

What Does Silence Mean?

by Kay Hetherly

What do you do when somebody says something that goes against your own beliefs or principles? Particularly, if you're with a group of people -- friends, colleagues, relatives, or even strangers -- do you say something or keep quiet? The answer to this question may have something to do with culture, as well as character.

Racism, sexism, ageism, or some other prejudice is often involved when this kind of situation comes up. Imagine, for example, that you're with friends. Everybody's having fun, laughing and talking. Then one person starts telling a story like this:

Another house in my neighborhood got robbed last night. That's the 3rd one this year. No one saw the robbers, but I know they were [foreigners, blacks, teenagers, etc.]. I never worried about crime until they started causing so many problems.

If you're bothered by this kind of stereotyping, you're probably thinking, "Hey, wait a minute. Just because some [teenagers] commit crimes, that doesn't mean all [teenagers] are bad. Crimes are committed by all kind of people." But is it better to say this aloud or not? It's even more difficult when an individual that you know is being attacked. "Attack" may sound extreme, but isn't that what's really happening with bullying or talking viciously behind someone's back? What is our personal responsibility in such cases? If we believe that racism, stereotyping, vicious gossip, and bullying are wrong, can we keep quiet and still hold onto our principles?

I have struggled with these questions myself, but still have no simple answers. My American education did teach me what I "should" do: I learned that silence = consent. In other words, saying nothing is the same as agreeing. So if someone in our group tells a racist joke and we keep silent or, even worse, laugh, the unspoken message is "Racism is OK with me," or possibly, "I'm a racist too." I'm not saying that every American who is offended by racism would speak up in this situation. Many people would not have the courage. But I do think that most Americans who believe racism is wrong would feel that they should speak up, and if they don't, they'll probably feel guilty.

Until recently, the American interpretation of silence was the only one I knew, and I assumed it was correct. But living in Japan often makes me rethink my own beliefs and assumptions, especially when I find myself in situations where things don't happen as I expect them to. At a party, for instance, a male acquaintance once commented that all

women are emotionally weak and tend to get hysterical. He laughed as he said this, but most of the other people didn't laugh. What surprised me, though, was that nobody, including the women, disagreed with him. Surely in an American context, someone would disapprove by saying something like, "That's so old-fashioned." But in this case, silence was the only response. At the time, I was confused by this silence, but now I've come to realize that ignoring his comment was not necessarily consent; rather, it was probably a way to keep a good feeling in the group, perhaps a silent disagreement.

Still, this kind of situation always presents a dilemma for me. What's more important, keeping the group harmony or standing up for what you believe? In the past, I would have said the second is more important, but the truth is, both are. Sometimes silence is best and sometimes it's not. Of course, deciding is the hard part.

[The End of Essay]

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Questions for your discussion. by KOBAYASHI Fumiaki

(Compare your opinion with others', particularly with foreigners'.)

Q. Do you feel something when you have an opinion but don't speak up?

Q. Can you speak up even when you know it will destroy the peaceful atmosphere in a discussion or group, if necessary?

Q. Do you have any preference between group harmony and your personal responsibility?

Q. What are you educated explicitly or implicitly to do when you have an opinion, if any?

Q. If you have a discussion with American, what attitude would you take? (Remember, in her opinion, they feel guilty if they don't express themselves and they will understand you agree with them if you don't say anything.)

Q. In an international discussion, what kind of assumptions would you think you have better?

(Ex. Everybody talks when they want to? Everybody speaks directly? Everybody disagrees with something without any hesitations?)

[The End of Questions]