests around the world. With the confluence of BLM and the global pandemic, the discourse on racism and inequality and unearned advantages is punctuated by ongoing traumatic and violent events with compounding effects at the intersection of race, gender and class (Bilge, 2010; Hill Collins, 2016; Nixon, 2019). The discourse on racism is highly visible in incidents of police brutality, in the unfair advantages of the rich, in lack of access to healthcare in individuals oppressed through policy, legal and political disadvantages, unemployment, incarceration and in psychological stress.

COVID-19 is a novel coronavirus caused by SARS-CoV-2. At the time we undertook this study, COVID-19 had become a worldwide pandemic and we as researchers and our participants were experiencing lockdowns, travel bans and uncertainty. The pandemic has had significant impacts on personal and collective health, healthcare infrastructure and the economy. The way that people work, learn and interact has been utterly transformed. Today, we are in the midst of vaccination roll outs, breakthrough cases and the emergence of new variants of concern. The pandemic continues to kill over 2,300 people per million, with nearly 150,000 cases per million worldwide (John Hopkins University, 2021; Oxford Martin School, 2021). The emergence of the highly transmissible Omicron variant, coupled with waning immunity and the inequality of vaccine coverage globally, has led to more stress on fatigued healthcare resources, more lockdowns and curfews, booster fever and the greatest

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level of infections globally. By January 2023, more than 660 million cases were reported worldwide and with more than 6.6 million deaths ([John Hopkins University & Medicine: Coronavirus Resource Centre](#)).

Racialized trauma has become a central concern for many in organizational practice with the confluence of BLM and COVID-19. It is now an imperative to create healthier and kinder workspaces. According to Harris (as cited in [Asare, 2020](#)), trauma is “an event or series of circumstances, one experiences that is physically and emotionally harmful or life threatening[. . .] has adverse effects on one’s functioning and mental, emotional, physical, social or spiritual well-being. It can be acute, chronic, complex or historical.” Race-based trauma or stress is experienced through encounters of racial bias, discrimination, racism or hate crimes ([Asare, 2020](#)). The results can be depression, anxiety, dissociation, disengagement and feelings of being unsafe. Responding to COVID-19 also means responding to mental health needs. The pandemic is not only a threat to the economy and physical health but also mental health. Individuals are feeling fear, sadness, anxiety, social isolation, insecurity and even stigma ([Adhanom Ghebreyesus, 2020](#)).

Our paper proceeds as follows: first, we outline our conceptual framework and applicable theory and associated literature. We focus on critical race theory (CRT), intertextual narrative analysis and the literature on kindness. We then we share narrative insights and first voice accounts from our participants as they make sense of kindness behaviours in context of a worldwide pandemic and an environment of racialized trauma. Our findings and analysis are shared in three parts, beginning with our contributions to understanding of the phenomenon of kindness. In the second part, we unpack broad themes known in race scholarship (such as colour blindness) and illustrate how our participants have drawn a potential relationship between kindness behaviours and allyship. The third part of our analysis applies [Boje’s \(2001\)](#) intertextual framework which considers historicity and social/cultural contexts. Then we contextualize our findings in the discourse on allyship praxis and White Fragility ([Diangelo, 2018](#)) in our discussion and the opportunities for kindness behaviours. We conclude with our thoughts on kindness and its potential role in shaping leadership and more humane organizational practice.

### Conceptual model

To develop our conceptual model, we employed emancipatory theorizing and social inquiry with narrative analysis serving as our methodology. This approach was informed by the literature on systemic racism and kindness and the application of CRT.

CRT’s early writings are credited to Derrick Bell, an African American civil rights lawyer from Harvard Law School and other founding theorists including Kimberlè Crenshaw and Mari Matsuda ([Delgado and Stefancic, 1998](#)). Initial theorizing focused on speech, social construction of racial reality and a critique of rights and liberalism and accepted as a starting point that racism is permanent and represents an economic determinist view of racialized experience ([Delgado and Stefancic, 1998](#)). CRT developed along with other critical approaches paradigmatically driven to confront objectivism and realism and support methodological difference ([Bleijenbergh et al., 2018](#)). CRT specifically is characterized as crossing different paradigms and eschewing the simplistic distinctions often characterized by distinguishing just between qualitative and quantitative approaches ([Bleijenbergh et al., 2018](#)). It is specifically rooted in emancipatory theorizing ([Cornelissen et al., 2021](#)) and understanding racialized experience as a complex phenomenon ([Knight, 2016](#)). It is meant to theorize the potential of moving beyond just understanding social relations of power to “animate the imperative of social change” ([Carbado et al., 2013](#), p. 312).

CRT is considered both a theory and a movement ([Delgado and Stefancic, 1998](#)). It is particularly valuable in exploring how durable dynamics and systems of oppression persist ([Moore et al., 2010](#)) and how we individually make sense of these dynamics and systems and

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how we respond to new trauma. In the case of this study, we asked our participants to reflect on the confluence of racialized trauma and the pandemic and we asked them to relate stories of kindness to help us understand the phenomenon of kindness and its potential in these circumstances. We hoped to learn enough about kindness to see its potential for organizational environments to respond to the need for organizational practice to resource and foster identity work, as well as promote psychological safety in the workplace to reduce racial identity threats (McCluney *et al.*, 2017). We wanted to build upon research which has called for empathy to form part of organizational frameworks for diversity and inclusion (Cole, 2017).

We employ narrative analysis informed by Boje (2001). Specifically, we examine multi-voiced narratives that are not linear and at times, appear fragmented. Though our approach is dialogic, we did not seek to find a collective consensus, but instead wanted to explore many stories of individuals in a “living exchange” about social phenomena (Boje, 2001, p. 11). The accounts we surfaced are subjective accounts, not “realist tales” (Boje, 2001, p. 11). Specifically, we take an intertextual approach that considers what transpires between and within a narrative including how narrative meaning is constructed in a dynamic production containing many voices that are not co-located. Boje (2001) describes this kind of analysis to be antenarrative theoretically in that the narratives are themselves “a storied soup [with] [. . .] no origin, no totalized story and only temporary agreement, here and there” (p. 78). We feel that this is significant to our discovery, as these narratives are emergent and unfolding across dynamic social events and diverse cultural contexts.

Turning to the literature on kindness, our findings are scant. Elsewhere, we have examined the taxonomy of kindness as well as the relationships between kindness and motivation and kindness and leadership (Weigand *et al.*, 2021; Williams and Weigand, 2021). Here, we wished to specifically examine the value of kindness in organizational practice and authentic allyship praxis. Classically, the idea of kindness can be traced philosophically to Aristotle’s ideas of compassion in response to misfortune (Shahzad *et al.*, 2014). Religious and spiritual considerations include moral dimensions, such as the Buddhist ethic of compassion and Hinduism’s concept of moral excellence (Shahzad *et al.*, 2014). Generally understood as a positive behaviour (learned) as well as a trait (innate), kindness is informed by belief and thus influences dispositional behaviours. McIvor (2007) offers three dimensions of kindness behaviour and directionality. These are kindness (1) to oneself (taking the form of authenticity, self-care and attitude), (2) to colleagues, friends and family (taking the form of trust, friendship and compassion) and (3) to community (taking the form of service, responsibility and tolerance). In our study, we saw examples of kindness across all three of these dimensions.

Kindness is often seen as an indication of good character and the foundation for friendship (Wagner, 2019). Good character has also been described as a key personality dimension which leads to greater acceptance (Wagner, 2019). We see the phenomenology of kindness as distinct, but related to the ethic of care (e.g. Heidegger’s ontology or Gilligan’s grounding in gender or Kant’s moral law, Paley, 2002), having associations with authenticity in leadership (Marques, 2018) and/or caring responses (Watson, 2009). The current discourse on kindness and the value of kindness-based practices (such as compassion, mindfulness, loving-kindness meditation, kindness as a social cognitive skill or kindness as an innate trait) is growing (Mascaro *et al.*, 2015). It is generally understood that kindness can be taught and that there are many benefits of kindness-based practices for both the self and others (Mascaro *et al.*, 2015). However, our data point to some phenomenological clarity. The narrative accounts in our study illustrate rich insight into how members of Gen Z and Gen Y understand and engage in discussions on racism and kindness and how they (as new and emerging entrants to the workplace) might inform organizational practice and leadership approaches. We believe these insights can serve the development of a model of authentic allyship praxis.

## Findings and analysis

We have structured the presentation of our findings and analysis in three parts, which begins with contributions to our understanding of kindness and then continues with a broader thematic analysis informed by CRT and finally concludes with a more granular analysis using Boje’s intertextual analysis.

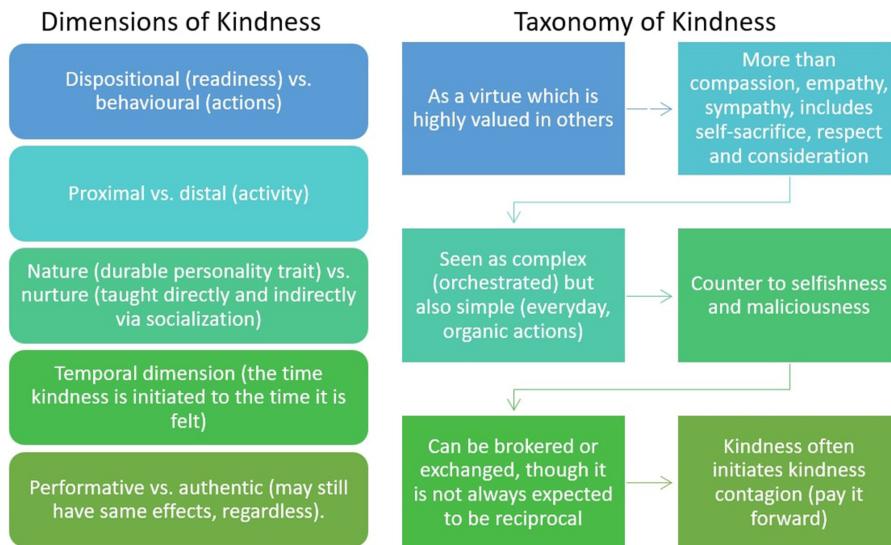
### Part 1: understanding kindness

Through the narratives of our participants, we saw a spectrum of kindness behaviours from transactional to authentic, as well as a spectrum of responses to racism from evasion to solidarity. To understand the dimensions of kindness and its developing taxonomy, we have summarized our findings here (see [Figure 1](#): Kindness Dimensions and Developing Taxonomy).

Our study points to some phenomenological clarity in terms of how kindness is defined and how it can be enacted. Additionally, our participants helped us appreciate how complex kindness by using a variety of examples of how they made sense of it. These insights helped us understand what kind of kindness was being referred to as we undertook our next level of analysis. Of particular importance, we draw your attention to the contagious quality of kindness, which we believe has crucial benefit for social/organizational environments.

### Part 2: critical race theory analysis

As we unpacked the narrative accounts, CRT helped us to identify four familiar and dominant discourses pertaining to racism, which we have labelled: (1) evasion, (2) colour blindness, (3) qualification and (4) elucidation and solidarity. Our participants noted that the BLM movement in the context of recent traumatic events has instigated and informed new dispositions and actions and has both revealed kindness and a lack therein. Our participants also underscored the importance of authenticity in allyship and that allyship involves action as well as intention. We found this consistent with the findings of other studies which promote engagement and empathy as a framework for diversity and inclusion ([Cole, 2017](#)). Additionally, we also saw consistency with the need for organizational practice to resource



**Figure 1.** Kindness dimensions and developing taxonomy

and foster identity work as well as promote psychological safety in the workplace to reduce racial identity threats (McCluney *et al.*, 2017).

*Theme #1: Evasion:* This theme describes the distinction we saw between the engagement in discussion of racism between BIPOC and non-BIPOC participants. Specifically, the responses offered by non-BIPOC participants to our questions about BLM were significantly terser, often just offering a quick affirmation that BLM is increasing kindness behaviour. Non-BIPOC respondents also tended to demonstrate discomfort and disfluency with the topic. Whereas on balance, BIPOC participants offered substantive responses, effused with emotional activation and critical reflexivity. Emotions are understood to serve critical functions in processing social information and can lead to restricting one's awareness or broadening one's attention and both of these dynamics were at play (Chong and Mohr, 2020). Our BIPOC respondents discussed the complex and systematic nature of racism and how BLM is creating tension and can no longer be ignored. They also cited concern that sustained engagement on racism is difficult which suggests that evasion is a well-tolerated racist behaviour in White society.

*Gen Y, Non-BIPOC Respondent, P15:* I think it's too early to say, to be honest, I think Black Lives Matter really took everyone like by surprise and brought to light a lot of, you know, [t]he [ir] regularities and like inefficiencies in our systems [...] our systems are not set up for success for kindness towards a specific race.

*Gen Z, Non-BIPOC Respondent, P14:* [I] think definitely that the Black Lives Matter movement helping to foster the kindness of people [h]as raised some more awareness on on the issue of racism. But surely I've also seen that on both on both sides of the conflict, there's been very different there's been very different angles taken and that people still, some people were very opposed towards the Black Lives Matter movement and thought they were manipulating the crowds and making themselves seem like they were the big victim. So I definitely saw that. Also, it seemed to create more hatred as well.

*Gen Z, Non-BIPOC Respondent, P28:* I think that a lot of I think people are becoming nicer because of the Black Lives Matter movement, but I think it's also because they might be maybe a bit scared to, to say the wrong thing or or be criticized.

Here we see that our Gen Y respondent appears more sympathetic to systemic structures but unaware of the long history of BLM, whereas Gen Z is highly sceptical about the intent of BLM and even concerned about perceptions of themselves in relation to BLM. We found that both Gen Y and Gen Z non-BIPOC participants evaded discovery and engagement of the topic and issues, even if they believed kindness might hold promise. Kindness was not enough to spur action.

In contrast, our BIPOC respondents across both Gen Y and Z spoke urgently about the need for change and were highly sceptical about the authenticity of kindness enacted in relation to COVID or BLM as being sustainable or authentic. Here are two examples from our Gen Z participants:

*Gen Z, BIPOC Respondent, P9:* [...] but not really understand what is going on. And while taking up, you know, like just picking up movements from social media, or from seeing our peers really could be a start to caring about the cause and becoming more kind and selfless. But is it the right? Would I call it a sustainable? Like, you know, for example, what I'm trying to get at it is that right now for the Black Lives Matter, we see so much interest and of course the interest has died down compared to what it was like a couple of months ago. And I see a dying down every day, even though the laws that are in place have not changed even though the stats for these discriminatory discriminatory incidents have not changed, which really shows that this movement has brought to surface the issue. But has it really increased how people care? I don't think so I think it has just brought created more awareness created like the mayor has understood the importance of it. But if you ask me has the movement really made people kind? No, it hasn't.

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*Gen Z, BIPOC Respondent, P27:* To the fact that like, I know, some people want to hire people of colour now because of the movement. But at the same time, it's just, it's, it's, it's bringing all the attention on people of colour. And I know, please, some people don't like that, because they think that we don't deserve all this attention.

Evasion indicates a very limited quality of engagement on racism and in our study illustrates a vast gulf between the discourse on racism for White versus for BIPOC individuals. Though our data do not illustrate how this conversation might be merged and how individuals with such differing views could find common ground, it does illustrate one of the largest concerns in our findings, namely “where do you start to engage in a discourse on racism when parties do not share the same perspective on a starting point?” Non-BIPOC respondents demonstrating evasion did little more than acknowledge racism. The discourse on racism that has evolved since the birth of BLM has charted the diffusion and growth of the movement and recognizes a spectrum of White behaviours (Hughey, 2021). However this end of the spectrum contains relatively no action beyond words and supports the idea that racism is a set of disparate acts involving individuals vs a systemic and complex global problem (Diangelo, 2011, 2018).

*Theme #2: Colour blindness:* This theme describes unconscious bias in respondents. Sometimes the respondents' engagement on the topic indicated some understanding of privilege, but a lack of deep appreciation for different subjectivities and active “othering”. Some non-BIPOC respondents would not acknowledge racism as a matter to be addressed personally or as relating personally to them. In other words, racism and BLM is perceived as BIPOC concern – a concern in which kindness is only offered in terms of peripheral awareness. “Their problems” are framed as being caused by “others”, and individuals do not see themselves as complicit in or benefiting from the social structures of oppression and the oppressive system of inequality (Nixon, 2019). Our BIPOC respondents spoke of the complexity of lived experience and critiqued the concept of colour blindness as avoiding needed conversation and action and illustrated the emotional labour associated with grappling with racism daily. They identified that kindness is needed to support their own identity work and responsibility in supporting one another in solidarity.

*Gen Y, Non-BIPOC Respondent, P21:* I would say people's willingness to learn more about a problem that doesn't necessarily affect them directly. Okay.

*Gen Z Non-BIPOC Respondent, P42:* Black Lives Matter movement has very good intentions, I believe. And I think most people that go have great intentions. However, I see the problem in that they are starting to call the average American racist, which is creating a large division. In a society where everyone's being labeled as racist, even though I do not believe majority of people, especially in us around Western countries are racist, or consciously racist. Sure. Our it may have some racist backgrounds, as I think Black people in the US only got the right to vote in 1965. So of course, they're going to be some long-lasting effects from that, which of course, unacceptable. However, I do not see the future. I think the best way to deal about it is not going around and calling majority people racist. That's it's going to create create even more division.

Here we see both Gen Y and Gen Z non-BIPOC respondents critique the BLM movement and adopt the view that it does not affect them personally and that it might even be harmful. Kindness was seen as a willingness to learn (awareness), but it was also seen as a way to judge participants in the BLM.

Our BIPOC respondents contextualized their comments historically to critique the colour blindness position. The views and our Gen Z participants were particularly interesting and offered that kindness may have a role in demonstrating empathy in the context of the day-to-day struggle with systemic racism and vicarious trauma and as the motivation to appreciate and try to understand people experiencing racialized trauma.

*Gen Z, BIPOC Respondent, P25:* Well, for me, the Black Lives Matter movement didn't start today. You know, I've always been a Black person. So for me personally, I feel like what it did bring was a lot of anger. If I'm gonna be honest, it was a lot of anger towards so many different things.

*Gen Z, BIPOC Respondent, P30:* But like the major events that happened, and the and how, like, the global movement, when the global movement started about Black Lives Matter, that is when I, like, took time to educate myself on certain aspects and dig deeper. And when I figured all that out, when I read certain articles, I, I really felt I really felt more empathetic, I really tried to, I tried to, I tried my best to be there for to be to stand in solidarity with my Black friends. And if they were not like, I actually had a few conversations with some Black people, some of my Black friends to asking about some, like, some difficult questions, I actually asked a few of them about their perspectives, and what do they think about that? Like, why is this conflict being caused and everything. And because of that, because of that, I think I definitely, like increase my understanding of what community goes through.

Engagement on racism involving the theme of *colour blindness* ignores race and supports the view that “race does not matter”. It also ignores the anti-racist approaches needed to dismantle racism (Braddock, 2021). Colour blindness espoused the movement of All Lives Matter (ALM) as a criticism to BLM and suggests the interpretation that BLM is *only* about Black lives (West *et al.*, 2021). This form of engagement is cloaked in the idea of inclusivity and egalitarianism, but it is disingenuous and motivated by the desire to reject BLM movement despite it taking no advantages away from White individuals (West *et al.*, 2021). The danger of this kind of engagement in younger generations is that prior research has indicated that anti-Black racism predicts White participation in ALM and thus discourages recognition of contemporary forms of racism (West *et al.*, 2021) and may even decrease sensitivity to racism or even foster it (Plaut *et al.*, 2018).

*Theme #3: Qualification:* This theme is framed with kindness intention, with underlying characteristics of judgement. It is the behaviour of non-BIPOC participants to qualify their status relationally to BIPOC individuals and the discourse on racism and carve out a space to demonstrate solidarity and to distinguish themselves from less “enlightened” views. However, we observed that this qualifying exercise is noted as emotionally taxing to the BIPOC individuals and sometimes perceived as performative, inadequate or failing to provide psychological safety or identity safety (McCluney *et al.*, 2017). Our BIPOC respondents were cynical about the performative nature of qualification.

*Gen Y, Non-BIPOC Respondent, P63:* I think people are becoming more aware. And I think for the people that I associate with, there certainly has been a change in focus and language. I grew up in a neighborhood that was predominantly Black and Asian community [ . . . ] and being the only White guy in the community, I grew up around a lot of people and I realized I was quite insensitive. So it's allowed me to discover to ask for forgiveness and become a little kinder.

*Gen Y, Non-BIPOC Respondent, P62:* I like to think that I've been a bit more enlightened, even based on my background, like, I grew up in a rural area, and not heavily conservative one of that, and I like to think that I'm a lot more open minded than that upbringing would suggest, and in fact, that my, my last partner was African American. So, I like to think that really hasn't changed how I view kindness because I don't think I've really ever had those kinds of issues that kind of come up with people who don't understand the Black Lives Matter movement. [I] like to think I kind of have I started out at a pretty good starting point.

Here we see two examples from our Gen Y non-BIPOC cohort who take great pains to qualify their growth or enlightenment in comparison to unnamed “others”. Our BIPOC cohort was quick to illustrate that such examples stem from performativity not authenticity, thus holding no promise of social change. Kindness is an empty gesture, devoid of power:

*Gen Y, BIPOC Respondent P36:* I feel like people have become they becomes a kind of a trend everybody has to write about it. And but not really everybody understand[s] it and feel it and really believes in it. [ . . . ] and I don't see I don't see a change. At least this is my belief, I feel it's just a trend

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[. . .] let em talk Black life matters just to say in another way that I'm not like them. I'm not I'm not bad. I'm not racist. I'm not there's no way of saying it in a way that is to say that "I'm not part of this" and, and they post it to send a message about them. Um, "I'm the good guy." "I'm not the bad guy." But yeah, doesn't really mean anything.

*Gen Z, BIPOC Respondent, P25:* Again, this is another one where it kind of grew to, I would say half and half I think that a lot of it is, um, for lack of better words performative. I was going to people are maybe attempting to show kindness. I would say that in my own community, I've seen a lot of people pull together, and you know, actively put in the work. But then on the other spectrum, I've also seen a lot of people do it as a way to show that they're, like hyping up something and it's and it's becoming more trendy. And I don't really know if that's not if that's kindness, or if that's just wanting to be to say that you were part of something.

Engagement on racism by those demonstrating our theme of *qualification* appears to support BLM but also appears to be driven by fear of being labelled a racist, pressure to confront racism, a desire to seek Black gratitude and a desire to be socially connected to a movement (Hughey, 2021). Therefore, this behaviour lacks potency and appears to attempt to deflect a deeper discourse on racism as belonging "elsewhere" and involving "others" and was construed as performative and inauthentic.

*Theme #4: Elucidation and solidarity:* Our BIPOC respondents gave us significant clues as to how to demonstrate authentic allyship and what kindness can contribute to this process. Respondents promoted self-education, dialogue, empathy and humility as key ingredients to authenticity and meaningful engagement on racism. Kindness was seen as comprising of compassion and increased social resources for coping and education, shared power and space, and intentional integration of perspectives as positive organizational practices (McCluney *et al.*, 2017). BIPOC respondents also indicated authentic allyship praxis requires sincerity, conscious action and consideration. Significantly, our BIPOC participants connected the notion of kindness to justice.

*Gen Z, BIPOC Respondent, P10:* From a sincere effort to learn, and because of, you know, the very prominent issues that underlie the Black Lives Matter movement. As long as it's about the sincerity of that, I think people are becoming more kinder, they're becoming more conscious. [. . .] You know, even if you look at the NBA right now, using their platform to address the Black Lives Matter movement, it's done a lot, and people are trying to make change.

*Gen Z, BIPOC Respondent, P12:* There are a lot of things that we as Black people struggle with in our day to day lives. And so it's just kind of taught me to be more kind to the people who are in me to look like me. [. . .] And so even like with supporting Black businesses, like I'll now try and just only eat it like Black owned restaurants, or my shopping will change from like [White owned stores/brands] to like Black owned brands or so just doing things that will lift my people up. [. . .] While I was aware of that before it's made me more conscious of it and try to put in more of an effort.

*Gen Z, BIPOC Respondent, P7:* I think some people either either embrace Black Lives Matter, and do that embrace some kind of kindness or other I don't know, to be honest, to me feels like Black Lives Matter, as a movement is kind of not disconnected. But it's not really the end goal of it is not kindness, so much as it is justice. And it can be hard to think about kindness and justice. Like they're not mutually exclusive, but it's not always that one leads to the other, I think.

Solidarity was recognized as requiring purposeful action and tackling embedded structures as work that is required by everyone (Hosseini, 2017). We concur with other research that has surfaced the value of lived experience as having the capacity to provoke a radical shift in behaviour, and we believe kindness is a critical ingredient of social solidarity (Hosseini, 2017). Our findings support the assertion that White allyship must be a "continuous, reflexive practice of proactively interrogating Whiteness [. . .] and leveraging one's position of power

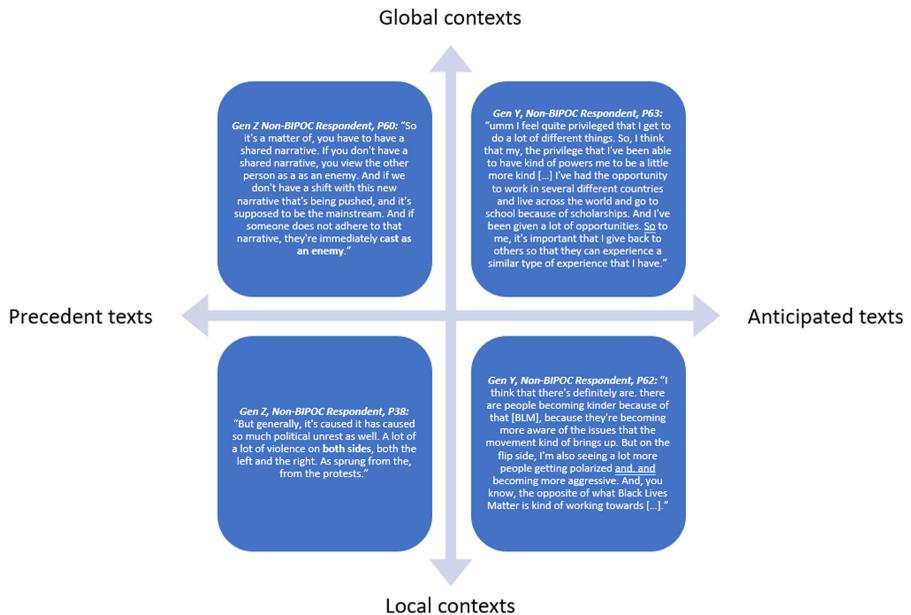
and privilege, and courageously interrupting the status out by engaging in prosocial behaviours that foster growth-in-connection and have both the intention and impact of creating mutuality, solidarity and support [ . . . ]” (Erskine and Bilimoria, 2019, p. 321).

*Part 3: intertextual analysis*

We apply Boje’s (2001) social questions for intertextual analysis to interpret these narratives. Such questions consider the global social context (conventions and audience) vs local contexts (whose social identities get constructed), preceding text (or how various existing stories are incorporated) and anticipated texts (what is metamorphized). Boje (2001) plots these dimensions on a vertical and horizontal axis to locate the text in a social and cultural activity (p. 77). While our uncovered themes conceptualized kindness behaviours broadly in the context of racism, our participant narratives offer greater detail on the nuances of kindness behaviours and their potential for authentic allyship. Our analysis also points to the hegemonic struggle that permutates social and cultural activity (Boje, 2001).

In this portion of our analysis, we wanted to drill down deeper on the differences between our non-BIPOC and BIPOC participants and chart the trajectory of their discourse (see Figure 2: Intertextual analysis BIPOC respondents).

The upper left quadrant represents how social identities are constructed. In this case, those that are viewed to not share the narrative of BLM are considered “enemies”. The participant is demonstrating the limits of his/her identity in relation to BLM based on interpretations of what is perceived to be “mainstream”. The lower left quadrant considers how parts of known narratives are incorporated. Here the participant uses the familiar Former President Trump’s nullifying text of violence occurring on “both sides”. This incorporation of historicity illustrates how narratives are onboarded and reproduced, seemingly without introspection. The upper right quadrant considers the audience of the text and here the participant takes great pains to demonstrate their position and associated actions to non-specified racialized individuals in the same vein of White saviorism.



**Figure 2.**  
Intertextual analysis  
BIPOC respondents

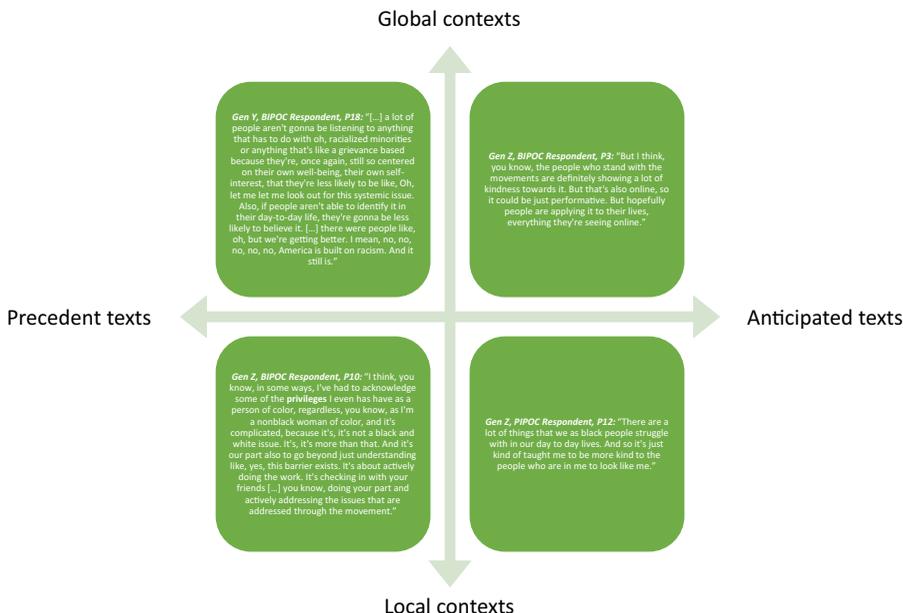
The perception is that being an ally is confined to familiar tropes without a critical understanding of embedded harms. The final lower right quadrant considers metamorphization or how the participant constructs a narrative for consumption. The participant describes what BLM is or is not, while simultaneously defining it within his/her own mental model. Here the participant is attempting to set the narrative on a particular course in which he/she is viewed favourably positioned (see Figure 3: Intertextual analysis non-BIPOC respondents).

In our intertextual analysis of BIPOC participants, we see a different social/cultural trajectory. The upper left quadrant represents how social identities are constructed and our BIPOC participant speaks directly to systematic racism as the foundation for American society and individualism as a critical driver for identity and a barrier to change. Our lower left quadrant emphasizes how known texts are incorporated and reproduced. Here our participant uses the term “privileges” which is a signal to the power of privilege and demonstrates how the concept of White privilege has been onboarded by racialized people (and perhaps holds a critique for White audiences). The upper right quadrant considers the audience and here, the participant has targeted the audiences of social media and conveys what maladapted, inauthentic support for BLM looks like. Finally, our lower right quadrant considers how the participant constructs a narrative for consumption and our participant has used lived experience to inspire kindness and how to treat one another.

Our intertextual analysis reveals the trajectory of conversations about racism from two participant groups. Our final observation is that the path towards a more humane and kinder environment cannot be reconciled, and we explore this revelation more in our discussion.

## Discussion

Our study surfaced a range of perceptions on racism, which supports prior research findings on the difficulty to achieve social change and the durability of “the status quo and associated belief systems” (West *et al.*, 2021, p. 11). What we have named authentic allyship is quite similar to critical



**Figure 3.**  
Intertextual analysis  
non-BIPOC  
respondents

allyship, which is the practice of developing awareness and understanding privilege and recognizing its visible and invisible effects within social structures in a system of inequality (Nixon, 2019). Both involve collective action and individual responsibility of White allies to address violence, discrimination and social justice (Clark, 2019). White allies must see themselves as White, must “recognize the power and privilege conferred by White identity” and must work to dismantle systems of oppression (Clark, 2019, p. 523). It is the ongoing practice which is active and consistent vs a fixed identity (Nixon, 2019). It is also not merely intent, but “requires deepened capacity to understand the multifaceted effects (positive and negative) of action or inaction” (Nixon, 2019, p. 8). Allyship involves creating a sense of mutuality, solidarity and support (Erskine and Bilimoria, 2019). It is “an active, lifelong, and consistent practice of unlearning and reevaluating beliefs and actions; working in solidarity with a marginalized individual or group of people and building relationships based on the ability of a dominant group member to support marginalized groups” (Erskine and Bilimoria, 2019, p. 321). Our contribution to the discourse on critical allyship is the incorporation of kind behaviours which may lead to more authentic allyship, and we believe this may serve as a key driver for social change in the individual and in the collective.

A significant barrier to allyship is White Fragility. Diangelo’s (2011, 2018) critical work on White Fragility reveals the way we have been taught to think about racism as discrete acts by individuals rather than a system that is interconnected and complex. We recognize that there is a desire within society to maintain a racial status quo and that only through “self-awareness, continuing education, relationship building and actual antiracist practice” can we begin to combat the systems which protect racial inequality (Diangelo, 2018, p. 5). It cannot be understated that in producing research which focuses on race that we are also undertaking a process of addressing systemic racism personally and academically and discovering our own ways to be Allies and stand in solidarity against racism. We found kindness to be a powerful ally in allyship. As a group of scholars studying kindness, we used this opportunity to imbed kindness as practice and to test the utility of kindness in the research endeavour. We used kindness to dismantle expectations of power, to build a collaborative rapport and we saw the benefits of kindness in developing allyship in research.

However, we would be reticent to not consider the range of White consciousness as it was profoundly evident in the narratives of our participants. White consciousness measurements have been developed to understand a spectrum of cognition of racism and include consideration of characteristics like obliviousness, depression or guilt, awareness of privilege and appreciation of difference (Clark, 2019). A growing appreciation for the complexity of social inequalities spanning a range of stigmatized experiences is also now better understood as having the potential to inspire empathy and influence allyship (Chong and Mohr, 2020), but it is clear from our study that the trajectory of the discourse is incredibly slow and fraught with potential setbacks. We are still grappling with harmful and durable stereotypes that are easily replicated and reproduced underpinning the racist metanarrative. Our view is that the discourse might be going in generally the same direction, but with distinctly different views and rules, and our non-BIPOC participants gave us the impression that they do not realize that they were potentially off course nor do they have the sensitivity or urgency to match their BIPOC peers.

Crucially, our respondents did identify a relationship between sensitivity to BLM movement and kindness and the inclination for kind behaviours to lead to other behaviours which supports dismantling racism, including intention (coupled with action), humility and education. We have argued elsewhere (Weigand *et al.*, 2021; Williams and Weigand, 2021) that kindness can take many forms, and in our initial analysis here, we spoke to the broad spectrum of potential actions. These can range from a *small act*, which is not seen as a burden, but is memorable, to an *event*, which has structure, rules and a sense of duty, through to an *intervention* which is highly intentional, supportive, mindful of autonomy, personal dignity and requires trust. These different kinds of kindness provide a potential path to achieving authentic allyship if intentionally directed to the practice of allyship. Because kindness can be taught and

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is accessible to all (no matter the station or status in an organizational environment), it can be passed on and become an intentional practice which might ignite social change.

One of the most compelling findings on the nature of kindness is its contagious potential (Weigand *et al.*, 2021). Kindness can be morally driven, it can be driven by feelings of satisfaction, it can be context driven and it can be very simple to create the circumstances for kindness to occur (Weigand *et al.*, 2021). If kindness is instigated by a single person, it can lead to kindness being passed on (Girard, 2004). Kindness motivates kindness, and it can change norms of behaviour (Weigand *et al.*, 2021). It is our belief in studying the intersection of BLM and COVID-19 that kindness is the essential ingredient to more authentic, long-term, action-oriented allyship praxis and perhaps even, social change and social justice.

## Conclusion

Our study surfaces a potential valuable relationship between kindness and authentic allyship. However, given the hesitation demonstrated by non-racialized, non-BIPOC individuals in our study to avoid more productive, accountable, pro-social behaviours, we see significant barriers continuing for organizations and society. It is also fair to say that as we undertook generational research with Gen Z and Y, particularly as we were investigating global perspectives, we expected more worldly, progressive ideas. In other words, we were surprised by a lack of open-mindedness and ignorance, particularly in our non-BIPOC respondents in North America, Africa and Europe. The younger generations of today are being shaped in significantly negative ways, inhibiting enlightened discourse, which is perpetuating racism, prohibiting inclusive discourse and contributing to ongoing systemic barriers in society and in organizations.

We believe that our current COVID reality means that kindness (as action) needs to be enacted intentionally but also differently given the restrictions of social distances, technological barriers and the constraints of certain activities. However, we do not believe that was perceived by our participants as a reasonable barrier to allyship. Our growing understanding of kindness behaviours supports the observation that there are many ways that kindness can be enacted temporally and proximally. We were also surprised, given how different cultures and regions tend to interpret the phenomenon differently that kindness as action translated so consistently. Ideas and concepts have socially constructed meanings, which are regionally and culturally influenced, but this did not play out in our findings. We have come to appreciate the link between intentionality of action (kindness as action) as being needed to achieve authentic allyship praxis. We believe that the phenomenology of kindness gives us important new clues to developing a simpler path to meaningful allyship in and out of the workplace.

We situated our study in the ongoing discourse of the value of prosocial behaviours to reduce racialized bias and we investigated if kindness held potential value for more authentic organizational allyship praxis. It is our contention that kindness has the potential to inspire more authentic allyship and that the contagious qualities of kindness can inform collective behaviours in support of BIPOC in the workplace and in support of the creation of more humane workspaces.

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### Corresponding author

Kristin S. Williams can be contacted at: [kristin.williams@uef.fi](mailto:kristin.williams@uef.fi)

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