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To cite this article: Sara DeTurk (2011) Allies in Action: The Communicative Experiences of People Who Challenge Social Injustice on Behalf of Others, *Communication Quarterly*, 59:5, 569-590, DOI: [10.1080/01463373.2011.614209](https://doi.org/10.1080/01463373.2011.614209)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/01463373.2011.614209>



Published online: 14 Oct 2011.



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# Allies in Action: The Communicative Experiences of People Who Challenge Social Injustice on Behalf of Others

Sara DeTurk

*This study explores the lived experiences of people who act as allies in the interest of social justice. Interviews were conducted to investigate the meaning of the ally identity and the tactics allies use to interrupt stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination against others. Findings suggest that people who speak out on behalf of social justice from positions of relative power do so (a) out of identity concerns that emphasize moral obligations, (b) largely through authoritative and dialogic strategies that draw on their symbolic capital, and (c) in ways that reflect ideologies of culturally dominant groups. The study also describes tensions arising out of the contradictory nature of deploying social power against the system that confers it. Conventional definitions of “allies” that rely on static notions of power, finally, are challenged as too simplistic.*

*Keywords:* Dialogue; Intercultural Communication; Interpersonal Communication; Persuasion

An increasing body of communication research focuses on the pursuit of social justice. Although social justice *movements* have long been an important concern of rhetorical scholarship, this focus has only recently begun to expand as a priority throughout the discipline. Frey, Pearce, Pollock, Artz, and Murphy (1996) issued a call for increased theory, research, and pedagogy on social justice. In response, a small number of books, notably those by Frey and Carragee (2007) and Swartz (2006),

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have begun to document and analyze social justice efforts from a communication perspective. Many of the chapters in those volumes, however, were at the stage of “argu[ing] for embracing a turn to social justice in communication studies” (Swartz, 2006, p. ix), rather than actually analyzing communication directed at social justice. Few of them, moreover, specifically focused on identity concerns or on efforts to interrupt stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination at interpersonal levels.

Within intercultural communication studies, four trajectories of research address ways in which people communicate to interrupt racism, sexism, heterosexism, and other “isms”: “Co-cultural communication” (Orbe, 1998) addresses ways in which members of marginalized groups negotiate their identities in situations where power relations impose negative constraints on their communication. Second, research on intercultural alliances (Collier, 2002) explores the potential for intergroup partnerships to transcend or confront oppressive cultural structures. Third, Whiteness studies (Nakayama & Martin, 1999) interrogate some of the dynamics that, among other things, impede White people from being fully committed and effective actors in efforts to dismantle racism. A final stream, emerging mainly out of the education literature, examines how people with identity-based privilege come to act and identify as allies to others.

This study seeks to align and extend these four streams through systematic and empirical investigation into how people communicate interpersonally to confront not only racism, but also other forms of social injustice. This study, moreover, interrogates the specific roles of “allies,” or people who have relative social power or privilege and who stand against injustice directed at people who lack such privilege (Adams, Bell, & Griffin, 1997). From a phenomenological perspective, it explores what it means to identify and act an ally, as well as the advantages and tensions inherent in striving to promote equality from a position of privilege.

Interviews of 15 self-described allies suggest that (a) commitment to acting as an ally is experienced as an important element of identity, and (b) relative social power both enables and complicates allies’ rhetorical opportunities. In particular, it enables both dialogic and authoritative approaches, presents a variety of tensions regarding the deployment of power to speak on behalf of others, and tends to carry certain assumptions about social change. This study addresses communicative interventions related not only to race, but also gender, sexual orientation, disabilities, physical size, language, and economic class.

Examination of the reasons that, and tactics by which, people communicate to promote social justice on behalf of groups of which they are not members is important in a number of ways. First, it offers practical tools to readers seeking guidance in how to effectively communicate in the interest of social justice. Second, this study reveals ways in which the use of such tools is circumscribed by culture, structure, and other contextual contingencies. In this way, it extends theory about the relationships among identity, power, motives, and tactics in regard to social justice communication.

### **Theoretical Foundations**

Existing research directly related to ally communication focuses on three main areas: (a) the nature of alliances as relationships, (b) the role of Whiteness as an ideology in

inhibiting alliances, and (c) how people become allies. With few exceptions, this third stream tends to almost exclusively focus on White allies to people of color. Limited research, finally, has begun to examine White resistance to racism.

### *Alliances as Relationships*

Collier (2002) defined *alliance* as “a relationship in which parties are interdependent and responsible for and to each other. Intercultural allies recognize their cultural differences as well as their interdependence, and often seek similar goals, but they are not necessarily friends” (p. 2). Allies, according to Collier, stand against injustice, give voice to the poor, and actively respond to social oppression. Collier pointed out that “there are more ideological forces, institutional policies and practices, and social norms that reinforce hierarchy and elites keeping their privileges in place than there are ideologies, policies, practices, and norms encouraging and rewarding intercultural alliances” (p. 14); and that alliances, therefore, “require risk and vulnerability” (p. 14).

In the same volume, Allen, Broome, Jones, Chen, and Collier (2002) associated alliance with both material assistance and interpersonal relationships; and emphasized the importance of trust, recognition of interdependence, and dialogue, which includes both the ability to express oneself comfortably and the willingness to openly listen to the pain of others. They noted that alliances lead to both social justice and personal growth, but that they always involve some tension or conflict because allying with one group or cause is also to distance oneself from others.

Several authors identified other tensions involved in alliances. These include conflicts between individual interests and those of a collectivity (e.g., Allen et al., 2002; Sorrells, 2002), as well as demands to negotiate agency and identity in the face of dominant-culture demands (Sorrells, 2002).

Although this scholarship contributes in important ways to the understanding of social justice communication, its lens is relational; it does not attend much to rhetorical choices or identity concerns of individual actors. Whiteness studies, on the other hand, offer important insights about the ontological, epistemological, and rhetorical advantages and limits of positions of privilege.

### *Whiteness as an Ideology Inhibiting Alliances*

Frankenberg (1993) defined *Whiteness* as “a location of structural advantage . . . [;] a ‘standpoint’ . . . from which [W]hite people look at ourselves, at others, and at society . . . [;] and a set of cultural practices that are usually unmarked and unnamed” (p. 1); and described ways in which it hinders, for example, interracial feminist coalitions. A number of communication scholars, too, have articulated important ways in which alliances are inhibited by ideologies such as Whiteness. Tierney and Jackson (2002), for example, pointed out that Whiteness constrains alliances to the extent that it denies the relevance of race (and, therefore, racism), and—conversely—that race is used by those in power to recycle “otherness.” Carrillo Rowe (2002), furthermore, demonstrated how Whiteness (as well as labels and categories in general) serves to

keep people of color at a distance from White people. Specifically, she identified a White mode of relating—reinforced by institutional structures and norms—which is characterized by abstract knowledge of others. This impersonal relational mode, she argued, protects White women from the pain of people of color, and perpetuates a “power-over” relationship. Marty (1999) added that White antiracist rhetoric often denies White people’s accountability for their racist actions, typically by denying intent; and observed that, too often, White people put their self-image as antiracists ahead of their interracial relationships.

### *How People Become Allies*

Informing the study of ally communication is a collection of scholarship addressing ways in which (mostly White) people come to commit themselves to social justice activism. In a 2002 study, I found that people tend to come to their identities as allies in one or more of three ways. First, they may identify with marginalization as a result of their own social identities or close personal relationships. Second, they may have been socialized (through family, friends, school, or travel) to value and enjoy differences within their social networks. Third, they have learned from role models or others who treated them with respect and honored their humanity while also confronting them with their own prejudices (DeTurk, 2002).

Other authors have described the specific experiences of White men and women who challenge racism. Curry et al. (2000), for example, described their experiences as White women in the civil rights movement, whose identities as antiracism activists were transgressive to their largely Southern upbringings. Thompson, Schaefer, and Brod (2003), similarly, collected 35 personal stories of White men who confront racism—a task that “is integrated into their day-to-day existence in such a way that their lives are permeated with questions of justice, personally and politically” (p. 1). For these men, confronting racism is not a choice, but “simply what they must do” (Thompson et al., 2003, p. 1). Thompson et al. noted that, for these men, educators, role models, and inspirational figures (both public figures and in interpersonal relationships) have been important in their antiracism work. Such work includes

organizing, protesting, engaging in civil disobedience, witnessing, writing, using power and position to raise issues, teaching, infiltrating racist organizations, rescuing people of color from oppressive conditions, getting involved in politics, building coalitions and supporting organizations of color, advocating, taking legal action, boycotting, lobbying, creating and building organizations to challenge racism, researching and spreading information, and making contact with and supporting [W]hite men. (Thompson et al., 2003, p. 12)

Some analyses of the stories collected by Thompson et al. (2003) have been conducted from a communication perspective. Arndt, Orbe, and Hopson (2005) identified the following themes related to antiracism work by White men: political influence/activism, making views known in conversation to influence culture, unity between communities of color, awareness of White privilege (particularly in terms of the normative character of their communication style), and challenges of the journey,

such as anger, frustration, and risk-taking. Camara (2005) observed that these same narratives revealed the use of interracial communication capital to handle attacks, build bridges across groups, and build community through cooperative projects, but that this framework was “insufficient in (1) individual healing and (2) reconciling racist discourse that [violates] personal friendship” (p. 5). Tolerance of racism among other White people in the interest of individual rights, for example, “is complicit in nature and does not support grassroots organizing” (Camara, 2005, p. 10).

In terms of how people become allies, Clark and O'Donnell (1999) explored the phenomenon of White students who do not resist multicultural education, and asked the question, “What is required for Whites to come to the realization that the benefits of being antiracist far outweigh the benefits of being racist?” (p. 2) Through narrative analysis of their own experiences and those of other Whites challenging anti-Black racism, Clark and O'Donnell identified three conditions: “(1) Be[ing] exposed to educational experiences . . . outside the Eurocentric norm; (2) Engag[ing] with people of color in books, in newspapers, in films, and in person . . . ; [and] (3) Engag[ing] with antiracist Whites . . .” (pp. 8–9).

### *White Discourse to Resist Racism*

Mease's (2006) study of Whiteness discourse comes closest to describing allies' communicative strategies of resistance to racism. She noted that both resistance and maintenance strategies reflect characteristics of meritocracy, individualism, race neutrality, invisibility, fragmentation, and deflection; and offered useful examples of each. Mease concluded by recommending the following actions on the part of Whites who would resist racism: identifying role models, encouraging talk about race, modeling positive talk, redefining racism as a historically and socially institutionalized phenomenon, and encouraging interaction with others.

The little existing scholarship that describes allies' communication strategies (and tactics)<sup>1</sup> in the interest of social justice is important, but limited. First, it almost exclusively focuses on race and racism. Although critical Whiteness studies are extremely valuable in interrogating other dimensions of identity and social interaction, empirical research and theory needs to extend to these other identities, such as gender, sexual orientation, religion, and nationality. Little of the extant research, furthermore, either describes and analyzes the actual communicative resistance tactics used by allies in their everyday lives, or relates such tactics directly to an ally identity. This study, therefore, seeks to expand the focus of this line of research more broadly by exploring the nature of the ally identity and ally experiences in general—including how they are informed and shaped by their cultural and institutional contexts—and to theorize about the strategies allies use to promote social justice.

As a model, I use Orbe's (1998) study of co-cultural communication in which he explored ways that members of oppressed or marginalized groups in society negotiate or resist their marginalization through communication. Orbe's co-cultural theory explicates relationships among culture, power, and communication by identifying individual responses to racism, homophobia, and other “isms” on the part of their

targets and organizing them into categories according to their levels of assertiveness and cultural accommodation. Orbe concluded:

Situated within a particular *field of experience* that governs their perceptions of the *costs and rewards* associated with, as well as their *ability* to engage in, various communication practices, co-cultural group members will strategically select communication orientations—based on their *preferred outcomes* and *communication approaches*—to fit the circumstances of a specific *situation*. (p. 120)

This study seeks to apply a similar lens in exploring the following questions:

- RQ1: *What characterizes the lived experiences, motives, and tactics of people who commit themselves to the pursuit of social justice through communication?*
- RQ2: *What does it mean for them to identify as “allies”?*
- RQ3: *What advantages and tensions characterize the pursuit of social justice from positions of privilege?*

I also propose a taxonomy of communication approaches selected by allies based on their experiences, abilities, costs, and situations, as outlined by Orbe.

## Method

The study's participants were 15 residents of a large Southwestern city, recruited for the study through network and snowball sampling. (Fourteen responded to e-mail messages I sent to an “allies” listserv and a university-wide diversity committee; the 15th was referred by one of the others.) Although all but one participant worked at the same university, they represented a variety of institutional roles (including students, faculty, and staff), and were extremely diverse in terms of age, gender, sexual orientation, race, and regional origin. (Participants included those who identified as male, female, transgender, lesbian, gay, bisexual, heterosexual, Anglo-American, African American, Native American, Latina, Asian, Northern, and Southern; and ranged in age from their 20s to 50s. Their occupations were much less diverse; 14 of the 15 were employees of the same university, and a plurality had roles related to counseling or student support.) Each person participated in a semi-structured interview (see Appendix B) of approximately 1 hr with the investigator. The interviews were conducted and analyzed in accordance with phenomenology, which is the study of persons' consciousness of their everyday life experiences (Lanigan, 1988). It is a meaning-centered methodology that sheds light on essential structures of consciousness while also accounting for different standpoints (Martinez, 2000). Phenomenology is an inductive approach whose rigor is based on its openness to ambiguity, its attentiveness to the relationship between phenomena and the semiotic categories and personal experiences that shade our interpretation of them as researchers, and a progressive three-stage process of analysis (Ihde, 1986; Lanigan, 1988).

Following the phenomenological approach, the interviews mainly focused on broad questions about participants' lived experiences. I (the researcher) approached them with a dialogic attitude, in a spirit of mutual inquiry, and frequently shared my thoughts and experiences with interviewees. Once each interview was completed, it

was transcribed and analyzed according to the three-step phenomenological process articulated by Ihde (1986) and Lanigan (1988).

The first stage of analysis, description, involved condensing the interview transcripts into a first-person narrative in the voice of each interviewee, retaining their exact words as much as possible, but using creative license to represent their standpoints as clearly, succinctly, and truthfully as possible. These narratives were then sent back to the respondents for their feedback and approval. Critical to the description stage is "horizontalization" (Ihde, 1986), or considering the data equally and holistically so as to avoid inordinately privileging certain observations over others. The intent is to avoid theorizing at this stage but, rather, to describe the phenomena under investigation as they reveal themselves. The integrity of the description is also contingent on the *epoché*, a process of attending to one's own feelings and preconceived ideas to account for one's subjectivity as a researcher (Ihde, 1986, p. 36).

Reduction, the second stage, entailed reducing the data to essential themes through a process of imaginative free variation. Narratives were examined holistically, and in a variety of orders, to identify themes and test the extent to which they held up across respondents and situations.

The third stage was interpretation in which the initial themes are reduced once again to identify the most essential feature of the phenomenon, but also to relate the themes to one another and to the research questions. The purpose of the interpretation phase "is an attempt to specify the 'meaning' that is essential in the reduction and description of the conscious experience being investigated" (Lanigan, 1988, p. 10).

## Findings

Phenomenological analysis of the interview-based narratives generated three main themes about how participants experience being allies to others. First, being an ally is an identity that is achieved by acting on the moral imperatives of pursuing social justice and validating differences. Second, allies invoke social and cultural capital to influence others through a variety of strategies and tactics ranging from authoritarian to dialogic communication orientations. This influence is often, but not always, linked to dominant/"agent" identities (e.g., White, male, or heterosexual). Third, allies experience tensions between (a) nonjudgmentalness and personal values, (b) perspective-taking and honoring differences, (c) self-interest and moral commitments, and (d) support and overprotectiveness.

Being an ally is an identity achieved by acting on the moral imperatives of pursuing social justice and validating differences.

On the whole, people who identify as allies are passionate about social justice, enjoy learning and educating others, and seek a stronger sense of self through connection with culturally different others. Allies see their role as one of honoring differences, validating the identities of those outside the mainstream, and being visible and vocal advocates for the "underdog." Their goals are (a) to affirm and support individuals who may be marginalized because of their sexual, racial, or other

identities; and (b) to promote cultural change in the direction of social justice, inclusion, and intergroup understanding. Allies assume that difference is good, and celebration of diversity is a desirable way to achieve social cohesion. They believe, further, that identification with particular social groups should not have to interfere either with individual identity or intergroup unity. Louise<sup>2</sup>, for example, said:

[P]ersonally, my ethnic, racial, and religious identities are important to me. I want to know about my background, and I think everyone should be proud of their roots. On the other hand, I tend to seek out people who are different from me. I want to create a multiracial community of people that represents all different kinds of differences, but has unity on certain things that we're trying to do, like peace and justice.

For allies, honoring differences is an integral part of social justice and, therefore, a moral imperative—especially, for some, to the extent that they have unearned privileges in society (e.g., as a function of being White). Research participants framed their ally identities largely in terms of social responsibility, doing the right thing, or being a good person. Audrey, for example, said, “[B]eing an ally, really, is about being compassionate, and being a good person. . . . It makes me feel good to be doing the right thing.”

Ellen, having moved from Massachusetts, which she perceived as having a widespread social justice ethos, to Texas, where she felt much more isolated in her commitment to social justice, compared herself to “a missionary without a church.” A great deal of people’s work as allies, then, is aimed at “converting” others in the interest of cultural change. Allies have faith that such change can be enacted through communication, and they are willing to take personal risks for it. Research participants indicated, for example, that confronting racism and homophobia made them vulnerable not only to embarrassing their loved ones and threatening their relationships, but even being called names such as “bitch” or “nigger-lover” and facing physical violence. One ally reflected, “[Y]ou know, if you’re going to lose your life, lose it for something worthwhile.”

Allies are often driven by relational, as well as abstract, ethical motives. Audrey, for example, said, “[Y]ou have to be able to put yourself out there, and be in a real friendship with the person. Part of being an ally is working to empower groups, but for me it’s really more relational. I have to feel that personal connection, you know.” Audrey’s example is consistent with existing research (e.g., Goodman, 2001) suggesting that members of privileged groups tend to work toward social justice out of ethics of caring and justice, and that both are related to what she describes as an enlightened sense of self-interest. This self-interest, for many allies, is intricately connected to identity. Even in situations where they felt they could have little impact on others, several allies spoke of needing to express their positions. As Georgia said, “I feel I have to call people on things that are just wrong. Because, if I don’t, then what does that say about *me*?”

Allies intentionally draw on various forms of social and cultural capital to influence others.

Bourdieu (1986, 1998) described “symbolic capital” as a social property affording agents the right to be listened to within a field of power relations. Such capital, he argued, is effective to the extent that it is perceived to be natural or inevitable. He described social and cultural capital as phenomena that function as symbolic capital, and that includes knowledge, skills, credentials, membership in particular groups, and other advantages that give individuals status in society. Allies, often by virtue of being White, male, heterosexual, able-bodied, fluent in English, or otherwise equipped with such capital, are relatively powerful in their capacity to influence others. In this study, most interviewees spoke not only from their ally/agent identities, but also from less powerful identities as gay men, women, or people of color. Seven of them reflected that, as such, they needed heterosexuals, men, and White people as allies to *them*. As Steven observed, “[A] [B]lack person can’t really fight the system unless he has a [W]hite person that’s willing to also go along and say this is wrong. Because the system’s set up where [W]hites are basically in power of everything, just like men are primarily in power of everything.” The significance of power for the ally experience emerged in a number of important ways.

The first way was in terms of knowledge. Five allies in this study stressed that their ability to act as allies to a particular group was limited to what they knew, and spoke of the importance of educating themselves about issues faced by the groups they hoped to help. This was essential, they felt, to their ability to provide guidance and support to individuals. Knowledge was also critical, however, to their ability to advocate on behalf of groups; three allies related using their knowledge to persuade others. Mary (a slim woman), for example, talked about “blasting people with facts” to contradict a stereotype that overweight people were all lazy. She also spoke of drawing on her clinical training to interpret facial expressions, manage emotions, and otherwise capitalize on her communication skills. Steven, an African American man, described his ability to fit in with White men: “I was really kind of a chameleon; I could chew tobacco with the best of them. Just little things, you know, to make people comfortable.” Steven observed that this ability to assimilate, thereby putting others at ease, increased his credibility with White colleagues and superiors, which he then drew on not only on his own behalf, but also as an ally, in his efforts to promote gender equity in the military.

Often, social capital is relational. Louise spoke of how she leveraged her Whiteness not only for its cultural authority, but to help White acquaintances to identify with her messages. Similarly, she perceived that she had a great deal of influence on her son, due to the nature of her relationship with him. Still another form of capital used by allies was their institutional authority. Although some were wary of “imposing their worldview” on subordinates in the wider cultural/political realm, most had no trouble prohibiting homophobic rhetoric (for example) within the departments they supervised.

As a result of their social capital, allies’ responses to prejudicial/discriminatory rhetorical acts are different from those of their targets.

This study revealed some basic differences between allies’ communication in situations where the identities in play afforded them relative capital and those in which they did not. The first difference is that people tend to have more choice about

whether to intervene as allies than as targets in discriminatory situations. As Georgia observed, “I might choose not to be an ally in a group of hardcore racists or homophobes, because I might fear for my safety. Which, of course, I can do, because I’m [W]hite.” As long as allies remain silent, they may retain their cultural capital by blending into the dominant group.

A second, related, difference is that when allies do choose to speak up from positions of relative status, they have a different range of rhetorical options than they would as targets of negative prejudice. Their credibility, for one thing, is taken for granted in a way that it is not for targets. A Native American woman responding to a racist comment, for example, is disempowered not only by the perception that her response is one of self-interest (and, therefore, less “objective” than a response by her White ally), but also by the ideology that generated the racist comment in the first place. Research participants indicated ways in which their efforts to confront racism and sexism differed depending on how much power they had in a given situation. As targets, they spoke of trying to demand respect and of long-term efforts to demonstrate their capabilities through their actions. Targets and allies both recounted using relatively unsuccessful tactics of fighting, yelling, and preaching when they found themselves in positions of rhetorical weakness, such as (a) when they were first learning to be allies and were, therefore, relatively unskilled; (b) with their families of origin; and (c) in the face of prejudice or discrimination against their own group.

Allies employ different tactics for different reasons.

People enact their ally identities in a variety of ways, which range from interpersonal to public communication, and that also include forms of support that are more concrete than rhetorical. Many allies, for example, employ forms of *political action* to raise public awareness and challenge discrimination at the structural level. These include fundraising, lobbying, or organizing political events. In other situations, being an ally means offering *direct, concrete support* by sharing information, advice, assistance, and use of material resources with individuals in need. Research participants spoke of offering referrals to counseling, rides to health care services, and use of their computers. Ellen, for example, said that the housekeepers in her organization “know they can use my phone, they can use my computer, and I’ll help them with their communication. Many of them don’t have much command of English.”

Also at the interpersonal level, allies often engage in *private communication to comfort or support targets* in the face of discrimination, prejudice, or embarrassment as a minority group member in a particular social environment. Several interviewees, however, expressed loathing to intervene directly in a verbal exchange for fear of disempowering targets by speaking for them, co-opting their positionality, inciting retribution, embarrassing them further, or outing them as members of stigmatized groups. Some allies reported that their most likely response, instead, would be to wait until they were alone with the target and then express support by affirming their concern and offering to be a sounding board for the person’s feelings. Participants in this study stressed the need to assess each situation to determine the appropriate response (sometimes including physical protection of the target) or non-response.

A fourth type of ally work I classify as *advocacy* on behalf of particular individuals or groups. Ellen, for example, spoke of serving as a liaison/advocate for less powerful groups: "The workers come to me with issues, and I serve as a liaison between them and the administration." As another example, one male ally spoke of what he called "running interference" on behalf of particular women. In his male-dominated workplace, he would preempt sexism in sometimes subtle, yet concrete, ways—and in ways that the women in question were probably unaware of—by proposing their candidacy in hiring meetings where women would otherwise be overlooked, by volunteering to be partnered with women (in an environment where some of his colleagues refused to do so), or simply by visibly associating with women. Louise, a White woman married to a Native American man, described nonverbal tactics she used to advocate for her husband. She told of being with him in meetings at their children's school in which the teachers and school administrators addressed only her, and not her husband:

They would always look at me, and direct all their comments to me. And so I would do things like look down, look at my husband. I would force them—not by saying anything, but just by my nonverbal behavior—I would force them to relate to him.

The other three types of responses involve explicit, rhetorical efforts to promote social change through confrontation or persuasion of agents of discrimination.

One such response involves public rhetoric intended to educate other agents in ways that are relatively abstract, non-confrontational, or removed from specific interpersonal interactions with targets. In such *rhetorical* situations, allies assert their identities as allies to the world at large in order to discursively (re)produce their values at the cultural level. Male allies to women, for example, might "intervene" by commenting during a class discussion that they believe women should earn equal pay for equal work, that they consider themselves to be feminists, or that they fail to find humor in an offensive joke.

The last two approaches are responses to what I refer to as *interpersonal* situations, which allies perceive as requiring direct communicative responses to educate other agents in the face of apparent prejudice, stereotypes, or discrimination. The first is leveraging one's *authority* by asserting policy. Six research participants spoke of invoking their power as classroom instructors, supervisors, or other institutional authority figures to enforce respectful and inclusive communication. Mary observed: "[I]n a university setting, there's an implicit assumption of tolerance, fairness, and education; it's part of the mission. And if I'm the boss, and someone's rights are getting stepped on, then I feel it's my responsibility to intervene." Cindy, similarly, reported telling a staff person that he needed to reconcile himself to being welcoming, open, respecting, and caring toward gays and lesbians, regardless of his personal feelings: "And if you can't do that, then maybe this is not the job for you." These responses reflected allies' feeling of moral obligation to intervene, as well as confidence that their moral position was backed up by the mission of the institution in which they worked.

The second, and most prevalent, rhetorical strategy invoked by allies was *dialogue*. Repeatedly, they reported relying on nonjudgmental conversation to encourage others to think about social issues or to reconsider comments that seemed to

denigrate particular groups of people. Although they were often quite assertive, and even pointed in raising issues, they did so in ways that were generally open, respectful, and affirming. Rita, for example, talked about responding to prejudicial comments with questions like, “[W]hy would you say that?” or “[Y]ou used the phrase ‘that’s so gay’. Do you realize where it comes from? What do you understand it to mean?” Several allies spoke of initiating conversations about diversity-related issues with their children and acquaintances. Cindy, for example, enjoyed mentioning to the “gray-haired [W]hite ladies” at her Evangelical Lutheran church that “[I]t’s GLBT [gay, lesbian, bisexual, & transgender] month at school!” As Louise said, “[T]he media encourage us to think about Hollywood, diets, clothing, and material things all the time, but I make a conscious point to focus on more important things.” Most allies talked about gently challenging racist or homophobic remarks in subtle ways, taking care to listen, learn, avoid condescension, explain their own perspectives, and use questions and other open-ended conversational styles.

In explaining this dialogic approach, allies noted that they wanted to avoid making others angry, uneasy, or embarrassed—feelings that can turn against the ally and entrench the person’s original attitude; and some allies verbally validate others’ prejudicial feelings while at the same time condemning discourse that stems from such feelings. Simone described a workshop during which one participant said that homosexuals were not fit to be parents, and another responded in anger:

I try to remind my staff to be conscious of what they’re saying. Because we all say things without thinking sometimes; it’s a very human trait. But it can be hurtful. So when this happened, we pointed out that their views were valid, and they should stick up for them, but that the way you phrase things could be very hurtful to others. And that just as they took their identity very seriously and could easily be hurt by something someone else might say, so could their comments be hurtful, too. I think giving them examples with identities that they were sensitive about, themselves, helped put it in perspective for them.

Embedded in this approach is a certain reliance on empathy and perspective-taking. Louise, for example, challenged the use of a phrase she perceived to be racist by asking, “I’ve never heard that before; what does that mean?” The conversation led the other person to reflect on her upbringing, and to say, “I’d never thought of that before.” Louise said, “I understand about that. I’m [W]hite, I grew up in a racist society, and I was trained to be racist. So I can relate.” Allies’ discourse, consequently, is influenced by their trust that most people, given the opportunity, would like to discard our racism and homophobia and welcome learning. Their identification, based on personal experiences, engenders respect and trust that, through dialogue, change can occur without conflict. As Steven said about confronting anti-White comments, “[I]f you do it in a tactful way, most people realize it’s wrong.” Allies such as Steven, Louise, and Simone reflect Alinsky’s (1971/1989) conviction that, “[I]f people have the power to act, in the long run they will, most of the time, reach the right decisions” (p. 11), and his call to emphasize commonalities.

In sum, allies work to promote social justice on behalf of others through a variety of means involving both verbal and nonverbal tactics, and ranging from interpersonal

support for individuals to actions intended to influence the culture as a whole. These include (a) political action at structural levels; (b) direct, concrete support for targets; (c) private communication to comfort or support targets; (d) advocacy for targets; (e) indirect, public rhetoric to educate agents; (f) authoritative interpersonal communication to confront stereotypes, prejudice, or discrimination; and (g) dialogue aimed at educating agents. Examples of each category are provided in Appendix C, and the relationships among them are illustrated in Table 1.<sup>3</sup>

Allies experience tensions between self-interest and moral commitments, nonjudgmentalness and personal values, perspective-taking and honoring differences, and support and overprotectiveness.

There are a number of reasons for which allies might decide not to stand up for others in particular situations. One is avoidance of risk to one's personal safety, relationships, or status within the dominant group. Cindy, for example, spoke of confronting one of her husband's friends when she told a racist joke:

That was a really difficult situation, because by confronting my husband's friend, I embarrassed him, and jeopardized his friendship with her. That just brings back my mother's comment that what I do and say doesn't just affect me, but other people as well. My sensitivity to that is one of the biggest barriers to confronting racism, for me. And then, of course, the fear of physical violence; getting beat up by my cousins taught me that maybe it's not always wise to speak up and say something.

Three other tensions are inherent in the lived experience of allies in deciding to deploy their power and privilege on behalf of social justice. The first is their commitment to an ideology of openmindedness and acceptance of differences. As an ideology, this position is intolerant of intolerance. To the extent that allies are committed to social change, they do not abide prejudice and discrimination, and this position requires them to act in judgment of those who disagree with them. Most allies negotiate this tension through assessments about what is most appropriate in particular situations, choosing open-ended dialogue in some, and force or assertion of authority in others. Simone, for example, is a Black woman who says she was brought up to hate anyone presumed to be hostile to civil rights, including all Republicans:

But then I had an opportunity to meet some [W]hite, male supremacists, and when I really listened to them, some of my views changed completely. I realized that I was the one being exclusionary, by saying that my beliefs were right and theirs were

**Table 1** Ally Communication Strategies

Strategy	Interpersonal level	Small group/organizational level	Societal level
Mostly verbal	Direct (authoritative and dialogic) responses to expressions of stereotypes and prejudices Comforting targets	Public rhetoric	
Verbal and nonverbal		Advocacy	Political action
Mostly nonverbal	Concrete support		

wrong. At least they were being honest about how they felt. Of course there's always that tension between wanting to push what *I* believe and keeping in mind that what's okay for me might not be okay for someone else. So I just try to take it slow when I notice that I'm being judgmental.

Although Simone's example may seem extreme, her caution about assuming the superiority of her own standpoint is common among allies, whose experiences of becoming allies have typically involved challenges to their preexisting worldviews. Such openmindedness to other perspectives, furthermore, enables them to engage dialogically with those they seek to educate. As Alinsky (1971/1989) wrote, change agents should maintain an "ever-gnawing inner uncertainty as to whether or not [they are] right" (p. 11).

The third tension is between empathy and recognition that we all have different experiences. The ally's paradox is the dual drive for unity and pluralism and the simultaneous recognition of difference and commonality. For many people, empathy, compassion, identification, and perspective-taking are at the heart of their work as allies, yet they recognize the danger of assuming that their experiences or feelings are the same as those of other people. DK articulated this poignantly:

I mostly identify as an ally to other GLBTQI<sup>4</sup> people, but my personal history has also made me very conscious of the fact that I'm [W]hite. And I'm very aware of the oppression, in particular, of queers of color. But I think it is hard to speak for any group that is not yours. And there's a real tendency toward essentialization. You know, saying 'you can't possibly know what it's like because you're not \_\_\_\_\_'. And certainly there are aspects of being, say, Chicana, that I can't know. However, I think there are parallels that can be drawn between being queer and being a person of color. I think if I've got one thing that being an ally for any group is made difficult by is that notion that I *can't* understand. I can't—I can sympathize, and in many cases I think I can empathize. I don't need to necessarily have experienced something to know what it means to be oppressed. I do know what it means not to be accepted on the basis of your physicality.

This recognition relates to a fourth tension, which pits the desire to support and empower others against the recognition that support can become disempowering. Some allies spoke to an acute concern for avoiding overprotectiveness or the temptation to speak for others. Ellen articulated the tension this way:

I'm very careful about speaking on others' behalf. I would prefer not to, because I really want the group or the person to have the power to do it themselves. But if they really can't, either because of fear for retaliation, or they don't have the confidence or the skills, then I will, but I try to wean myself out of that, because I want them to do it on their own. I don't want to disempower them, or make them dependent on me.

## Discussion

These findings suggest three important insights about the relationships among communication, identity, and power. Positions of power, first of all, carry not only certain rhetorical choices, but also certain ideological assumptions that inform those

choices. Second, relative privilege complicates agency when one's efforts are intended to challenge the system that conveys such privilege. Power, finally, is more nuanced than simple membership in a culturally dominant group.

Allies' communication reflects elements of their symbolic capital, including certain cultural ideologies about communication and social change.

Ally communication is persuasive to the extent that an ally has a broad range of rhetorical options (including non-response), the skills and social/cultural capital to employ them, and the ability to respond strategically. As Rita noted, "[I]t's important to tailor the information according to what's going to be most persuasive to the people we want to get through to." In responding to interpersonal instances of discrimination or expressions of prejudice, therefore, allies' tactics tend to differ from those of targets of injustice in three ways. First, they are relatively detached from the emotional impacts of discrimination, and this allows them to respond more strategically than in the heat of anger or fear; Within U.S. culture, moreover (and especially among Whites and males), emotional responses tend to be viewed as irrational, uncontrollable, unwelcome, and less credible than more dispassionate ones (Aminzade & McAdam, 2001). Second, allies can invoke authority accorded to them through their relative social, cultural, and institutional power. Third, they show high degrees of trust that prejudices and stereotypes reflect deficits of awareness on the part of generally well-meaning individuals, and can be corrected through dialogue. Their identification with other agents, in fact, can lend itself to the kind of perspective-taking, trust, and goodwill that facilitate dialogic communication. In addition, however, their relative preference for dialogue reflects a deeply held trust in the power of communication to enact social change. Allies tend to be idealistic and to believe that because we are all interdependent, it is important to nurture all persons and relationships. A second belief shared among many allies is that expressions of stereotypes and prejudices tend to be failures of knowledge, rather than will. This belief probably stems from (a) a U.S. American form of individualism that frames "isms" as personal failures requiring moral conversion through education (see DeTurk, *in press*; Peck, 1994); (b) a particular bias of the education industry that all problems have ignorance at their root; (c) a standpoint of privileged groups that social change should occur through choice, rather than coercion; and (d) allies' lived experiences of having been "converted" through education and dialogue themselves.

Tensions between support and overprotectiveness and between moral commitments and personal interests constitute inherent paradoxes of pursuing social justice from a position of unearned privilege.

Two of the tensions experienced by allies—support versus overprotectiveness and moral commitments versus personal interests—highlight an important point of caution about the deployment of privilege to dismantle the systems that produce it. Previous scholarship has shown that, all too often, White people engage in antiracism work in ways that lead less to social justice and more to the reinforcement of their own feelings of virtue, cultural competence, and even superiority. As Alcoff (1991/1992) noted,

“[T]he practice of privileged persons speaking for or on behalf of less privileged persons has actually resulted (in many cases) in increasing or reinforcing the oppression of the group spoken for” (p. 7). Theoretical reflections on dialogue and voice, moreover, observe that a great deal of White people’s communication—especially when ostensibly aimed at social justice and inclusion—is primarily directed at protecting their identity concerns. Dace (1994), for example, in her study of communication between White and African American women, found that the White women demanded “disclosure, trust, and communication that affirmed their liberal attempts to work on [racism]” (p. 21). McPhail (2004), too, observed that, “[D]efense of [W]hite privilege results in antidialogical strategies of discourse” (p. 216), and that “[T]he principles of dialogue are simply appropriated by Whites in order to affirm their own positive sense of self” (as cited in Simpson, 2008, p. 155). What Goodman (2001) called “enlightened self-interest,” in fact, Bourdieu might have described as *noblesse oblige*, or a sort of politically correct notion of virtue—phenomena that convey a certain cultural capital in an increasingly multicultural society.

Allies’ power is more complicated than membership in dominant social groups.

Although allies’ rhetorical agency is different from that of targets of discrimination, one of the most important points revealed in these interviews was the fluid, multifaceted, and contingent natures of identity and power. The rhetorical power of a White lesbian (for example) differs from that of her Native American counterpart not only in terms of race, but also depending on the visibility of her racial and sexual identities, the constellation of other ways in which she may be marked, and the particular characteristics of any given communicative context. Many allies, furthermore, identify with more than one race, sexual orientation, or even gender.

In this study, in fact, several participants resisted my initial definition of “ally.” Although the recruitment documents (see Appendix A) defined allies as people who have relative social power or privilege in society who take a stand against injustice directed at people who do not, several of the self-described allies who responded challenged the condition of relative power or privilege, noting that, as African Americans (for example), they could act as allies to Whites by interrupting anti-White prejudice. Others, moreover, complicated the definition further by identifying as gay men, for example, who acted as allies to other gay men. In the analysis, I focused on their experiences of supporting members of groups of which they were not members; it is important to recognize, however, that both power and identity categories are fluid, contextual, and multiple so that an adult, gay guidance counselor’s support for a young, bisexual student may be legitimately framed as “ally” communication in a variety of ways. All but one participant, furthermore, identified with both dominant and subordinate groups in society.

## Conclusion

This study sought to describe the lived experiences of allies as they seek to promote social justice through communication. Implicated in these experiences are the meanings they assign to the “ally” identity, a terrain of overlapping and shifting fields

of influence and resources, the advantages and tensions allies face as rhetors acting largely on behalf of others, and the choices they make in the face of these phenomena.

I find it important, in closing, to both honor and critique the role that allies play in social justice. Allies operate from both altruism and self-interest, and are not always effective in their efforts on behalf of social justice. Such efforts, indeed, often reflect misguided standpoints of privileged groups, are limited to actions that pose little threat to their well-being, and ultimately serve to re-inscribe social and cultural capital. Many alliances, furthermore, may be specific to particular events or contexts, and being an ally to one group or individual protects no one from the possibility of ignorance or discrimination against another.

Ally work, on the other hand, is not easy. Although doing it is a choice that allies make—more so than responses to prejudice and discrimination faced directly by their targets—it can be both risky and exhausting, and those people who commit to doing it work hard to perform it effectively. They make tactical decisions about what forms of communication will be supportive to targets, persuasive to agents, and conducive to a just and respectful society while at the same time protecting their own safety and personal relationships.

### *Practical Applications*

The goal of this study has been to articulate an ally identity and to begin mapping a theory of how members of dominant social groups use their social and cultural capital to confront discrimination, stereotype, and prejudice. This has potential value for anyone striving to advance social justice through communication in any of its various forms. My hope is that it will inspire activists, scholars, educators, and learners in a variety of educational contexts to engage in reflection and dialogue. Specifically, these findings offer tools for (a) understanding our power, social positioning, and social/cultural capital; (b) considering our rhetorical choices and the reasons behind them; (c) building awareness of and negotiating the tensions involved in acting as an ally; and (d) challenging some of the assumptions we make about the nature of stereotype, prejudice, and discrimination. Such reflection, either at the personal level or built into formal training programs, can promote self-awareness, sensitivity to others' standpoints and rhetorical strategies, coalition-building, and effectiveness in our communication in the interest of social justice.

### *Limitations and Directions for Future Research*

This study has a number of limitations, primarily in regard to the participant group. Almost all participants in this study, for one thing, worked in the same university. Several respondents, furthermore, identified themselves as allies primarily as members of a campus "Allies" program to support GLBT students, and some of these identified as GLBT themselves. These individuals tended to frame their ally roles less in terms of their privilege vis-à-vis social justice activism and more in terms of their professional roles in counseling or otherwise supporting students. Finally, although I hope that this project helps to expand research on social justice communication

beyond race and racism, it does not specifically explore how antiracist work on the part of White allies may reflect or differ from discursive challenges to other “isms.”

It will be important, therefore, for future research to explore differences across issues, identities, and contexts. Like all communication, ally work is informed by its cultural context. Participants of this study spoke of regional differences in attitudes and communication styles; differences in organizational climates; and influences of media, church, and other socializing institutions. Undoubtedly, too, responses to racism are very different than responses to homophobia, and allies’ racial, religious, regional, socioeconomic, and gender identities (to name a few) have important impacts on their communication as allies. It would be important, too, to know to what extent (and in what ways) the “ally” label is avowed by people outside of higher education. It would be useful, finally, to learn more about the relative effectiveness of allies and of various rhetorical tactics. The time is ripe for further research on ally communication; this study is just a beginning. I look forward to working with other scholars and practitioners to further our understanding of this important phenomenon.

## Notes

- [1] To the extent that allies’ communication is both subversive and situated in positions of social or institutional power, it is difficult to characterize as strictly *tactical* or *strategic*. I use these terms here somewhat interchangeably, but have tried to use *tactics* to reflect relative emphasis either on the speakers’ objectives or situations requiring immediate responses, whereas I use *strategies* either to emphasize the speakers’ authority and in referring to more long-term approaches to social justice.
- [2] All names of interviewees are pseudonyms.
- [3] Two notes about the limitations of categories are important here. First, authoritative and dialogic communication are less distinct categories than opposite ends of a spectrum. Second, many communication behaviors fit in more than one category. Acting as a cultural liaison, for example, can simultaneously involve direct assistance to a disempowered individual and education of people in power.
- [4] Gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, questioning, queer, or intersex.

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## Appendix A Recruitment Flyer

### Seeking Allies for a research project

Ally—a person who has relative social power or privilege in society who takes a stand against injustice directed at people who do not (e.g., male feminists, white people working against racism, or Christians working to stop hate crimes against Muslims or Jews).

Sara DeTurk, Assistant Professor of Communication, is conducting research on how people come to be allies to others in the face of oppression on the basis of race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, religion, nationality, age, dis/abilities, or economic class.

If you consider yourself to be an ally and are willing to discuss your experiences in a one-hour interview, please contact Dr. DeTurk at 458-7737 or [sara.deturk@utsa.edu](mailto:sara.deturk@utsa.edu)

## Appendix B Interview Guide

1. What does it mean for you to be an ally?
2. What do you do as an ally (specific behaviors to support others)?
3. How did you become an ally? (How did your views/attitudes/beliefs/feelings/relationships/behavior/communication change? Were there particular experiences, relationships, or things you heard/saw that shifted your consciousness about racism/sexism/etc.?)
4. How is your experience or identity as an ally supported and/or challenged (by other individuals, groups, institutions, media, your social/cultural environment, or society in general)?

## Appendix C Examples of Ally Communication

1. Political action
  - Donating money/fundraising
  - Lobbying; participating in petitions, meetings, marches

2. Concrete support
  - Driving to doctor
  - Offering use of technology & material resources
  - Sharing information, advice, referrals
3. Comforting targets
  - “Are you okay?”
  - “You know I disagree with what he said”
4. Advocacy
  - Explaining groups and their cultural assumptions to each other
  - Recommending or directing attention to members of marginalized groups
  - Demonstrating affiliation with or support for members of marginalized groups
5. Public rhetoric
  - Introducing symbolic resolutions within areas of institutional authority
  - Being visible as an ally by attending diversity- and social justice-related events
  - Teaching, creating, and participating in educational programs
  - Teaching others to be allies
  - Voicing social justice views
  - “I believe women should get equal pay for equal work.”
  - “I consider myself a feminist.”
6. Use of authority
  - Invoke personal policies (“Please don’t ever use that word in my presence.”)
  - Invoke institutional authority/policies (“That kind of language will not be tolerated, especially not in this office.”)
  - Threaten (“If this doesn’t stop, I’ll report it.”)
  - Use physical force
7. Initiation of dialogue
  - Initiating/encouraging conversation about important issues in daily life (mentioning at church that it’s diversity month at school)
  - Sharing information (“I learned today that most beneficiaries of affirmative action are [W]hite women.”)
  - Explaining own perspective (“What you said is offensive to me, and here’s why . . .”)
  - Gently questioning & challenging assumptions
    - “Why do you feel that way?”
    - “Why would you say that?”
    - “What do you understand that to mean?”
    - “How did you come to believe that?”
    - “How would that make them feel?”
    - “Have you thought about/did you know that . . .”
    - “Did you choose to be heterosexual?”
  - Encouraging thoughtfulness about speech (“When you say ‘that’s so gay,’ what do you mean by that?”)
  - Responding in the moment (“Let’s talk about that.”)
  - Making it personal (“My husband is Latino.”)

- Establishing common ground (“I can relate.”)
- Validating (“It’s okay to feel that way.”)
- Developing rapport (e.g., through humor, use of students’ language)
- Establishing long-term conversations (as a part of socializing one’s own children)
- Looking for openings/waiting for less confrontational moment.