


Constructing Allyship and the Persistence of Inequality

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ABSTRACT

We examine how people construct what it means to be an ally to marginalized groups. Based on 70 in-depth interviews with college students who identify as allies to one or more marginalized groups, we analyze how they construct allyship in ways that ultimately reproduce patterns of social inequality by (1) assigning responsibility for inequalities to minorities, and (2) suggesting individualized, rather than structural, remedies for combatting unequal systems. We find that the combination of these strategies allows them to claim identities as allies without having to engage in concrete efforts that could challenge systems of oppression. We argue that systematically examining processes through which people construct and perform what it means to be an ally may provide insights into mechanisms whereby inequality is maintained and justified. Such systematic examination may also point to potential avenues for combating social inequalities.

KEYWORDS: allies; gender; generic processes; inequality; race and ethnicity

An emerging line of scholarship examines the persistence of social inequalities alongside contemporary discourses asserting that oppression is a thing of the past (Bonilla-Silva 2017; Ridgeway 2011; Sumerau and Mathers 2019). Within a socio-cultural context wherein most people are taught to assume a post-racial, -feminist, -gay society (Ghaziani 2011; Sumerau and Grollman 2018), what happens when people face empirical realities that contradict such lessons? Likewise, within a socio-cultural context in which speaking explicitly about inequalities is, at best, frowned upon, and social movements are predicated upon identity membership rather than the needs of a population (Hochschild 2016), how do people make sense of existing inequalities and movements seeking to combat them? Finally, within a socio-cultural context in which one is supposed to be open-minded and morally opposed to oppression (Pfeffer 2017), how do people signify their opposition to disparities while being taught such things warrant no further discussion? Put simply, within the current historical moment when inequalities persist alongside claims about their successful eradication, how do people who may benefit, at least partially, from existing inequalities respond to such conditions in their own negotiation of social life?

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Potential answers to such questions can be found, at least implicitly, in another emerging line of research focused on individuals occupying privileged racial, class, sex, gender, and/or sexual social locations who identify as allies for marginalized groups (Fields 2001; Johnson and Best 2012; Ueno and Gentile 2015). Implications of these studies include that people who identify as allies generally become connected to movement and social support efforts of marginalized groups due to a personal connection to someone within the marginalized group, and that they can provide at least symbolic comfort and friendship for members of marginalized groups navigating potentially hostile and/or isolating social spaces, situations, and groups. Such research also suggests that the term *ally* has become a common symbolic marker that may provide people in privileged groups with moral value (i.e., “I’m not part of the problem”), but, in practice, allies act in ways that ultimately reproduce the subordination of marginalized groups (Broad 2011; Mathers, Sumerau, and Ueno 2018; Pierotti, Lake, and Lewis 2018). While these studies have begun the process of explicating where allies come from and how they fit within specific minority movements or groups, we know much less about how they construct allyship – that is, what an “ally” is and what allies should do. How do people who identify as allies conceive of what it means to be an ally, and what consequences do these definitions have for the persistence of inequality?

We examine these questions through an inductive interview study of college students who, without provocation, identified as allies in the course of in-depth interviews focused on other topics. Specifically, we analyze how they – responding to the existence of inequalities in the social world – constructed allyship by defining this term in ways that allowed them to articulate support for marginalized others while also excusing them from engaging in concrete activities that could potentially disrupt interactional patterns of social inequality. In doing so, we synthesize and extend emerging analyses on both allies and the persistence of inequalities by demonstrating how people in privileged social locations within a given inequitable system may simultaneously articulate opposition to social inequality while also doing so in ways that leave the structural foundations of oppression intact. However, it is not our intention to generalize these findings to all people who identify as allies. Rather, we use the data from this case to elaborate strategies of constructing allyship that people may use in various social settings when they seek to articulate opposition to inequality without having to engage in actions that might challenge oppression in their own lives or more broadly.

THE PERSISTENCE OF SOCIAL INEQUALITY

In the past two decades, sociologists have demonstrated the persistence of systemic oppression along the lines of race, class, sex, gender, sexuality, and other social locations despite major changes, advancements, and transformations since, at least, the 1950s (Bonilla-Silva 2017; Collins 2015; Davis 2015; Ridgeway 2011; Schrock, Sumerau, and Ueno 2014). Rather than show a clear, linear progression or regression for marginalized groups, these studies demonstrate fragmented conflicts wherein some individuals seek to maintain or reinstall systems of oppression; others seek to challenge or eradicate such systems; and many others experience social life without much consideration for either side of these battles, unless such conflicts enter their own personal experience. Within this context, scholars have increasingly turned their attention to the ways in which people respond to societal patterns of inequality that, regardless of a given person’s intentions, impact the persistence of inequality.

Investigating such sense-making in relation to varied systems of oppression reveals that a primary component in the persistence of inequality involves how people construct inequality itself, marginalized groups, and the social roles of privileged groups (Bonilla-Silva 2017; Ridgeway 2011; Sumerau, Grollman, and Cragun 2018). Following Goffman (1974), such efforts involve the meaning-making in which people engage concerning the current reality of a society or social group (i.e., what is going on here), and the ways people should respond to such definitions or frames (i.e., what should I do). As symbolic interactionists have long noted (Blumer 1969; Goffman 1977; Schrock et al. 2014; Schwalbe et al. 2000), we may thus conceptualize the persistence of inequalities as the result of the

everyday meaning-making activities that provide the foundation for the macro-social world (Collins 1981). Whereas the elements of everyday meaning-making in which people engage vary dramatically historically, culturally, and across different social settings, all such endeavors establish the scaffolding whereby people make sense of how the world is and how people should act, which provide the symbolic foundation for broader social patterns (Goffman 1959; Hochschild 2016; Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock 1996).

Examining the meaning-making through which people construct inequality, marginalized groups, and the role of people in privileged groups in such systems, however, also requires attention to current meanings that have become widespread in a culture (Loseke 2007). In the current historical moment, researchers investigating such patterns in relation to race (Bonilla-Silva 2017), class (Hochschild 2016), gender (Ridgeway 2011), and sexuality (Mathers, Sumerau, and Cragun 2018) in the United States reveal the construction and affirmation of what have been termed “difference blind” (e.g., Smith and Shin 2014) conceptualizations of social life (also see Henricks 2018). Specifically, these societal frames suggest the following: (1) inequality is a thing of the past and we are all equal beyond differences now; (2) explicit articulation concerning inequality is problematic and divisive; and, (3) good people oppose oppression and would not stand for such things to exist in our society anymore. Put simply, individual and societal narratives continuously argue that society is now “post” or beyond inequalities (Moon, Tobin, and Sumerau 2019; also see Loseke 2018 and Mueller 2017). So, when people encounter evidence to the contrary, they may – like the college students at the heart of our study – seek to define themselves as an exception to such patterns.

Historically, one strategy people use to define themselves as exceptions to broader patterns of social inequality involves the construction of a “moral identity” – an identity that testifies to an individual’s sense of their exceptional worth, value, and virtue (Katz 1975; Kleinman 1996; McQueeney 2009). As Deeb-Sossa (2007) notes, moral identities signify not only what someone is, but also that one is better or more virtuous than a given norm as a result of one’s willingness to perform or support important values that others may take for granted (see also Holden 1997; Mathers et al. 2018; Sumerau 2012). In such cases, people transform their privileged social location into a way to give the impression (Goffman 1959) that they are the exception to broader patterns of oppression.

Although mostly absent from other emerging literatures on the persistence of inequality and difference-blind politics (but see Schwalbe et al. 2000), researchers have documented moral identity construction and elaboration in many social contexts. In her study of charitable efforts by upper-class individuals, for example, Holden (1997) demonstrates how her respondents both defined their charitable work as evidence that they were more virtuous than others who did not engage in similar work, and constructed the people whom they helped in racist and classist ways that justified the marginalization such people faced in their lives. Likewise, researchers have shown how religious people (McQueeney 2009; Wolkomir 2006), medical providers (Kleinman 1996; Nowakowski and Sumerau 2019), and parents (McMahon 1995; Padavic and Butterfield 2011) construct moral identities to define themselves as exceptions to broader patterns of social inequality. In each case, members who occupy privileged social locations define themselves as exceptions to – or outside of – patterns that marginalize others by emphasizing potentially positive things they do for others who are marginalized by existing systems of oppression.

In fact, much of the research concerning allies has focused on the establishment of the term *ally* as a moral identity that grants privileged individuals virtue based upon the impression that they are exceptions to broader norms (Fields 2001; Johnson and Best 2012; Ueno and Gentile 2015). Specifically, much research on allies begins with the assumption that they serve as a lever for transforming existing social relations concerning race, class, gender, and/or sexuality (Finley 1996; Goldstein and Davis 2010; Montgomery and Stewart 2012). From this origin, studies concerning allies then typically examine how (Duhigg et al. 2010; Ford and Orlandella 2015) and why one becomes an ally (Broad 2011; Piccigallo, Lilly, and Miller 2012; Russell 2011). Although this work is important for understanding pathways to identifying as an ally to a given marginalized group, it rarely

examines the assumption that allies are, in fact, engaging in advocacy that could transform existing social relations (but see [Droogendyk et al. 2016](#); [Fields 2001](#); [Mathers et al. 2018](#)). In this article, we shift from the origins of ally as a moral identity to examine the ways in which people define inequalities and what it means to be an ally.

To this end, we also draw on research examining the ways members of privileged groups, regardless of their intentions, may actually facilitate the persistence and reproduction of oppression. Sociologists studying, for example, educational trajectories and interactional patterns among parents, teachers, and students ([Lareau 2003](#)), gendered and workplace politics among men ([Schrock and Schwalbe 2009](#)), the transmission of cultural and other capital via religious organizations and networks ([Barton 2012](#)), and whites' backstage performances and political behavior concerning racism ([Picca and Feagin 2007](#)) all demonstrate some ways members of privileged groups reproduce and maintain broad scale patterns of social inequality. Likewise, recent studies concerning the ways in which privileged individuals define minority groups, movements, and experiences reveal how such efforts often rely upon negative depictions of marginalized groups ([Bonilla-Silva 2017](#)). While these studies reveal the importance of studying how members of privileged groups make sense of marginalized others, they have left self-identified allies within such privileged groups out of the conversation to date ([Ueno and Gentile 2015](#)).

Here, we seek to bring allies into these broader discussions of meaning-making among members of privileged groups, and these conversations about members of privileged groups' roles in the persistence of inequality into studies concerning those who identify as allies. To this end, we use the ways in which our respondents construct allyship to illuminate both what it means to be an ally in practice ([Mathers et al. 2018](#); [Ueno and Gentile 2015](#)), and what consequences – positive, negative, or somewhere in between – such meanings may have for the persistence of inequality in society. In so doing, our work here provides a framework whereby researchers may examine the social construction of allyship in a wide variety of settings, situations, populations, and social contexts. Specifically, we outline the ways our respondents defined inequalities and allyship. Although only systematic empirical attention could excavate the ways such definitions may vary within and between groups, we use this case to illustrate the importance of such analyses and how people may define what it means to be an ally.

DATA AND METHODS

Data for this study derive from three separate interview studies during which the topic of allyship emerged organically in the statements made by our respondents. Specifically, the first author (Sumerau) conducted three in-depth interview studies with U.S. college students on three separate topics from 2014–2017. In each case, the college students were recruited by word-of-mouth; the studies themselves were announced on three college campuses via flyers and presentations, and each respondent was invited at the end of the interview to tell others about the study. The three studies took place in the same city in the southeastern United States, and each study was open to participants from three colleges in the city. The colleges themselves were of different types – one public research university, one community college, and one private mid-sized university. Recruitment was also aided by students who took classes with the first author where each study was introduced and discussed. All of the interviews for each of the three studies were conducted in a place of the respondent's choosing or in the first author's campus office, and all were transcribed verbatim.

None of the three studies initially contained questions about nor sought to learn about allyship specifically. Rather, each of the three studies sought to capture how college students make sense of both inequalities and marginalized populations within the United States today. The first study, which contains 20 interviews used here, sought to examine the ways in which college students make sense of gender and sexuality in relation to contemporary political debates about reproduction, healthcare, and relationships (see [McCabe and Sumerau 2018](#) for more on this study). The second study, which contains 25 interviews used here, explored college students' thoughts on music, as well as settings

where music is performed, in relation to race, class, gender, and sexualities (contact the first author for more on this study). The final study, which contains 35 interviews used here, examined college students' impressions and attitudes concerning two prominent minority movements active in the United States today (see [Sumerau and Grollman 2018](#) for more on this study). Rather than seeking to study allyship specifically, the data in this article arose in an organic or "grounded theory" ([Charmaz 2014](#)) manner in which respondents brought up allyship on their own and without provocation.

In the three studies combined, the first author obtained 80 in-depth interviews with college students of varied races, classes, sexes, genders (though all respondents were cisgender), sexualities, religions, and ages. Although the specific question that initiated discussion of allyship (though unprompted) varied in the interviews, the topic generally arose in response to the following types of questions: "What do you think about [insert X minority movement] active in society today"; "What are your thoughts on [insert X minority group] in the US today"; "How do you think we should respond to [insert X type of inequality] in the US today"; or "What are your thoughts on [insert X political debate] in society today." In such cases, 70 of the 80 interviewees brought up the topic of allyship, and the first author asked follow-up questions about the topic as she did with any other topic that emerged during interviews.

In fact, even the ten respondents who did not bring up allyship made statements that could have been interpreted as *about* allyship, but in their responses, these interviewees did not identify themselves as allies or explicitly use the terms *ally* or *allyship*. In this study, we focus only on the 70 respondents who explicitly raised the topic (see [Table 1](#) for demographics). Following [Charmaz \(2014\)](#), we thus utilize an opportunity to analyze unexpected data that arose organically in the process of in-depth interviews, which may or may not have arisen within studies structured or planned around the topic in question. Put simply, even though allyship was not a planned part of the interviews, it arose throughout the three studies as a way for respondents to make sense of the existence of social inequalities and define the relationship between such phenomena and themselves in contemporary U.S. society.

Table 1. Sample Demographics ($N=70$ college students)

<i>Demographic Category</i>	<i>Self-Identification</i>	<i>N</i>
Race and Ethnicity	Black	10
	Latinx	10
	White	45
	Asian	2
	Multiracial	3
Gender Identity	Cisgender women	50
	Cisgender men	20
Sexual Identity	Bi+	8
	Gay/Lesbian	2
	Ace	1
	Heterosexual	59
Religion	Religious	45
	Nonreligious	25

In all three studies, the interviews themselves took a conversational form in which the first author asked a broad question (e.g., “What are your thoughts on sexism in the US?”) before probing interviewees on their responses to such questions. In doing so, she followed the interview subjects in whatever direction they took from the initial question and allowed them to elaborate or otherwise articulate their thoughts as much or little as they wished on any given topic (Charmaz 2014). In each of the 70 cases in which interviewees brought up the topic of allyship, for example, the first author asked them the same follow-up or probing questions after they brought up the topic: (1) “what does it mean to be an ally”; (2) “what do allies do for minority communities”; (3) “why did you choose to become an ally to [insert X minority group the respondent identified as an ally to here]”; and, (4) “are you also an ally to any other minority community?” A similar process occurred in probing other topics during interviews, and the first author shifted to the next part of the formal interview guide whenever respondents appeared to have said all that they wanted to on a given topic or probe.

Overall, the interviews typically lasted between one and two hours with most being closer to two hours. Discussion of allies – facilitated by the respondents bringing up the topic and the first author asking the probes above in response – constituted a substantial portion of the interviews, generally lasting between 25 and 45 minutes. In fact, more than once throughout the three studies, the first author considered officially adding the topic of allies to the interview guides because of how much respondents brought up the topic in comparison to some topics where they had much less to say. Instead, however, the first author continued following principles of grounded theory (Charmaz 2014) by allowing the topic to continue to emerge (i.e., in 70 of the 80 interviews) in an organic way, rather than intentionally attempting to target the concept. She did, however, use the same probes each time the topic came up after first noticing the pattern in the first interview study.

Like the data, our analyses developed in an inductive fashion. First, we created a separate dataset for discussion of allies that occurred during interviews. Next, we went through the entirety of the statements to identify recurring themes and patterns. We sorted these themes and patterns into categories and began to see them as the ways in which respondents defined and outlined what inequalities are, what it means to be an ally, and what allies should do in response to persistent inequalities. Recognizing these patterns, we went back through the data, arranging them into the most common themes. We further explored literature on allies and inequalities cited throughout this paper, noting similarities and differences to our data.

At the same time, we observed that, while most studies captured the notion of allies in relation to a specific movement or minority group, our respondents, speaking to different movements and groups (i.e., people of color, LGBTQIA people, cisgender women, poor people), expressed a very similar notion of inequality and allies, no matter which group they were talking about. Building on this insight, we generated labels to capture how they *constructed allyship*, or defined and made sense of what it means to practice allyship, by (1) assigning responsibility for inequalities to minorities themselves, and (2) suggesting individualized remedies for systemic oppression. Although we treat these processes as analytically distinct, respondents regularly used a combination of both strategies in their construction of allyship for those marginalized by unequal systems of social organization.

ASSIGNING RESPONSIBILITY

Sociologists have long recognized the importance of investigating the manner in which people assign meaning to others in society (Blumer 1969; Collins 2005; Goffman 1974). Key to these processes are the differential symbolic and instrumental resources that social beings possess for defining and enforcing a given set of meanings for an object, type of people, type of place, or how things should be done at a certain time or in a certain context (Goffman 1963). In so doing, scholars have noted that an integral part of maintaining inequalities involves people in privileged groups defining inequalities as someone else’s problem rather than taking responsibility for changing oppressive systems themselves (Schwalbe et al. 2000). In this section, we demonstrate how the allies whom we

interviewed mobilized similar definitions by assigning responsibility for combatting inequalities to minorities.

This type of meaning-making is also implicit in existing studies. Specifically, this process typically involves members of privileged groups ignoring the ways in which they are (positively) impacted by unequal systems; instead, privileged individuals suggest that such systems only really impact minorities (Bonilla-Silva 2017; Sumerau, Padavic, and Schrock 2015). Additionally, such definitions show up when members of privileged groups suggest, for example, that things would get better for minorities if only they acted in certain ways (Barton 2012; Schrock and Schwalbe 2009); specifically, privileged individuals encourage minorities to be patient, kind, and polite in the face of inequalities that are slow or resistant to change (Collins 2005; McQueeney 2009). Finally, we see such meaning-making at work when privileged group members assign marginalized individuals negative labels (e.g., angry, defensive, overly-emotional, hypersensitive, paranoid) for reacting to marginalization in ways that the privileged group deems inappropriate (Hochschild 1983; Kleinman 1996). Although existing studies generally note such patterns in the way people in privileged groups *make sense of themselves*, our respondents also did so in their conceptualizations of marginalized others.

As reflected in the following excerpt from a white, bisexual woman who identified as an ally to racial minorities, our respondents stated that systems of oppression were ultimately the sole concern of the ones hurt by them – minorities:

The thing is, an ally is not really supposed to get involved much because it's not our fight really. It's about how they are treated by other people, people who aren't allies, and so it's really about them knowing that not everyone is like that, and for us, it's about kind of staying out of the way so they can do what they need to do to make things better. So, I mean, that's why I would say there isn't a lot you do as an ally, you just kind of have to be there for them as they try to get the treatment they want, that's kind of it.

Here, the respondent not only expressed that the “fight” is the responsibility of the oppressed and not their allies, but she also completely removed herself from the ongoing inequality by suggesting that her duty as an ally is “staying out of the way.” Perhaps she, as a white person, simply wants to avoid behaving as a “white savior,” or taking up too much space in racial minorities’ justice movements. However, by her own admission, she does little to fight against racist systems and institutions in her role as a white ally, thereby putting the entire onus of such efforts back on the shoulders of an already oppressed people.

Similarly, respondents explicitly assigned the responsibility for combatting inequalities to the group hurt by a given system of oppression. For example, one Black, heterosexual man who identified as an ally for sexual minorities explained:

The way it works is that I have gay friends, and that helps because they have friends now. It's not about political stuff, they're just my friends and so I'm an ally and they're an ally to me because a lot of them are white kids, but the racial stuff, that's on me, just like the gay stuff is on them.

In this example, the respondent made clear that his allyship to sexual minorities is equivalent to friendship rather than a political commitment. Although similarities between allies and friends have been drawn before (Brown 2015), such a conflation fails to specify the type of system-transforming actions allies are, by definition (Myers 2008), theorized to perform in support of marginalized groups. This example also illustrates how non-intersectional approaches to allyship leave certain groups, such as sexual minorities of color, especially isolated in their fights against multiple systems of oppression – racism and heterosexism, in this case.

While researchers have long noted that inequalities function in a reciprocal fashion reliant upon the actions of both the beneficiary and the one hurt by the exchange (Goffman 1963; Ridgeway 2011; Schwalbe et al. 2000), our respondents overwhelmingly assigned responsibility for challenging inequalities to the people hurt by those oppressive systems. Consequently, they avoided facing the ways in which they benefit from such systems or the ways their own actions in response to inequalities could accomplish change. Our interviewees also avoided facing potential opportunities in their interactions with others that could result in meaningful change (see also Picca and Feagin 2007). In so doing, they constructed allyship by claiming ally identities while also distancing themselves from any responsibility for challenging inequalities.

In fact, most of our respondents not only defined their response to inequalities this way, but they also argued this was what they expected of other allies. They – like the heterosexual, white woman who identified as an ally to racial minorities quoted next – defined what allies do explicitly as the suggestion of potential support while arguing that actual concrete involvement in political action was not their responsibility:

The main thing an ally can do is be good to another group. I mean, I don't care about or see race, I just don't, so I can be friends with Black people and be someone they can talk to, you know, someone who cares. And, I think, that's what an ally should do. I mean, it's not up to us to do more than that, that's up to the group, you know? Like, there are people who care about women's rights – my rights – you know, and they don't have to do that, but they do care, and that's really what makes them an ally, you know, they know it's not their issue and they don't have to do anything, but they care about me and my rights anyway. That's just kind of how the whole thing is supposed to work.

Alongside assertions that combatting inequalities was primarily, or even exclusively, the responsibility of the people hurt by them, our respondents often utilized negative stereotypes that blame marginalized people's individual behaviors for the continuance of unequal systems (Bonilla-Silva 2017; Collins 2005). In doing so, as the heterosexual, Latino man who identified as an ally to Black people quoted next noted, they assigned blame for persistent inequalities on the actions of a hypothetical minority:

Part of the problem, and I know this because I've seen it myself, is that people don't want to act right, and I don't mean anything bad when I say that. What I mean is that you have to act the right ways to get anywhere, and I think a lot of the problem is some people don't want to do that. They just want to do their own thing, and that's cool, but it's a big part of the problem because if people would just act right all this stuff would just be done and over faster than you might think.

This same theme – that if (minority) individuals would “act right” – came up repeatedly in our interviews. After identifying as an ally for sexual minorities, a heterosexual, white man noted: “The problem sometimes is that they like to be so loud and flamboyant about things, but that's just gonna turn off people who already don't like their lifestyle and all the gay stuff.” A white, heterosexual woman who identified as an ally to racial minorities added: “I'm not saying it's all their fault, but sometimes they get so defensive about the cops and other stuff, but you have to just stay calm and trust that things will work out if you do the right things.” A multiracial, bisexual man sounded a similar note talking about his support for women's issues: “The problem sometimes, not all the time, of course, but sometimes girls just get so emotional and it's kind of hard to take them seriously like that.” In fact, as a white, heterosexual woman, who identified as an ally to sexual and racial minorities, suggested below, many respondents said that part of being an ally might involve showing minorities how to act more respectable:

The problem is they act crazy and then other people don't know what to do. We can help with that – allies can I mean; we can explain the right ways to act, the way other people see them, and that can help a lot because they can get the better treatment if they just learn how to fit in better like everyone else, if you know what I mean, and part of it not being my issue is that I feel like I can help them with that and give the other, like, view.

Overall, the allies we interviewed constructed allyship as a form of friendship while assigning responsibility for inequalities – and thus for gaining more equitable treatment and opportunities – to minorities themselves. In doing so, they suggested that marginalized individuals were the ones who were supposed to do the work to eliminate unequal systems while leaving aside their own privileges and benefits from such systems and potential for advocating for change themselves. They also often reproduced stereotypical depictions of minority behaviors to suggest that not properly conforming to dominant social expectations could be blamed for the problems minorities faced. Once again, this suggestion meant that ultimately minorities, rather than everyone, were responsible for the existence and/or potential challenges to unequal systems embedded within society.

SUGGESTING INDIVIDUALIZED REMEDIES

Although assigning responsibility for inequalities to minorities allowed our respondents to avoid grappling with the consequences of their privilege vis-à-vis marginalized groups, their identities as allies necessitated expressing some ways they supported marginalized others in practice (Mathers et al. 2018). This is because the central component of an ally identity revolves around at least expressed belief in the pursuit of equal rights for a given minority group (Fields 2001; Johnson and Best 2012; Ueno and Gentile 2015). As such, our respondents sought to negotiate a space between active, concrete work against inequalities and non-ally others who did not care about or oppose oppression in any way (Fields 2001). To accomplish this, they generally presented the work of allies in personal or individualistic – rather than structural or institutional – terms. In so doing, they were able to (1) maintain their assertion that combatting inequalities was ultimately the responsibility of members of marginalized groups, and (2) define themselves as good, moral people who supported better conditions for minorities, at least in theory.

This method of constructing allyship is not all that surprising when we look at recent sociological analyses demonstrating the rise of individualized discourses in the justification of existing inequalities and maintenance of difference-blind politics (Bonilla-Silva 2017; Picca and Feagin 2007; Ray 2015; Ridgeway 2011). Rather, the dissemination of individualized discourses as remedies for inequitable structural systems can be seen as the other side of the coin in a reciprocal fashion. Specifically, those who do not support minorities may explain inequalities via individualistic rhetoric, and those seeking to identify as allies without having to challenge their own privilege draw on similar rhetoric to propose solutions. Put simply, the former group blames individuals for their own marginalization (Bonilla-Silva 2017), and the latter group suggests individual-based remedies to potentially counter the same systems (Ray 2015; also see Hunt 2007; Sanders et al. forthcoming).

In this section, we outline the ways in which our respondents accomplished this type of ally construction by suggesting individualized remedies to inequalities faced by marginalized groups. Rather than suggesting structural remedies capable of potentially shifting the oppressive systems, they argued that allies operated on the personal, individual level to support members of marginalized groups. Specifically, they argued that allies did so by (1) emphasizing care and concern for the difficulties minorities face in their lives, and (2) being kind and understanding when interacting with minorities. While these efforts allowed them to define allyship as an effort to support minorities in some way, they stopped short of any concrete challenges to systems of oppression that maintain the marginalization of minorities more broadly.

Emphasizing Care and Concern

Goffman (1959) noted that impressions often carry as much or more weight in social life as concrete, empirical actions. Stated another way, people often receive more or less social standing from the way they appear to others than from what they actually may do in a given circumstance. In many ways, our respondents appeared to be aware of such norms as they generally constructed allyship in terms of impressions rather than specific actions. As the following quote from a white, heterosexual woman who identified as an ally for sexual and racial minorities illustrates, some did this by emphasizing care and concern for marginalized others:

It's not so much what we do, but how we feel, I think. It's about caring for other people even when you don't really need to. Like Black people have to deal with all kinds of people who don't seem to care, so just caring and being someone they know and can see cares, that's really powerful. Because, like, that means they can feel like they're not alone in all this, that somebody really cares about what is happening and so it's not everyone who is so mean to them, but really just some people who don't care like they should.

A white, heterosexual man who identified as an ally to racial minorities added: "I'm an ally because I care about what happens to minorities, it's really as simple as that, it's about being a caring person." A white, bisexual woman who identified as an ally to transgender people said: "Caring is what matters most, and I know this dealing with sexual stuff, it's important to have someone who cares about you, and that's what we can do for them. We can care and, if enough people start caring, then things will be different." Rather than stating concrete actions related to oppressive systems themselves, respondents generally said that the main thing that allies could do was feel – and potentially show – caring and concern for other people, particularly marginalized group members. Although caring and concern are potentially positive things for minority individuals to receive from privileged individuals, this emphasis is unlikely to facilitate any systematic changes in the ways marginalized groups experience the broader world.

This observation became more striking in follow-up questions and responses to expressions of caring as the core of allyship. In most cases, caring was defined as not only a stand-in for other political activity, but, in fact, was described as *more* important than such actions. As a white, heterosexual man who identified as an ally to gay and lesbian people noted:

Well, yeah, I pay attention to the news and elections, and I'm concerned about those kinds of things. But, that's not where I feel like I can make the most difference. It's also kind of hard to keep up with all that stuff so, for me, it just makes more sense to focus on what matters most, and that's kind of the golden rule type stuff, just caring about each other and trying to treat the people you know as well as you can. That's really what matters more than all that other stuff from what I can tell.

An Asian, heterosexual woman who identified as an ally for gay and lesbian people added: "I'm not going to protests and stuff – that's not my place. My place is with my friends and showing them that they're not alone, that I'm concerned about them and their lives. That's what I can do as an ally." In such cases, respondents constructed allyship as a source of sympathy for minority individuals (and at times, minority communities) rather than a source of political activity or active engagement in the pursuit of changes to the ways marginalized people are treated more broadly. As a Latina, bisexual woman who identified as an ally for Black people noted: "The answer to all this stuff is about how we treat individuals as people. It's not about political stuff really, but more about being a good person who cares about other people."

Being Kind and Understanding

Researchers have also noted the ways interactional norms about how one acts in polite, kind, and – in short – expected ways shape much of social life (Goffman 1959; Kleinman 1996; Scott and Lyman 1968). In fact, a common way that inequalities are maintained in interpersonal contexts involves holding minorities accountable for meeting normative or professional expectations of dress, conversation, emotional expression, and other polite rules created and enforced by privileged groups (Hochschild 1983; Schwalbe et al. 2000). In the same fashion, social beings work to maintain the impression that they are kind, open-minded, and otherwise good people throughout their interactions with others and the construction of their own identities (Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock 1996). In this section, we outline the ways our respondents sought to maintain such impressions by defining allies (including themselves) as people who could be kind and understanding to marginalized others.

The following quote from a white, heterosexual man offers a typical case of this sort of impression management. He simultaneously identified as an ally to racial and ethnic minorities and blamed the individual acts of minority individuals for existing inequalities in society:

I was talking about this with friends the other day: so, what is an ally? I think about it and it's about how you try to be above the normal stuff. You know, some people see the ways Black people act and that kind of stuff, and then they're not cool to them. But, it doesn't have to be that way because you can understand it, you know; you can understand they act different because they don't know any better, you know. And, so you can understand that and not be a jerk. And I think that's the big thing: don't be a jerk, you know, if you want to be an ally. That means just being nice, you know, even if they act strange or whatever, you just be nice to them anyway.

Respondents, as illustrated in the following quote from a white, heterosexual woman who identified as an ally for sexual and racial minorities, often tied such kindness and understanding to other relationships: “Like my family doesn't get it, they don't understand ‘those people,’ as they say, but it's not hard to understand and even if you don't, you can still be a decent person and treat them well, you can still be cool with them.” A multiracial, heterosexual man who identified as an ally for sexual, gender, and racial and ethnic minorities agreed: “Sometimes your friends just don't bother; they don't get it, so they act like idiots, but you don't have to do that. You can be nice to people even if they are kinda weird and that helps you understand them, I guess.” Although none of the respondents mentioned discourses on campuses concerning institutional inequalities or social justice explicitly, more than half mentioned conversations with friends about allyship, which may suggest their responses here arise both from encountering the existence of systems of oppression and from seeking to make sense of current discourses about inequalities and allyship on college campuses.

Rather than seeking to better circumstances faced by minorities, such responses suggest allies focus on being kind toward and understanding of the individual minorities with whom they interact. In fact, in each case wherein respondents mentioned family and friends who did not “get it,” the follow-up question asked what they did, if anything, to change this. In every case, the respondent reported avoiding the situation. In fact, they said they did not engage with family and friends on such issues because, for example, “It's not worth it,” “It would just start a fight or something,” and/or “That's just how they are so there's no point in trying to change their minds.”

Importantly, interactions with family and friends who “don't get it” pose concrete opportunities to advocate for marginalized others. In such cases, their individual identities as allies could become a lever for impacting broader relations or opinions via others with whom they interact in their own lives. However, our respondents noted focusing on maintaining the impression that they were kind, polite people (both to marginalized others and to the people in their lives who did not identify as allies) rather than on seeking to change unequal conditions that marginalized others face. As a white,

heterosexual woman who identified as an ally for racial minorities put it: “You don’t need to start any trouble or anything like that, you just need to be nice to them because that’s how things will change in the long run because it can be an example to other people.” In such cases, interviewees prioritized their space between, on the one hand, identifying as an ally and, on the other hand, avoiding concrete efforts to advocate for marginalized others. As a result, they constructed allyship as an identity they have rather than in relation to advocacy they could be doing in their own lives and with other members of privileged groups.

CONCLUSION

In this article, we used the case of people who identify as allies to racial, ethnic, gender, and/or sexual minorities to reveal the social construction of allyship, and how such efforts may facilitate the persistence of inequality in society. Specifically, we outline the ways in which the allies we interviewed construct allyship by integrating arguably contradictory desires: to create the impression of themselves as supporters of equality for other groups, and to not “start any trouble” or disrupt systems of oppression. Although the contents of allyship construction may vary across settings and situations, existing work on allies and on patterns of inequality production more broadly suggest constructing allyship may be an important process for systematic analyses. Our work here thus provides a framework for exploring the ways in which people who identify as allies may construct allyship by assigning responsibility for oppression to minorities themselves and suggesting individualized remedies for social inequalities.

That our respondents – who offered to us, with no prompting, that they were allies to one or more marginalized groups – constructed allyship in this manner begs the question: what constitutes an ally? Indeed, current popular, scholarly, and activist discourses argue that allies will provide a lever toward the transformation of contemporary inequalities (Case 2012; Duhigg et al. 2010; Finley 1996; Ford and Orlandella 2015; Montgomery and Stewart 2012; Piccigallo et al. 2012; Russell 2011). At the same time, however, some analyses of allies associated with specific minority groups suggest that the relationship between minorities and allies may be more complicated than this (Broad 2011; Fields 2001; Johnson and Best 2012; Mathers et al. 2018; Ueno and Gentile 2015). Although only systematic empirical research will be able to fully answer such questions, our respondents suggest that allyship may also be a way to signify a space between active advocacy and vocal opposition to minority groups. Within a socio-cultural context in which inequalities persist and opposing them has moral value, people, like our respondents, may construct allyship as a way to both symbolically oppose inequalities while also avoiding taking any direct action toward challenging inequitable social systems.

Our respondents’ construction of allyship reveals the importance of theorizing what a true or real ally might be. In fact, current popular and activist discourses debate whether privileged group members can ever profess themselves allies for this very reason. Some would argue that one can only be an ally through concrete actions that benefit marginalized communities, but this argument would not stop anyone from self-identifying as an ally in pursuit of moral recognition in society (Sumerau, Grollman, and Cragun 2018). At the same time, the construction of allyship might be dramatically different among, for example, the members of our sample and people actively involved in minority movements and/or protest events. Further, it may be the case that even symbolic gestures (e.g., a Safe Zone sticker or an ally button) could provide at least some benefit to minorities who experience social life within especially inequitable settings or locations such as the Bible Belt or rural areas throughout the United States. Although addressing these theoretical questions lies beyond the scope of the current study, our analyses highlight links between micro-level actions and macro-level structures by demonstrating that even members of privileged groups who identify as allies construct allyship in ways that may actually perpetuate inequality.

Our results also have implications for understanding how people construct allyship in varied contexts and settings. First, our respondents represent a common experience for contemporary

Americans in which they may be called upon to respond to an emerging movement whose activities are spreading across varied media platforms and demonstrate that reactions to such movements may be quite nuanced in concrete interactions (see also [Sumerau and Grollman 2018](#)). Second, contemporary social norms that require people to refrain from talking about inequalities directly while also responding to evidence of inequalities in society creates a scenario wherein many privileged people may face circumstances that require them to make sense of their stances on this or that issue ([Bonilla-Silva 2017](#)). Specifically, rising consciousness of divisions within American society, combined with increased discussions of such issues, may lead many people to develop strategies for making sense of *both* movements across the political spectrum *and* desires for maintaining an impression as good, moral, and caring people ([Collins 2015](#); [Hochschild 2016](#); [Ridgeway 2011](#)). Although our analyses of the ways our respondents construct allyship is relatively unique at this point in sociological history, as a “sensitizing concept” ([Blumer 1969](#)), constructing allyship provides researchers with a framework to examine the ways people make sense of inequalities and allies in many contexts.

Our findings also have implications for the ongoing development of sociological research on allies and allyship. While sociologists have begun to outline the ways people identify as allies and how some allies become involved in specific minority group campaigns ([Fields 2001](#); [Johnson and Best 2012](#); [Ueno and Gentile 2015](#)), conceptualization of the ways in which such groups make sense of and respond to inequalities has thus far been mostly left out of the conversation (but see [Mathers et al. 2018](#)). Further, how allies respond similarly and differently in relation to varied minority groups and inequalities has escaped attention to date (but see [Moon, Tobin, and Sumerau 2019](#)). Considering the increasing opportunities and patterns of self-identified allies, it is no surprise that this topic is gaining attention. Furthermore, focusing on the construction of allyship indicates that analyzing how people stake their claim as allies, regardless of what actions accompany such an identity, is an important part of understanding the persistence of inequality in a difference-blind social context. It may be the case that, especially in such a context, the social construction of allyship plays a vital role in ongoing debates about systems of oppression and the ways people make sense of and respond to them.

Finally, these findings also speak to emerging inequalities scholarship focused on the ways people in privileged groups facilitate the reproduction of oppression regardless of their intentions ([Bonilla-Silva 2017](#); [Schwalbe et al. 2000](#); [Westbrook and Schilt 2014](#)). When researchers note, for example, the ways people mobilize individualist discourses to explain or justify racial patterns ([Ray 2015](#)), opposing equal rights for sexual minorities ([Broad 2011](#)), or explaining their problems with movements for economic or medical reform ([Hochschild 2016](#)), they are ultimately negotiating the space between arguments that one should oppose inequalities as well as participate in efforts to actively challenge or change such inequalities. As these debates play out in relation to varied systems of oppression and specific social problems, it is increasingly important to understand how people construct allyship, the accomplishments of allies who engage in active advocacy, and the efforts of those who identify as allies without doing actual work that could challenge societal oppression. Although allyship as a concept may be a lever toward greater social equity in theory, only systematic empirical analyses of the ways people construct allyship – and the results of such constructions – will allow us to distinguish the theoretical potential from the actual, concrete impact of allyship.

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