



## Leaving behind the rhetoric of allyship

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ARTICLE



## Leaving behind the rhetoric of allyship

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### ABSTRACT

In fights for social justice, allies and their efforts receive a significant amount of attention. This attention can be justified, as allies serve essential functions in efforts to eliminate inequalities and inequities present in social systems, which is central to work within social justice movements. However, ‘the term ally has been rendered ineffective and meaningless’. Through this essay, I argue that although allies play important roles in fights for social justice, the ally label can be misapplied, and has lost much of its meaning. The intentions and actions of allies have been questioned through multiple social movements, including Black Lives Matter and No DAPL (Dakota Access Pipeline) in the United States, and Palestinian activism outside of Palestine.

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I use the term ally throughout the essay to reflect an individual from a dominant group, or more accurately an amalgamation of dominant group identities (e.g. White, cisgender, heterosexual), who expresses an ally identity. In the sections that follow, I begin with an explanation of what it means to identify as an ally. I then provide a view of what comprises action as an ally. From there, I offer my critique of allyship and how the word ally has lost much of its significance. Finally, I offer suggestions for how members of dominant groups can take corrective actions to do the work that allies should do.

To understand allies as agents working towards social justice, I want to first define social justice. One of the most frequently cited definitions of social justice situates it as ‘both a process and a goal’ (Bell 2007, p. 1). The goal of social justice is equitable participation in society by all people, while the process should be participatory and reflective of all people (Bell 2007). To help situate allies and allyship, it is important to consider that ‘democratic and participatory’ (Bell 2007 p. 2) processes are embraced in social justice, and in a way that ‘affirm[s] human agency to work collectively toward change’ (Stewart 2012, p. 64). The processes and goals of social justice connect to an overall aim to dismantle any and all systems and mechanisms that serve to oppress, while at the same time privileging others.

Allyship reflects a state of being connected to the expression of an ally identity. This is the current state of allyship: action is not required for one to apply the ally label as a component of their identity. Through this essay, I share a perspective on allyship, from what it could be to where we’ve gone wrong, and ultimately to what needs to change for allyship to be meaningful.

## *My positionality*

Even though this article is not based on an empirical study, I find it fitting to address my positionality, especially because I offer critiques of allies and what is missing in allyship. Positionality reflects my social identities in relation to other people (Bourke 2014). I am a cisgender, heterosexual, White, Christian man. I have participated in Safe Zone trainings, and have long posted social justice related quotes and images in my office and on my office door. I hesitantly consider myself to be an ally, but I do not express such an identity. My concern with doing so comes out in this article, but I also have a very simple reason: I worry that I am more passive in my allyship than in engagement with direct actions to dismantle systemic oppression

## *Allyship*

The term allyship reflects the adoption and expression/performance of an ally identity by a member of a dominant group (Anzaldúa 2000). In this context, allyship is about expressing one's ally identity. Additionally, allyship is an identity or state of being, with potential for remaining in a static position (Anderson and Accomando 2016). The choice to use the noun allyship as part of a critique might seem misplaced, as one might say that an ally is a person who engages in allyship, therefore connecting action to allyship. However, allyship has become a performance that all too often is disconnected from action (Anderson and Accomando 2016).

'I'm an ally' is a common outward expression of one's ally identity, and is made by people who dominate discursive spaces (Foucault 1990). To dominate discursive spaces means to perform identities that are imbued with power, wherein those with unearned privileges are set in juxtaposition with members of subordinated groups (Butler 1999). Ally identities are normative, meaning their identities reflect societal norms. They possess compounding privileges through which they can choose when and how to express their ally-ness. The term ally has become a buzzword among self-labelled progressive members of dominant sociocultural groups (Anderson and Accomando 2016). By putting on the ally name badge, allies hope to deflect attention away from their privilege, especially when interacting with members of underrepresented groups.

## *Who is an ally?*

An ally is 'a person who is a member of the dominant or majority group who works to end oppression in his or her personal and professional life through support of, and as an advocate for, the oppressed population' (Washington and Evans 1991, p. 195). Ally has been defined more succinctly as a member of a dominant group 'who advocate[s] against oppression' (Munin and Speight 2010, p. 249). There is a more direct and nuanced perspective on defining an ally: 'an individual who consciously commits to disrupting and ending cycles of injustice' (Waters 2010, p. 2).

Perspectives on allies are often based in allyship with identity-specific target groups. Scholarship on allies as a broadly defined group is very limited, and scholarship specific to individual ally groups is also limited. For example, Rostosky et al. (2015) noted that research on heterosexual allies for LGBT individuals can be found in only a 'handful of

studies' (p. 331). Blogs and social media platforms feature an abundance of perspectives and critiques of allyship, some of which is referenced in this essay.

It stands to reason that an ally is not only a member of a dominant or majority group, but might also possess some level of authority in a social structure, e.g. the power of whiteness. The ally might reside in a position of power and privilege based on their identity status(es). Power and privilege beget oppression, through combinations of individual and collective actions, and inactions (Dixson and Rousseau 2006; Gillborn 2006). The struggle for allies is to individually, and collectively, push back while drawing on their positions rooted in power and privilege (Ortiz and Reyes 2017).

Words are powerful, and the word ally implies a strong connection with others (Gibson 2014). There can be a tendency to make assumptions about allies; first and foremost is the assumption that they act (Munin and Speight 2010). However, applying the ally label as identity becomes the performance of allyship in and of itself (Anderson and Accomando 2016).

### *Ally identity formation*

Conceiving of allyship as an identity is an important notion with which to sit. Identities are 'self-definitions at the individual level of goals, values, beliefs, and other individually held self-evaluations and expected future selves' (Patton et al. 2016, p. 72). An aspect of identity that is critical to thinking about allies and their development is the perspective of relational identities, which focus on roles individuals perform in relation with others (Patton et al. 2016). Allyship could be construed as a collective identity as an ally's sense of self can be situated within the social category of ally.

'Members of privileged social groups may have difficulty acknowledging social group memberships, while those in subordinated groups may prioritize those group memberships' (Stewart 2012, p. 68). The acknowledgement and interrogation of one's own privileged identities can serve as a precursor for engaging in activities aligned with allyship (Fingerhut 2011). The process of ally identity formation likely looks a lot like the formation of other psychosocial identities, particularly those that reflect identities for members of dominant groups. These processes involve a progression from an ignorance of difference to acknowledging one's identity as a member of a dominant group (Patton et al. 2016).

'Becoming an ally involves working toward ending oppression' (Gibson 2014, p. 200). Edwards (2006) theorised a developmental process by which individuals become allies. It is important to note that Edwards framed motivation for ally development with having a focus on other people. However, focusing efforts in relation to others does not sit in opposition to personally-directed thinking or motivation; this is not an either-or situation. In each position in the model, which should be considered as statuses but not sequential developmental stages, I provide an overview of Edwards (2006) work.

An Aspiring Ally for Self-Interest finds their motivation towards allyship largely through a personal connection with a member of a target group. Individuals whose ally identity and development reflect this status tends to focus on individuals and individual acts. For example, an Aspiring Ally for Self-Interest would call out someone for saying something racist, and see that person's their personal perspectives as the root of the

problem, rather than viewing individual racist acts as part of a broader complex of racism and hegemony (Reason and Davis 2005).

An Aspiring Ally for Altruism centres their social justice efforts on doing work for members of a target group. These aspiring allies feel a sense of duty to liberate, or look at opportunities to empower others (Freire 2008). Beyond a sense of duty, aspiring allies for altruism feel a sense of righteousness in their efforts. They understand the privileges they possess as a member of a dominant group, and feel guilt based in those unearned privileges (e.g. White guilt), but do not confront the very systemic privileges from which they benefit. Engaging in ally efforts with members of oppressed groups can be a means to overcome the guilt that accompanies privilege for many allies (Cabrera 2012).

The third, and final status that Edwards (2006) proposed is Ally for Social Justice. Allies who are developing within this status experience a sense of solidarity with members of a target group, so their self-motivation is shared with others. Allies for social justice embrace shared actions, acknowledge the role of privilege, not only in their lives, but as part of a broader system and pattern of oppression. They consciously work to dismantle systems of oppression, using their privilege in an effort to undo their privilege.

An aspiring ally has to develop self-awareness around their own identities, as well as those of members of minoritized groups, as prerequisite to being an ally (Gibson 2014). However, self-awareness by itself cannot yield ally development. Allies have to develop a sense of agency whereby they 'feel capable and responsible for helping create change' (Stewart 2012, p. 65). Like social justice, allyship is both a process and goal. It is important to consider that an ally's identity rests not in a single state or status, but like any aspect of identity, is constantly evolving (Jones, Kim, and Skendall 2012), and requires the individual to 're-examine themselves constantly' (Freire 2008, p. 60).

Allies might experience struggles in the identity development, as allyship could be the first time when external contexts comes to bear on their internal sense of self (Jones et al. 2012). These experiences can serve to initiate or otherwise propel an individual along their developmental trajectory (Patton et al. 2016).

### *Forms of allyship*

Jenkins (2009) offered a different perspective on what it means to be an ally by providing three distinct categories. This perspective is an important one, as we often approach allyship in overly simplistic ways (DeTurk 2011). 'An ally has a relational orientation toward justice' (Jenkins 2009, p. 28). First, the ally offers support and solidarity, perhaps comfort, to members of oppressed groups. The second category is that of vocal advocate, who would be a person who uses their voice to argue for a cause. Finally, Jenkins offered the category of agent. Agents are action-oriented, working to bring about changes to systems, particularly those that reflect power differentials. What Jenkins provided is a clarion call to question what allyship is, and what it means to engage in social justice work from positions of privilege.

### *The role of interest convergence in allyship*

Allies might pursue social justice action, or ally identities, due to a perception of social desirability (Alimo 2012). In this vein, allies view allyship from the perspective of

personal benefit; in this case, the personal benefit is the social capital that comes from meeting the social desirability of allyship.

Just as failing to acknowledge privilege can be a barrier to ally development (Davis and Wagner 2005), failing to acknowledge one's implicit bias can also be a barrier (Alimo 2012; Case 2012). Allies have to critically examine their biases, and understand their own positionalities (Bourke 2014) before they can commit to engaging in social justice action. Their failure to conduct such self-examinations leads to maintenance of the status quo, which aids in maintaining dominant ideologies (Reason and Davis 2005).

In examining men's attitudes towards social justice, Davis and Wagner (2005) noted that men who live privileged identities have to perceive 'external incentives or environmental presses ... to combat oppression' (p. 32). This highlights the role that interest convergence plays in allyship. Members of dominant groups have to build awareness of oppression, but, in the case Davis and Wagner's (2005) work, fail to see that anyone is oppressed and in need of liberation.

One of the key challenges of allyship in the context of interest convergence lies in co-opting group membership. Allies can experience an inclination to take expressions of solidarity to the point of claiming membership in a target group (Reason and Broido 2005). Allies can struggle with striking a balance between wanting to be seen for doing the work with recognising their place in the struggle, and the role their privilege plays.

Derrick Bell (1995) used the term interest convergence to label the act of member of the dominant culture supporting racial justice only when there is something in it for them. The following quotation from Lutheran minister Martin Niemöller is a clear illustration of interest convergence in the context of social justice allyship.

First they came for the Communists, but I was not a Communist so I did not speak out. Then they came for the Socialists and the Trade Unionists, but I was neither, so I did not speak out. Then they came for the Jews, but I was not a Jew so I did not speak out. And when they came for me, there was no one left to speak out for me. (M. Niemöller as cited in Marcuse, 2015, p. 187)

Niemoeller's quote is often held up as a mantra of allyship, but if we think carefully about it, the motivation to speak up for others is about interest convergence. If I don't speak up for others, there won't be anyone left to speak up for me. This individualistic perspective remains a problematic axiom for allies. Focusing on individual relationships, or seeing allyship as helping individuals rather than addressing systems represents a barrier to advancing allyship to a point where oppressed and oppressors build communities aimed at liberation (Harro 2000).

Allies put on their buttons, and apply their safe zone stickers to their doors, and feel satisfied. They've come out as allies. If an ally 'comes out,' they are diminishing the anguish and oppression that members of marginalised groups experience when they reveal their identities (Reyes-Chow 2011). In one such account of becoming an ally to LGBTQ individuals, one author noted their own fear and trepidation in coming out as an ally, fearing ridicule and having to justify their motives (Ji 2007).

There is a possibility that the ally, in nearly any stage of their development, might react negatively to being forced to recognise their privileged identities (Stewart 2012). Acknowledging implicit biases is not a one-time event or experience. Due to the pervasive nature of privilege and its accompanying social capital, allies have to

continually engage in this discomfort. The ally has to learn, through education and reflection, to work through the negative feelings that come with facing their privilege.

White allies can experience internal tensions as they struggle to reconcile their efforts to be seen as anti-racist with efforts to have meaningful relationships with people of colour (DeTurk 2011). At times the desire to be recognised as an ally by others, and to be accepted as part of a target group becomes a driving motivation for allyship (Bridges and Mather 2015). This desire to be seen as an ally and be accepted is driven by personal interest convergence. Allyship for the sake of acknowledgement sits very far from engaging in social justice work for the purpose of ending oppression.

### *Fragility*

Sometimes, these internal tensions not only in terms of seeking out acceptance by members of target groups, but also stem from feelings of guilt or futility. These tensions are what Collins and Jun (2017) describe as a White-22, which is a perception of a no-win situation. The feeling of futility can come from feeling criticised while attempting to engage as an ally. White fragility (DiAngelo 2011) can be wound up in this sense of futility, where White allies refrain from engaging in social justice efforts for fear of reprimand (Applebaum 2017).

By feeling caught in a White-22, White allies fail to engage in meaningful action in the pursuit of social justice. White people caught in White-22 situations do not have those experiences in a vacuum. Rather, these individuals are part of broader socially-constructed systems and institutions (Wilson 2019).

### *Leveraging social capital*

Ally identity is rooted in privilege and dominance, both of which influence their interactions with others (Patton and Bondi 2015). The use of privilege in interactions with others is a product of social capital, in that social capital provides access to physical capital and social networks (Hunter 2002).

There is a quid-pro-quo perspective of social capital, or building up one's favour bank (Putnam 2001). However, how social capital builds and connects to privilege and power is through what Putnam (2001) terms non-direct reciprocity. Much like accruing interest on an investment, social capital grows over time through an expectation that through our privilege, we can make withdrawals in the future. Social capital requires establishing networks of relationships with other people, even if the nature of the networked relationships is based on shared characteristics (Bourdieu 2011), e.g. identity or group membership. It is within group membership, or the relationships between group members, that social capital exists, not within individuals (Coleman 1988).

'Some forms of social capital are, by choice or necessity, inward looking and tend to reinforce exclusive identities and homogeneous groups' (Putnam 2001, p. 22). This connects back to the discomfort an ally might experience when examining their privileged identities. The discomfort arises from risking their social capital and threatening their membership and status within existing social groups. This risk also represents a White-22 situation (Collins and Jun 2017).

Social capital is also about being able to access and move about cultural norms, traditions, and mores (Bourdieu 2011). This connection to cultural reproduction is important, because social capital should be understood to be socially constructed (Coleman 1988). The social capital of whiteness can also be used as a shield against vulnerability, to protect against fragility (Applebaum 2017).

Allies draw on social capital as a means to engage in social justice actions. Through social capital, allies can put their power and privilege to use. Whiteness, carrying its embedded White privilege, represents a ‘strategic rhetoric, a means by which people, working in concert and often unreflectively, levy power and cultural influence’ (Warren and Fassett 2004, p. 412). When White privilege, for example, is addressed, it is often framed in the context of immunity from oppression, e.g. not being surveilled while shopping (see McIntosh 2007).

### The allyship is sinking

While Edwards (2006) offered a sound perspective on the developing an ally identity, I see something more to it. This act of allyship is problematic. ‘Much younger people than me have no hope, do not see alliances working, do not see white people reaching out or doing their work’ (Anzaldúa 2000, p. 477). Individuals can adopt ally identities connected to any number of social justice issues. While Anzaldúa specifically calls out White allies in the context of racial justice, her concern can be extended.

As noted earlier, statuses have been theorised in which individuals develop and perform ally identities (Edwards 2006). However, like many theories of identity development, ally identity is socially constructed. Identity development also relies on the individual shaping their own identity, approaching a sense of self-determination. Because identity is situated within the self, a member of a dominant group is able to adopt an ally identity, and express that identity of their own volition. Self-determination is certainly a key component of identity development, along with identity expression. However, there is a mismatch between within the context of the performance of the ally identity.

A key underlying principle of social justice is that the process involves action (Reason, Scales, and Millar 2005). ‘Social justice involves social actors who have a sense of their own agency . . .’ (Bell 2007, p. 1). Agency suggests self-determination of individuals, who not only have a sense of their own agency, but are actively engaged, in the context of social justice, to dismantle systems of oppression (Freire 2008).

A challenge for allyship rests in allies viewing members of oppressed groups as needing to be saved, and that the ally in a position to provide that help (Patton and Bondi 2015). This further reifies the power differential between allies and members of oppressed groups and does nothing to disrupt the status quo.

### Performance of identity

The ability to call oneself an ally reflects a set of privileges (Bridges and Mather 2015). There is an element of performance at play when it comes to ally identity. Adopting an identity involves defining one’s role within that identity (Butler 1999). As Butler reminds us, performance of identity is not simply about performing a role based on how an individual sees themselves and identifies. Rather, the individual strategizes ways to live an

internalised sense of self, mindful of the external gaze of others, of society (Foucault 1977). This oppositional gaze, as Foucault so named it, serves as a reminder to self-regulate oneself. In the case of the ally, self-regulation can come in the form of attending trainings, attending events in shows of solidarity, and displaying signs and placards.

Something problematic comes through in much of the scholarship about allies and their development. In many instances, published works use language about members of dominant groups being allies for communities (e.g. LGBT communities, Black communities). While this does function to posit allies as engaging in group action and not individualistic approaches, the use of language about communities based on identity categories is problematic on two levels. First, the definition of an individual being part of a community based on sexual identity, race, or other marker of difference is essentializing. Second, and building on this essentializing turn, there are no singular, monolithic communities based on identity (hooks 1990).

Allyship is often problematised by a tendency of allies to centre themselves in their identity development and social justice actions (Patton and Bondi 2015). The self-directed thinking of allies happens because ‘many members of dominant groups (ie: White or heterosexual) do not easily, or readily acknowledge their status as members of a privileged community’ (Getz and Kirkley 2003, p. 22).

### *Compartmentalised lives*

Allyship can be compartmentalised; allies perform ally identities connected to professional roles, but their allyship may not extend beyond the specifics of those professional roles (Ryan et al. 2013). Allies are able to go home at the end of the day, and disconnect from the concerns around which they claim to centre their allyship. Members of dominant groups are able to put allyship on and off, like a mask.

Sometimes allies are considered to be challenging injustices on behalf of others (DeTurk 2011). Such a perspective is problematic, as it reinforces the ideology of members of oppressed groups being liberated thanks solely to the efforts of members of dominant groups (Freire 2008). This trap of the White saviour is dangerous, as it places the focus and emphasis on the liberator, rather than on the oppressed (Freire 2008). Liberation requires cooperation, solidarity, and shared action, but the intention to liberate the oppressed on behalf of the oppressed is an act of further oppression (Freire 2008).

Reason and Broido (2005) used the term ‘fair-weather ally’ (p. 87) to describe an individual who shows up as an ally when it is easy. This is problematic not only for that individual who adopts the ally label, but for other dominant group members. Such fair-weather allies, if they are in community with other allies and target group members, can undermine collective efforts, as they reinforce ‘the suspicions of target group members through more unfulfilled promises’ (Reason and Broido 2005, p. 87).

‘Being an ally is difficult and often requires sacrifice, which makes maintaining motivation equally difficult’ (Reason and Broido 2005, p. 87). Allies might experience negative reactions to their allyship, or espousal of their ally identity by other dominant group members (Ji 2007). I sometimes wonder if there are folks who want to call themselves allies for fear of being labelled as being on the wrong side of history. This fear of being labelled racist drives some towards self-application of the ally label, but

ultimately use this avoidance as a means of remaining disengaged (Applebaum 2007). If they don't do the rainbow triangle, post a picture of a raised fist, or put up quotes about justice, will they be labelled as homophobic or racist? The prospect of such consequences brings about White-22 thinking for White allies (Collins and Jun 2017). Allyship requires confronting feelings of inadequacy or not feeling brave enough to stand up to and fight against injustices (DiStefano et al. 2000).

### *Seeking education from the Other*

Members of minoritized groups, particularly students of colour, experience being called upon to educate members of dominant groups. This can take place in an effort to learn about social justice, but not only by students from dominant groups, but also educators from dominant groups (Gibson 2014). Although questions posed to members of minoritized groups might seem innocuous, can cause minoritized students, 'particularly African Americans, [to be] uncomfortable discussing racial issues because they may feel revictimized by the content of racism' (Gibson 2014, p. 207).

An aspect of allyship that receives considerable critique is White feminism. Aspects of White feminism that are particularly concerning in the concept of allyship are the practices of tone policing of women of colour, especially Black women, and White saviour complex (Cargle 2018).

### *Corrective actions*

The glorification of the ally label needs to come to an end. Ally awards have become the participation trophy of social justice work by members of dominant groups. Allies, or aspiring allies as Edwards (2006) refers to allies in that first status of ally development, need to critically examine their why for allyship. Rather than celebrating the ally identity, individual allies need to take concrete steps to ensure that their allyship is rooted in action.

### *Understand privilege*

Before embarking on any other corrective actions, individual allies, regardless of where they are in their ally identity development, have to critically examine their privilege (Kivel 2018). 'The ability to call oneself ally rests on privilege' (Bridges and Mather 2015, p. 162).

'Oppression and dominance name social realities that we can participate in without being oppressive or dominating people' (Johnson 2001, p. 13). Allies can easily get caught up in the rhetoric of 'not all White people,' 'not all men,' and so on. Such statements reflect an ignorance to the scope and reach of oppression; a failure to recognise one's role through privilege to broader systems of dominance and oppression. McIntosh's (2007) framing of privilege is a useful tool in helping aspiring allies reflect on their privilege, particularly as a way to consider using social capital as a tool for social justice.

### ***Be ready for discomfort***

“Allyship should feel uncomfortable to you. If your allyship feels comfy then it’s most-likely lazy and ineffective.” Tweet from @kat\_blaque 27 May 2015

Allyship is a continuous developmental process, not simply a state of being. Are those who espouse a rhetoric of allyship but don’t engage in work to disrupt and dismantle systems of oppression resting at an initial stage of development in their allyship? Like social justice, allyship is both a process and goal. The act of becoming/being an ally requires the individual to ‘re-examine themselves constantly’ (Freire 2008, p. 60). Aspiring allies may not know where to begin in their learning, thus limiting their active engagement in social justice action (Gibson 2014).

In order to promote ongoing allyship development, opportunities need to be promoted for individuals to address the development of intercultural maturity (Waters 2010). Because intercultural maturity is spurred by exposure to alternative perspectives, developing allies greater capacity for growth through meaningful intergroup interaction (King and Baxter Magolda 2005).

Allies need to engage in purposeful developmental activities that extend beyond single workshops. To help individuals move beyond discomfort and to a place to truly engage in social justice work, educational workshops should be structured as multiple training sessions, to be both proactive and reactive as concerns arise (Stewart 2012). Allies can benefit from clear training curricula aimed at helping them confront their privilege and implicit biases. The discomfort that stems from these internal confrontations can mean that allies need support, both from trained facilitators, and other allies.

In concluding their book *White Out*, Collins and Jun (2017) acknowledge the discomfort that the book likely caused for White readers. Their conclusion is a plea to persevere despite discomfort. Collins and Jun (2017) urge the reader to not only do the work themselves, but to engage other White people within their various communities (e.g. work, church, neighbourhoods) in conversations that can lead to action.

### ***Being in community***

Allies have to attend to building and maintaining relationships with two groups: members of target populations, and other allies. What matters are meaningful relationships where trust is developed over time. The relative importance for each type of relationship bears critical consideration.

Something that allies, aspiring allies, and developing allies need to keep in mind is the importance of maintaining relationships with members of oppressed groups (DiStefano et al. 2000). Allyship in the absence of genuine relationships with members of oppressed groups can lead to the ally being perceived to be working on behalf of others, rather with others. However, this is not all about perception. Allyship in the absence of being present with members of oppressed groups equates to engaging saviour mode (Freire 2008).

Allies must also be in community with each other. This aids in allies being able to form relationships rooted in accountability (Brown and Ostrove 2013). As allies work to support one another, it is critically important to develop skills of empathy and patience

(Samuels, Ferber, and Herrera 2003). Efforts to hold one another accountable cannot be based in call-out culture, but rather calling-in, which relies on empathy. These efforts and actions can provide spaces for further reflection, which is quintessential to ongoing ally development.

### *Doing the work as an ally*

If members of dominant social groups want to profess allyship, allies have to do the work of social justice. Doing the work is about challenging and disrupting the very systems that privilege any group over other people. Allies have to turn their words into action. In social justice literature, praxis is about making sure practices reflect espoused theories and philosophies. The ally saying that there should be equity in opportunity, but doing nothing to address inequities within their sphere of influence does not reflect praxis. Praxis is the interweaving of theory and practice, the process of making words and action the same (Freire 2008). From a Freirean perspective, praxis is rooted in human interaction, and through interactions human actors recognise the historical roots of the processes and systems in which people interact (Bell 2007). The doing of social justice work is embedded with commitments to action that are reflected in the espousal of central ideals, which are in turn reflected in purposeful action (Ortiz and Reyes 2017). In living praxis, and individual demonstrates an internalisation of core beliefs, attitudes and dispositions, reflects on the effects of systems of oppression, and integrates a continually evolving commitment to a greater social good (Davis and Harrison 2013; Freire 2008).

Allies need to form connections with other allies. My reason for suggesting this, is allies have to hold each other accountable. The accountability that's needed is likely uncomfortable. Allies need to call each other out – think about instances of mansplaining or Whitesplaining (see Cargle 2018). As Stewart (2012) noted, when engaging in action, the ally will likely need to enlist support in their efforts. But beyond feeling supported, allies need to hold each other accountable (Collins 2000). Allies need to be accountable not only for acting, but for doing so in ways that reflect the development of empathy (Collins 2000), and an openness to feedback and critique (Love 2000). Accountability needs to come not only for actions taken, but for inaction, too (Love 2000). Allies also have to confront others in their lives who espouse ideas and beliefs that do not align with efforts to eliminate systems of oppression (DiStefano et al. 2000).

A critical role that allies should play is that of educator. Allies need to work to educate other dominant group members about oppression and strategies to end oppression, and confront microaggressions within dominant groups (Ji 2007). This is the space where allies need to leverage their social capital and draw on their power and privilege as group members to do the work with other dominant group members. All too often, allies are able to call themselves allies without confronting problematic behaviour within their groups (Cargle 2018).

### *Becoming an accomplice*

The idea of allyship has come under fire, and so-called allies have been called upon to become accomplices (Indigenous). The distinction between ally and accomplice is

important, and bears addressing here. Because of the passivity of allyship, allies can be seen as taking a position without taking risks. On the other hand, an accomplice is in the thick of things, actively participating, assuming risks.

To engage as accomplices, allies have to acknowledge that while their privilege protects them, publicly aligning themselves with members of oppressed groups or social justice movements can raise the risk of repercussions. However, such public alignment can send powerful messages to members of the target group. It demonstrates allies' willingness to take risks beyond personal interest and their willingness to leverage their privilege and associated social capital towards justice.

'I ask what it means to recognize that while we may be complicit in systems of oppression we also have the ability and power to be accomplices in challenging that oppression' (Sheridan 2017, p. 18). Ultimately, the ally has to make decisions and take action alongside others (Gibson 2014). Taking allyship to the level of accomplice is 'about putting yourself out there [taking risks], not because you want to have a clean conscience or be able to say that you dabbled in advocacy as an undergrad, but because it's the right thing to do' (Ortiz and Reyes 2017).

## Conclusions

Allies have to acknowledge the limits to their roles. The work of allyship has to be with the oppressed, not for or on anyone's behalf (Freire 2008). The ally, because of their possession and performance of one or more dominant identities that are inscribed with power, and function to then reinscribe that power in systems, lives in precarious spaces. The power differentials that exist between oppressed and oppressor results in ongoing dehumanisation, because 'the oppressor, who is [themselves] dehumanized because [they] dehumanize others, is unable to lead this struggle' (Freire 2008, p. 47).

Because of the role of personal interest convergence present in allyship, it is important to acknowledge and affirm ally behaviours that are consistent with expectations for social justice action (Waters 2010). Such acknowledgement, while seemingly inconsistent with portions of my argument in this article, aids in reinforcing the importance of action over identity, 'placing emphasis on how our everyday lives are lived, instead of [one'] personal identification as an ally' (Waters 2010, p. 2).

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