

ASPIRING SOCIAL JUSTICE ALLY IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT

Keith E. Edwards

Individuals who are supportive of social justice efforts are not always effective in their anti-oppression efforts. Some who genuinely aspire to act as social justice allies can be harmful, despite their best intentions. These folks can ultimately perpetuate the system of oppression they seek to change. Different underlying motivations of those who aspire to be allies can lead to differences in effectiveness, consistency, outcome, and sustainability. The conceptual model presented here, using underlying motivation to frame the different issues and challenges facing those who are aspiring allies, is offered as a tool for critical self-reflection and for guidance in developing other aspiring allies for social justice.

ASPIRING ALLY FOR SELF-INTEREST

The Aspiring Ally for Self-Interest is primarily motivated to protect those one cares about from being hurt. This person seeks to be an ally to an individual with whom one has a personal connection rather than to a group or an issue, and sees oneself as a protector who intervenes on the behalf of those who experience oppression, and often without consulting them. This individual may or may not identify with the term “ally” but instead will see their behavior as simply being a good friend or sister, for example.

Because the focus is on protecting those whom the individual cares for, this aspiring ally may be unlikely to confront overt acts of oppression when the person one cares about is not present and may even join in the oppressive behavior because their friend is not directly harmed. For example, a man may offer to walk a friend to her car to ensure her safety. While this is certainly helpful on an individual level, unless he also recognizes the institutional and cultural levels of support for men’s gender based violence he will be limited in his effectiveness as an ally and may even unknowingly be engaging in sexist behavior himself without realizing it. Without an understanding of the systemic nature of oppression, a well intentioned Aspiring Ally for Self-Interest may be ineffective and perhaps harmful.

The Aspiring Ally for Self-Interest generally sees the world as a fair and just place and is shocked and outraged that these exceptions still take place in this day and age. They are able to see specific overt acts of discrimination, but cannot see the underlying pervasive system of oppression. The aspiring ally may see acts of oppression as horrible and terrible acts perpetrated by bad or immoral people like the Ku Klux Klan. This myopic view allows one to avoid seeing, much less taking responsibility for, their own unwitting oppressive behaviors and role in perpetuating the system of oppression. The focus of action is stopping the “bad people,” perhaps overt and intentional racists or anti-Semites, but otherwise maintaining the status quo including one’s own, likely unacknowledged, experience of systemic privilege.

The Aspiring Ally for Self-Interest is sustained because this person feels deeply powerful and self-actualized when intervening on behalf of individual who experience oppression and can become addicted to being the hero and the praise that comes with that role. By intervening in these isolated instances one may be acting in accord with religious doctrine or seeking one’s own spiritual salvation by doing the “right thing.” Because of a lack of understanding of the systemic nature of oppression, efforts to address more institutional aspects of oppression are likely to be met with resistance by the Aspiring Ally for Self-Interest and be labeled as discrimination such as “reverse racism,” or “the homosexual agenda.”

ASPIRING ALLY FOR ALTRUISM

As an awareness of privilege begins to arise, seeking to engage in ally behavior as a means of dealing with the guilt becomes a primary underlying, often unconscious, motivator for the Aspiring Ally for Altruism. For members of the dominant group, recognition of the systemic nature of their privilege and oppression "often generates powerful emotional responses in students that range from guilt and shame to anger and despair" (Tatum, 1992, p. 1-2). This guilt is useful for a while as it can help move those with privilege from an intellectualization of oppression to an emotional connection, however, it cannot be the sole motivator as guilt alone does nothing to change the system that grants privilege to some and oppresses others (Kimmel, 2003). With regard to racism, Tatum (2003) refers to this as the "guilty White liberal" (p. 106). At this status, one sees the system intellectually, but will focus on other members of the dominant group as the real perpetrators. By vilifying other members of the dominant group, the aspiring ally distances themselves from others in the dominant group in an attempt to minimize guilt. One may seek to manage one's own guilt around privilege may lead a desire to be seen as, "one of the good ones."

As a result, when confronted with their own oppressive perpetuating behaviors, they may often become highly defensive and will have difficulty admitting mistakes in order to manage guilt and maintain one's status as an exceptional member of the dominant group. For example, a White woman working to end racism may be willing to acknowledge the possibility of her own racism intellectually. Perhaps doing so is itself a way of differentiating herself from other White people. However, she may respond with great defensiveness if a Person of Color points out the racist implications of a term she used during a training session, perhaps even defending herself by listing her "resume" of anti-racist efforts as justification, rationalization, or explanation.

A common response to this sense of guilt is to seek the role of "rescuer" or "hero" of those who experience oppression. The Aspiring Ally for Altruism seeks to empower members of the oppressed group, which maintains credit and some control in the person doing the empowering, rather than encouraging and supporting members of the oppressed group to empower themselves. This may be a part of a spiritual or moral view that helping others is the right thing to do. The Aspiring Ally for Altruism sees members of the target group as the sole victims of oppression and does this work for them. In this way, the Aspiring Ally for Altruism fails to recognize that one "must speak *with* the oppressed without speaking *for* the oppressed" (Reason et al., 2005a, p. 1). The paternalistic nature of this altruism may lead to positive gains in the short term, but ultimately perpetuates the system of oppression by placing the aspiring ally in the role of exceptional helper to those who experience oppression. This paternalistic approach may also unconsciously be feeding one's own sense of power and privilege. Freire (1972/2000) explains, "rationalizing his guilt through paternalistic treatment of the oppressed, all the while holding them first in a position of dependence, will not do" (p. 49).

Burnout is common among Aspiring Allies for Altruism because of the energy needed to maintain the status of the exceptional member of the dominant group, denying to both self and others one's own oppressive socialization, and the need for continued acceptance from those who experience oppression. Because this person does readily recognize how members of the dominant group are also hurt by the system of oppression, this aspiring ally views their efforts as self-less and altruistic efforts that should be welcomed with praise and approval from those who experience oppression. In this way, their guilt can become a liability as those who experience oppression are often sought out to reaffirm and support the aspiring ally, once again placing the burden of redressing oppression on those who experience oppression.

ALLY FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE

An individual acting as an Ally for Social Justice works *with* who experience oppression in collaboration and partnership to end the system of oppression. The collaborative and systemic aspects of how an aspiring ally views their role is congruent with definitions of social justice allies (Bell, 1997; Broido, 2000).

Although it is not the same, an Ally for Social Justice recognizes that members of the dominant group are also harmed by the system of oppression and sees the benefits of ending oppression for all. By working toward social justice the ally is seeking not only to free the oppressed but also to be liberated and reconnected to their own full humanity and authenticity. Accepting the reality and influence of systemic privilege, an Ally for Social Justice sees escaping, impeding, amending, redefining, and dismantling the system of oppression as a means of liberating the oppressor as well as the oppressed.

Rather than being an ally to an individual the Ally for Social Justice is an ally to issues - such as classism, racism, or religious oppression (Kendall, 2012). An ally for social justice also sees the interconnectedness of forms of oppression supporting each other and recognizes the need to address intersecting forms of oppression (Bell & Griffin, 1997).

As a means of monitoring one's own unacknowledged oppressive socialization, this person seeks to develop systems and structures to hold oneself accountable and be held accountable by members of oppressed groups, without placing the burden for accountability on those who experience oppression. An Ally for Social Justice connects and takes responsibility for working with others who experience systemic privilege, rather than seeking to separate from them, in an effort to bring about justice and equity. As such, ending oppression may be grounded in spiritual or moral principles and an effort to better connect all individuals to individual and collective humanity and spiritual liberation.

This blended motivation (enlightened self-interest and altruism) to dismantle the system of oppression for all creates a sustainable passion for social justice which is not dependent on the praise and favor of the oppressed. Rather than being defensive, one actively seeks out critique in an effort to better themselves and the anti-oppressive work they do. This blended motivation opens the ally up to accept their mistakes without defensiveness, not only to be an effective ally, but as a means to realizing their own full humanity and authenticity and as a gift toward their own liberation. For example, instead of fearing that one's own racism will be pointed out and responding with defensiveness, one instead genuinely appreciates a greater consciousness of one's racist socialization and as a result seeks out such critique and values it as a gift. This not only creates a more sustainable and consistent ally but also one that is less likely to unintentionally replicate the power structure at the root of oppression.

For more information and references see the full article:

Edwards, K. E. (2006). Aspiring social justice ally identity development. *NASPA Journal* 43 (4), 39-60.

ASPIRING ALLY IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT

	Aspiring Ally for Self-Interest	Aspiring Ally for Altruism	Ally for Social Justice
Motivation	Selfish - for the people I know and care about	Other - I do this for them	Combined Selfishness and Altruism – we do this for us
Ally to...	Ally to a person	Ally to target group	Ally to an issue
Relationship with Target Group	Working <i>over</i> members of the target group	Working <i>for</i> members of the target group	Working <i>with</i> members of the target group
Victims of Oppression	Individuals with personal connection are or could be victims –my daughter, my sister, my friend	They are victims	All of us are victims – although victimized in different ways
Focus of Problem	Individuals – overt perpetrators	Others from the agent group	System
View of Justice	These incidents of hate are exceptions to the system of justice	We need justice for them	We need justice for all
Spiritual or Moral Foundation	May be simply following doctrine or seeking spiritual self-preservation	Believes helping others is the right thing to do	Seeks to connect and liberate us all on spiritual and moral grounds
Power	I'm powerful - protective	Empower them – they need our help	Empower us all
Source of on-going motivation	Motivator (my daughter, my sister, my friend) must be present	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dependent on acceptance/praise from the other • Easily derailed by critique by other • Often leads to burn out 	Sustainable passion – for them, for me, for us, for the future
Mistakes	I don't make mistakes – I'm a good person, and perpetrators are just bad people	Has difficulty admitting mistakes to self or other – struggles with critique or exploring own issues – highly defensive when confronted with own behavior	Seeks critique and admits mistakes as part of doing the work – has accepted own ism and seeks help in uncovering it
Relationship to the system	Not interested in the system – just stopping the bad people	Aims to be an exception from the system, yet ultimately perpetuates the system	Seeks to escape, impede, amend, redefine, and destroy the system
Focus of the work	Perpetrators	Other members of the dominant group	My people – doesn't separate self from other agents
Privilege	Doesn't see privilege – but wants to maintain status quo	Feels guilty about privilege and tries to distance self from privilege	Sees illumination of privilege as liberating