Development-ally focused: a review and reconceptualization of ally identity development

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Abstract

Purpose – Although allies have been shown to be effective at helping to ignite positive change for marginalized groups, the literature on ally identity development is fragmented.

Design/methodology/approach – We draw from developmental, contextual, and identity theories to review the existing literature and focus squarely on the ally experience, resulting in a synthesized process-based conceptualization of ally identity development.

Findings – At each stage, we discuss intrapersonal experiences individuals are likely to have internally, interpersonal experiences that are likely to occur with others, and catalysts for progression to subsequent stages. In doing so, we outline the multilevel factors that influence and are influenced by ally development in hopes of identifying what motivates or dissuades individuals from becoming more active allies.

Originality/value – We provide practitioners and scholars with a deeper understanding of the organizational and societal benefits associated with allyship behaviors, as well as tools for increasing their presence within organizations.

Keywords Allies, Identity management, Identity development, Inclusion, Diversity

Paper type Conceptual paper

There is ample evidence that allies (i.e. individuals who are actively committed to supporting, advocating, protecting, and standing up for individuals who belong to stigmatized groups; Ragins, 2008) can be powerful agents for change. The history of the USA, for instance, demonstrates the power of White individuals joining the Freedom Riders as allies to help secure basic liberties for Black individuals during the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s (Lebrun, 2015). More recently, many White people have become more aware and devoted to racial equity in response to police violence against George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and many

other people of color, and allyship manifests as support and advocacy for other stigmatized groups, identities, and characteristics.

Allies have significant potential for influencing large-scale societal change. Allies can help establish norms within social groups given their often privileged, in-group status (Czopp *et al.*, 2006). Further, allies who are not members of the groups for which they are advocating are likely to be viewed more objectively in confronting instances of unfair, prejudicial treatment, given that they do not appear to have a vested interest in the outcome (Czopp *et al.*, 2006; Ratner and Miller, 2001). Allies also alleviate the burden from stigmatized targets in dismantling individual and systematic prejudices (Czopp *et al.*, 2006). Thus, it is clear that allies can play an important role in reducing mistreatment and advocating for social justice in different contexts.

Given the clear importance that allies have in society, it is critical to understand how individuals come to identify as allies and engage in ally behaviors. This endeavor is somewhat complicated in the literature given the lack of consensus around the terms "ally" and "allyship." Allyship is often viewed as working to reduce oppression and support individuals from marginalized groups (Washington and Evans, 1991). Yet, as noted by Collier-Spruel and Ryan (2023), definitions of allies vary based on perspective (e.g. did the person intend to be an ally versus did the target believe the "allied" behavior was effective) and what is actually done (e.g. are specific behaviors required for someone to be considered an ally? can someone be an ally if they have not engaged in ally behavior recently?). For the purposes of this review, we define allies as individuals who are intentionally preparing themselves and/or engaging in behaviors to reduce oppression and support members of marginalized groups.

Some research has examined the processes associated with this type of identity development, which has resulted in several different (though sometimes overlapping) theoretical models and descriptions of how people come to identify and behave as "allies." The research to date is dispersed across different fields (e.g. clinical, educational, developmental, and organizational psychology), which has led to a lack of cohesive understanding of ally identity development. Thus, our goal is to synthesize the literature to more comprehensively describe the processes individuals go through as they become more dedicated allies.

In this paper, we review the work related to allyship in general and ally identity development specifically and introduce a five-stage conceptualization of ally development that incorporates this past work. In framing our conceptualization, we draw upon social psychological and developmental frameworks as well as the existing literature related to allyship across a broad array of disciplines. We adopt a stage-based orientation modeled after Erikson's (1968) groundbreaking theory of psychosocial development, which focused on how people resolve intrapersonal and identity issues throughout their lifespan. We conceptualize ally identity development as a process with several stages that are somewhat separated by defining experiences. Whereas most previous models focus on allies for particular stigmatized groups (e.g. allies for gay and lesbian individuals), our conceptualization takes a global perspective that spans across ally development, identity, and behaviors for various stigmatized groups.

In the sections that follow, we discuss each of the five stages in detail and highlight both intrapersonal and interpersonal experiences that are likely to occur at each stage as well as factors that can act as catalysts for progression to subsequent stages. We also describe the benefits associated with this progression. Furthermore, we enumerate the factors that prevent or support this ally identity development. This helps scholars and practitioners to better understand strategies for increasing ally development and engagement with social justice movements occuring within and outside of organizational contexts.

Review methodology
We systematically searched online databases such as PsycINFO, Elsevier ScienceDirect Journals Complete, EBSCOHost, Taylor & Francis eJournals, and Google Scholar in February

2023. We included search terms related to "allies" (ally, allyship), "identity" (identities), and "development" (formation, progression, change) in different combinations. Through this process, we identified 243 works that were possibly related to our search. Two of the authors then reviewed each potential contribution and eliminated 169 articles that were unrelated based upon their full-text content. Because we were particularly interested in how ally identities develop in response to social and environmental cues, many of these articles were excluded because they were merely descriptive of different types of orientations toward stigmatized individuals or were related to completely different topics (e.g. the allied health discipline, military strategic allies, and Ally McBeal). This yielded 74 articles that focused on how allies' identities develop over time and/or described how allies interact with relatively marginalized others in ways that fit into the developmental nature of our inquiry. Although past research has defined allies as individuals from dominant groups that work to end discrimination for oppressed groups (Broido, 2000; Getz and Kirkley, 2003; Washington and Evans, 1991), we assert that allies may also be members of stigmatized groups themselves. Thus, our review includes relevant findings and models that describe the process by which (1) non-stigmatized individuals learned to be advocates for groups or people who are stigmatized in ways that they are not, [1] and (2) stigmatized individuals learned to be advocates for other stigmatized individuals within and outside of their groups (e.g. Watts and Abdul-Adil, 1998; Downing and Roush, 1985).

Stages of ally identity development

Through our literature search, we identified several models of ally identity development. In general, these models heavily emphasize the socio-cognitive changes associated with adopting an ally identity, followed by increased ally behaviors. Our comprehensive conceptualization below synthesizes the assertions put forward in these various previous models, placing particular emphasis on the factors that lead to and deter progression along the developmental path. Although many different definitions of "ally" and "allyship" exist in the literature, we focus on how individuals might adopt the term "ally" for themselves (or not) across the various stages and acknowledge that this term might mean different things for different people.

Stage 1 – Apathy

Most of the existing literature includes a "neutral point" that occurs before an individual begins the journey toward allyship (e.g. Downing and Roush, 1985; Gess, 2016; Jordan, 2012; Vasquez and Magraw, 2005; Watts and Abdul-Adil, 1998), which we label "apathy" toward stigmatized individuals. Apathy can have multiple underlying motivations for different people. Some people may be unaware that stigmatized individuals experience differential treatment compared to their non-stigmatized counterparts. Other people may be apathetic despite knowledge that discrimination takes place. Such individuals may accept the discrimination that stigmatized individuals experience and tolerate the belief that existing structures that disadvantage stigmatized individuals are appropriate or advantageous for themselves. People who believe group hierarchies and inequality are necessary are higher in social dominance orientation (Pratto *et al.*, 2006) and likely feel discrimination allows for the maintenance of what they believe to be social order. Finally, some individuals may be aware of the disadvantages that stigmatized individuals face but do not fully appreciate the extent to which these disadvantages disrupt stigmatized individuals' daily lives.

With respect to self-concept, individuals at this stage generally do not consider being an ally to be part of their self-concept. This first stage is a preliminary starting point, occurring before any steps toward ally identity development have taken place. Individuals at this

stage may describe themselves as being "color blind" or "identity blind" (i.e. claiming to completely ignore identity characteristics; Kulik, 2014). Consequently, individuals at this stage likely have neither strongly positive nor strongly negative attitudes toward issues affecting stigmatized individuals and feel they are promoting justice by not engaging in overtly prejudiced behaviors (Sullivan, 2014). They may characterize slights against stigmatized individuals as isolated incidents and ignore broader societal forces that contribute to such experiences in a systematic way. Further, they are likely unaware of the extent to which injustice occurs toward stigmatized individuals, and when confronted directly with this injustice, they may rationalize these events and assume they are not derived from prejudicial attitudes (Dovidio and Gaertner, 2004). Instead, they are likely to assume that the allocation of resources in society is conducted in ways completely dependent upon the merits of individuals and not influenced by biases. As a result of such attitudes, these individuals may also be likely to ignore, appreciate, and/or contribute to stereotypically insensitive jokes about stigmatized groups and believe that those who are offended by such jokes are being too sensitive or politically correct (Mohr, 2002; Salazar, 2022). Additionally, individuals at this stage may be likely to ascribe to "modern" forms of prejudice (e.g. modern racism, sexism, and heterosexism; Avery and McKay, 2010; Awad et al., 2005), characterized by beliefs that stigmatized individuals are pushing too hard for equal rights, are too sensitive about instances of discrimination, and are too prominent in popular media (Swim and Cohen, 1997).

With respect to interpersonal interactions, those who are apathetic can elicit negative experiences with others. Individuals at this stage who inadvertently perpetuate negative stereotypes and attitudes can directly threaten the self-concepts of stigmatized individuals (Crocker and Major, 1989). Even if these individuals are not directly contributing to negativity, simply ignoring or minimizing claims of harassment or discrimination can greatly damage relationships, which can result in lower feelings of interpersonal trust and contribute to strained relationships (Ragins and Cornwell, 2001; Robinson et al., 2014). This may contribute to a culture of silence related to stigmatized individual issues by ignoring or not realizing that claims of harassment or discrimination could be the result of systematic biases that disadvantage individuals based on group membership (Bowen and Blackmon, 2003; Noelle-Nuemann, 1974).

Catalysts for progression. Several things can encourage individuals to progress from Apathy to the next stage of ally development. Because apathy is characterized by a lack of knowledge or appreciation of differential group experiences, progressing beyond this stage requires a starker realization of these differences. This realization may come from observing and/or interacting with people from stigmatized groups. For instance, some apathetic individuals may realize their relative privilege associated with being a part of the dominant group as a result of directly experiencing favoritism or by witnessing overt forms of unfair treatment toward an outgroup member (Casey and Smith, 2010); that is, some people might move forward by discovering the extent of difference between their privileged positions and the positions of others. Others may also come to appreciate the relative differences between themselves and stigmatized individuals through increased interpersonal contact (Asta and Vacha-Haase, 2013; Grzanka et al., 2015; Ji et al., 2009; Strom, 2019); that is, there could be a "dosage" effect such that apathy is reduced as a person becomes more aware of how widespread differences are. Individuals may also become more mindful of inequalities after a close friend or family member becomes, identifies as, or forms close relationships with a stigmatized individual (e.g. a parent having more positive attitudes toward individuals with minority sexual orientations after their child discloses being gay or lesbian; Atkinson, 2010; Callaghan, 2012; Coleman-King et al., 2021; Dannison, 2014; Henry et al., 2021; Holloway et al., 2022; Knepp, 2022; Reason et al., 2005; Russell, 2011; Sleeter, 2008; Suyemoto and Hochman, 2021; Toomey et al., 2016).

Stage 2 – Dissonance

The second stage, Dissonance, is characterized by the realization of privilege, the resulting negative cognitive and emotional reactions to this realization, and the desire to reduce this dissonance. This stage is often precipitated by a catalytic event that disrupts one's acceptance of the status quo and leads to recognition and appreciation of systemic inequalities against others based on group membership that one has not experienced personally due to their relative privilege. This stage is primarily characterized as a frame of mind, with the implication that allyship behaviors will follow.

With respect to self-concept, the development of this stage typically begins for many people with appreciating the similarities and – more importantly – differences one has with stigmatized individuals (Case, 2012; Jordan, 2012; Reason *et al.*, 2005; Washington and Evans, 1991). For example, members of dominant groups could begin to recognize the ways in which they have benefited as a result of their privileged status (Atkinson, 2010; Broido, 2000; Clark, 2019; Gess, 2016; Mizock and Page, 2016; Suyemoto and Hochman, 2021). Individuals may gain an increasing awareness of multiple perspectives and differing experiences, and feel dissonance related to their unearned privilege (Junman, 2021; Suyemoto and Hochman, 2021; Waters, 2010). In some cases, this realization subsequently ignites sensations of guilt, depression, or anxiety (e.g. Asta and Vacha-Haase, 2013; Downing and Roush, 1985; Edwards, 2006; Gelberg and Chojnacki, 1995; Helms, 1992; Ji, 2007) and motivations to reduce this guilt by acting in ways to reduce these inequalities (Bargad and Hyde, 1991). Psychological dissonance is experienced as negative affect (Elliot and Devine, 1994) and is associated with measurable physiological indicators of stress (Croyle and Cooper, 1983). Some individuals within this stage may experience personal outcomes such as increased stress due to the contradiction between their previously held assumptions and their revelations. Furthermore, experiencing a misalignment between one's behaviors and attitudes can create more difficulty in making decisions about how to act in response to situations (Samuelson and Zeckhauser, 1988; Shelton *et al.*, 2006), which can negatively influence interpersonal relationships.

Some burgeoning allies at this stage may begin to question social policies and practices that systematically disadvantage certain groups. This may violate their previously held assumptions that their close friends or loved ones (with whom they previously shared similar attitudes) operated in ways that were high in justice and result in more negative attitudes toward them, contributing to strained interactions with these close ties as well. In particular, people may experience confusion, anxiety, and fear (e.g. of being rejected by the majority culture due to associating with stigmatized individuals; Chojnacki and Gelberg, 1995), which can lead to a resistance to identifying as an ally.

With respect to interpersonal interactions, guilt may elicit awkward behaviors among some allies because they are unsure how to manage their relatively privileged status when interacting with stigmatized individuals (Shelton *et al.*, 2010). Interactions between groups may be perceived as a stressor and can trigger physiological and psychological reactions that may lead to awkward and strained interactions (Richeson and Shelton, 2007). Unfortunately, these strained interactions can result in perceptions that stigmatized individuals are "too sensitive." For example, an individual who is just realizing their relative privilege may behave nervously in the presence of stigmatized individuals and say or do inappropriate things due to the cognitive distraction associated with managing this new (from their perspective) status (Plant and Devine, 2003). Stigmatized individuals will likely react negatively to these awkward interactions, which the ally could interpret as hostility or unappreciation, resulting in feelings that the stigmatized individual is too sensitive; ultimately, this self-fulfilling prophecy is an obstacle to good communication between the ally and the stigmatized person (Richeson and Shelton, 2007).

Catalysts for progression. In line with cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger, 1964), individuals are inherently motivated to reduce dissonance they experience. One way

to reduce dissonance is for the individual to change their behaviors; for allies, this could include pursuing activities designed to reduce inequalities between groups. However, people can also reduce dissonance by changing their cognitions, such as convincing themselves that the problem is not that bad. This action would result in regressing to an apathetic state. Finally, people may also reduce dissonance by seeking ways to reduce the importance of the dissonance they are currently feeling. One way this occurs is by looking for ways to reaffirm oneself that they are a good person because they do not discriminate or actively show bias toward a particular group. Each of these strategies may help to reduce the discord between one's thoughts concerning bias against stigmatized individuals and their lack of activity in reducing such bias; however, only the first option facilitates progression to the next stage of ally development.

Individuals who are open to change may be more likely to decide to alter their behaviors to become more active allies (Broido, 2000). Furthermore, individuals with a high desire to behave ethically may be more likely to choose to embark on the path to full allyship after realizing that their behaviors do not match their ethical self-concept (Washington and Evans, 1991). Additionally, individuals who have a growth mindset about allyship, meaning they believe they can learn and change their behavior to engage in ally behaviors, are more likely to progress to the next stage (Chugh, 2018). At this point, people are likely to start thinking of themselves in terms of allyship. This is important because past research has shown that identifying oneself with the term "ally" as part of one's self-concept is an important predictor of engaging in ally behaviors (Jones and Brewster, 2017).

Stage 3 – Learning

If an individual decides to reduce dissonance by actively changing their behavior in ways that help reduce inequalities, they are likely to begin the process of figuring out how to accomplish this. This typically begins by seeking out and absorbing information related to what can be done; thus, we call this stage Learning. This stage is characterized by a newfound resolution to change one's behavior following the resolution of the dissonance characterized by the previous stage, but a lack of knowledge or confidence about exactly what to do (Suyemoto and Hochman, 2021; Vasquez and Magraw, 2005; Washington and Evans, 1991). Nearly every description of ally identity development highlights the importance of learning, though sometimes this is described as a distinct stage of development (Downing and Roush, 1985; Washington and Evans, 1991), while other times it is described as parts of the dissonance resolution process (Broido, 2000; Getz and Kirkley, 2003; Goodman, 2000; Helms, 1992; 1995), or as being an important part of allyship, though not in the context of ally identity development (Asta and Vacha-Haase, 2013; DiStefano et al., 2000; Ji, 2007; Ji et al., 2009; Meyer and Schwitzer, 1999; Devine et al., 2003; Russell, 2011). These efforts may begin by immersing oneself in the issues that are relevant for stigmatized groups (Downing and Roush, 1985), often by engaging in what Middleton et al. (2009) call "difficult dialogues" with individuals with stigmatized identities or characteristics (Coleman-King et al., 2021; Suyemoto and Hochman, 2021). These conversations serve to move the individuals to deeper levels of awareness and guide them on their journey to allyship. Overall, there appears to be some consensus in the literature that to engage in appropriate ally behaviors, one must gain knowledge about the marginalized group(s) they seek to support.

In the Learning stage, individuals are likely to privately view themselves as potential allies, but they might not yet know how to engage in ally behaviors that are publicly visible (e.g. Ji, 2007; Russell, 2011). Individuals at the Learning stage likely have positive attitudes toward and a desire to help stigmatized individuals. However, because of their lack of knowledge and confidence, individuals at this stage are unlikely to engage in active or effective ally behaviors. The behaviors they are likely to engage in include acquiring

knowledge about the negative experiences that stigmatized individuals encounter and about specific strategies they can learn to enact as allies. They may acquire this information through a variety of channels. Some people may engage in independent research or seek out structured learning opportunities (e.g. ally training), such as acquiring knowledge about different minority issues and/or studying the laws, policies, and practices involving stigmatized individuals (Reason *et al.*, 2005; Rivers and Swank, 2017; Suyemoto and Hochman, 2021; Washington and Evans, 1991). Other individuals may gain a new perspective by participating in discussions with stigmatized individuals (Broido, 2000; San Pedro, 2018; Suyemoto and Hochman, 2021). They may also actively expand their network of friends or join formal or informal social groups with more stigmatized individuals. As a result, they learn to reduce their reliance on automatic stereotypes and assumptions about individuals from these groups, and improve their abilities to interact with stigmatized individuals (Kunstman *et al.*, 2013). Alternatively, some individuals at this stage may seek out other allies to stigmatized individuals who can act as role models and mentors in learning to be effective allies (Asta and Vacha-Haase, 2013). This may include working alongside similar others to find non-oppressive ways of behaving as a majority group member (e.g. Broido, 2000). Each of these behaviors allows people to build self-efficacy in engaging in future ally behaviors.

Catalysts for progression. Several things can encourage individuals to progress from the Learning stage to the next stage of ally development. Progressing to the next stage requires changes in the way one thinks about the mistreatment that stigmatized individuals experience and how one can positively influence such experiences. As people gain confidence through research, increased interpersonal contact with stigmatized individuals, and/or by learning from effective ally role models, they are likely to begin attempting to engage in active ally behaviors. As such, the bridge between learning and enacting ally behaviors is likely to be relatively consequential. Due to their inexperience, allies are likely to make mistakes and continue adjusting their behaviors.

One of the impediments to direct action and support of marginalized groups is likely a lack of knowledge in how to proceed (Ashburn-Nardo *et al.*, 2008). Thus, as allies learn more about the problems that stigmatized people face, the systems that produce these problems, and ways to intervene, they are more likely to act. Further, part of the learning process may entail conceptualizing and understanding the responsibilities of a good ally.

Stage 4 – Stumbling

Following Learning, many allies enter a Stumbling stage. This stage is characterized by positive and well-intentioned attitudes paired with ineffective or counterproductive behaviors (as well, of course, as some effective and productive behaviors). This may be the result of learning misinformation, not learning enough information, or believing that what works in one situation will work in all situations. It may also result from caring more about individual benefits of allyship to the self (e.g. feeling like part of a community; Rostosky *et al.*, 2015; Shelton, 2019) than genuine care for others (e.g. Bishop, 2015; Edwards, 2006; Goodman, 2000). Most of the reviewed literature acknowledges that it is common for some fledgling allies to experience difficulties effectively supporting members of minority groups (Broido, 2000; DiStefano *et al.*, 2000; Gelberg and Chojnaki, 1995; Ji, 2007; Ji *et al.*, 2009; Junman, 2021; Schey, 2017; Shelton, 2019; Suyemoto and Hochman, 2021; Washington and Evans, 1991). Allies often describe these unsuccessful attempts as quite frustrating experiences (Gelberg and Chojnacki, 1995; Munin and Speight, 2010; Schey, 2017). Further, as confidence grows, it is common for some overzealous allies to engage in behaviors too aggressively (e.g. co-opting initiatives or narratives that should be led by minority group members) and thus be ineffective, if not ambitious (Gelberg and Chojnacki, 1995).

In this stage, ally self-concepts can be strong, but allyship strategies tend to be weak and public allyship experiences are likely few. Sometimes, individuals who learn about the extensive disadvantage and mistreatment of stigmatized individuals can feel a heightened sense of resentment toward those who maintain the status quo. Thus, they may develop an "us" versus "them" mentality (Brewer, 1999; Downing and Roush, 1985; Shelton, 2019) pitting themselves, other self-described allies, and stigmatized individuals as "us" and those who are not self-proclaimed allies or minority group members as "them." This mentality may cause some individuals to develop a sense of pride in their new role as an activist and begin to be frustrated by and alienate themselves from those who may not share concerns about social justice issues to the same extent (Bridges, 2011; Gelberg and Chojnacki, 1995).

In terms of behaviors, some individuals at this stage may feel strongly about supporting minority individuals but fail to be fully effective in several ways. Some allies may be overzealous and engage in behaviors that they believe are helpful for minority individuals, but actually harm or undermine their efforts. For instance, an ally who is trying to be supportive of someone who is Black may encourage them to join social groups for Black individuals or selectively attempt to help them establish connections with others who have had similar experiences, which could further tokenize the person they are attempting to help (Suyemoto and Hochman, 2021). Similarly, because some allies tend to believe that minorities should be able to live openly without condemnation, they may inappropriately reveal hidden characteristics about minorities, such as outing gay or lesbian workers to others. On the surface, these behaviors are intended to be supportive but they can inadvertently invalidate the complexity of individuals' identities by reducing them to their stigmatized characteristics, especially if these characteristics are not central to targets' own self-concepts. In addition, non-stigmatized allies who advocate in an overzealous way can run the risk of taking agency away from stigmatized individuals who may want to manage their identities themselves or stand their own ground in the face of prejudice (Junman, 2021). Speaking on behalf of minorities when not needed or wanted can unintentionally perpetuate a paternalistic dynamic wherein the ally maintains the role of "protector" or "savior" of the minority individual, with the implication that the individual cannot take care of themselves (Bettencourt, 2020; Lawless, 2016).

Additionally, some allies in this stage may fail to engage in ally behaviors when they are helpful or needed (Patton and Bondi, 2015). This may occur because the individual does not accurately assess the situation and realize that help is needed or may not know how to help in the situation (Ashburn-Nardo et al., 2008). Individuals within this stage who fail to support or advocate can be functionally similar to those within the Apathy stage (given they both exhibit a lack of support for their stigmatized peers). However, these individuals who previously portrayed themselves as reliable allies who then failed to act may be especially detrimental, due to the expectations of support and subsequent disappointment. In these situations, stigmatized individuals may feel particularly hurt and socially isolated by these self-identified allies because they failed to live up to the expectations of a role to which they had committed.

Another manifestation of stumbling can occur when allies engage in behaviors they consider to be productive forms of advocacy but do not have real-world consequences. For instance, the dominant presence of social media has resulted in what Gladwell (2010) called "weak tie" behaviors that may make allies feel good about themselves but do not have real world consequences (e.g. changing one's profile picture on social media to support a certain cause but doing nothing else). These behaviors are likely to generate the social benefits of being an ally (e.g. admiration from others) without any of the social costs (e.g. time and energy spent advocating; Junman, 2021).

Catalysts for progression. Individuals in the Stumbling stage must be open to learning and growing as allies in order to progress to the next stage. This can be difficult, given that many

individuals in this stage think that they are doing enough and doing much more than most others in supporting stigmatized individuals. Although it is true that people in the Stumbling stage are likely doing more than most others, they need to be open to the fact that they have more to learn and do. Thus, an aspect of fully integrated allyship involves continuous openness toward new information and feedback regarding how best to fully support stigmatized individuals.

To become aware of this need, some individuals within this stage need to be confronted by stigmatized individuals or by other fully integrated allies about the ineffectiveness of their actions to progress to the next stage. The change can also come about by some allies observing or realizing their own ineffectiveness or the harm they are causing, but this internal process is less common (Asta and Vacha-Haase, 2013).

Some fledgling allies may become frustrated or discouraged if they engage in too many missteps. Participants in Asta and Vacha-Haase's (2013) study reported that positive feedback and/or recognition from minority group members greatly impacted their desire to continue engaging in ally behaviors. Thus, fully-integrated allies can help individuals to move beyond the Stumbling stage by recognizing the well-intentioned attitudes of these individuals and providing them with constructive feedback on how to develop even further.

Stage 5 – Integrating

Our final stage, Integrating, is a theoretical end state, characterized by consistently engaging in effective allyship and making a concerted effort to not overstep others' boundaries. This occurs because individuals within this stage can put the needs of the group or others before the needs of the self. This is consistent with previous models of ally development, many of which conclude with a stage in which allies completely integrate their ally identities into all aspects of their lives (e.g. Bishop, 2015; Broido, 2000; Brown and Trusty, 2005; Chojnacki and Gelberg, 1995; Downing and Roush, 1985; Edwards, 2006; Gelberg and Chojnacki, 1995; Getz and Kirkley, 2003; Goodman, 2000; Helms, 1992; Jordan, 2012; Middleton *et al.*, 2009; Suyemoto and Hochman, 2021; Vasquez and Magraw, 2005; Waters, 2010; Watts and Abdul-Adil, 1998) and in which aspects of one's ally identity navigated in previous stages become more stable, require less conscious effort, and become integrated with the person's way of seeing themselves (Broido, 2000).

In our conceptualization, integrated allies not only have their ally identity fully fused throughout their self-concept, but also have gained the knowledge, skills, and experiences they were lacking in the Stumbling stage. Allies within this stage generally fully commit to allyship and take on this identity as a way of life (Floyd and Stein, 2002), viewing situations through a social justice lens as a default (Vasquez and Magraw, 2005). Importantly, many fully integrated allies have reconciled the dissonance associated with initial feelings of privilege (in the Dissonance stage), learned that acquiring knowledge about effective ways to help is an ongoing process (in the Learning stage), and understood that although they will make mistakes, being an effective ally is about learning from those mistakes and doing better in the future (in the Stumbling stage; Coleman-King *et al.*, 2021; Gelberg and Chojnacki, 1995; Getz and Kirkley, 2003). Integrated allies are generally less defensive and argumentative with people who have different viewpoints from themselves and who are not at the same stage of allyship as themselves. Indeed, these allies can reduce their reliance on an "us" versus "them" mentality (Milton, 2013; Mizock and Page, 2016). Additionally, they are generally not upset or do not give up when their well-intended ally behaviors fail; rather, they seek ways to improve so that their future ally behaviors are effective in helping the intended target.

Further, many truly integrated allies engage in behaviors that are both reactive and proactive. Some allies in this stage not only accept and support stigmatized individuals who need their help, but they take steps to change their environments to establish more support

before they are asked. Examples of this include advocating for more inclusive and supportive treatment of stigmatized populations, engaging in social activism campaigns and protests, and expressing their support for stigmatized individuals before realizing that stigmatized individuals are present.

Allies at this stage are likely to engage in many of the same behaviors they attempted in the Stumbling stage but do so much more effectively and with less hesitation and fear (Getz and Kirkley, 2003) or they will have new behaviors that they have evaluated as more effective than ones previously tried. They are also more likely to engage in many of the behaviors they did in the Learning stage because they realize (unlike when they first enter the Stumbling stage) that effective allyship is an evolving process that requires continuous growth and change. In addition, they are likely to engage in more proactive behaviors than they may have been willing to attempt previously (e.g. directly confronting prejudice when it occurs rather than merely consoling victims after the fact; Getz and Kirkley, 2003).

Allies who can engage in this full range of ally behaviors are likely to elicit various positive outcomes. For example, some individuals may experience intrinsic joy or fulfillment due to the feeling of helping others. Additionally, some individuals may experience less stress than in previous stages because they have finally successfully reduced the dissonance they felt and have learned how they can be more effective allies for stigmatized people. Some individuals may also feel that they are morally right in helping others, which can contribute to their positive feelings (Grzanka et al., 2015). In addition, some may experience increased self-esteem, due to their new ability to help others. They may also experience more positive mood and health associated with engaging in altruistic/helping behaviors (Post, 2005). Indeed, identity management theories suggest that allies who express their ally identities are likely to experience greater acceptance and liking from like-minded allies, improved social support and appreciation from stigmatized targets, and increased perceptions of authenticity and trust (Clair et al., 2005; Sabat et al., 2015).

Individuals' progression toward integration can elicit vicarious benefits for those around them. Stigmatized individuals may benefit from allyship through increased instrumental support such as relevant information they may not have otherwise had access to, increased social support via acceptance from allies, and more and better advocates who will intervene on their behalf when needed (Cheng et al., 2019; Ragins, 2008). Additionally, stigmatized individuals are likely to feel safer and included in a variety of social situations as a result of having more active allies. Research has shown that targets appreciate when others confront prejudicial remarks against their group (Dodd et al., 2001; Kaiser et al., 2009). When allies become fully integrated, they can openly and frequently express their ally identities to others; thus, marginalized individuals are likely to know that they have a support system and that they can anticipate a positive and accepting diversity climate.

Allies who engage in effective ally behaviors may also spur others to progress along the stages of allyship. Indeed, it is important to acknowledge the effects of role modeling and setting social norms of civility and inclusion in describing how allies can set a tone of acceptance and integration in group settings and demonstrate specific behaviors that are inclusive of everyone (Zitek and Hebl, 2007; Monteith et al., 1996; Stangor et al., 2001). As allies begin to better understand, communicate with, and learn from stigmatized individuals (in the Learning stage), they could spur others to start questioning their passive acceptance of the status quo. As such, allies at any stage will feel more accepted and supported in progressing towards and achieving integrated allyship due to these individual actions. Thus, we believe that engaging in effective ally behaviors will lead to a spiral of civility, causing a snowball effect that ultimately leads to a greater level of acceptance and tolerance of stigmatized individuals throughout.

Importantly, we note that the Integration stage is not about engaging in effective behaviors all of the time, but rather about the desire (and skills) to be an effective ally, the

intention to engage in allyship more so to help others rather than self, and the realization that allyship is a journey and not a destination. As such, ally identity development can be conceptualized as a continuous process of learning, growing, adapting, and improving with the recognition that no ally will be perfect in all circumstances. Allies with integrated identities understand this process and are therefore able to adapt and sustain allyship over the course of time rather than feel defeated when allyship behaviors are ineffective.

Discussion and opportunities for future research

Our conceptualization of ally development draws together previous research and theory on allies, but broadens and extends this work in key ways. First, we synthesize previous models of ally identity into a single, comprehensive conceptualization that incorporates primary aspects of the existing literature. Second, we specifically focus on the intrapersonal and interpersonal implications of ally identity at each stage of development. Third, we describe the mechanisms and experiences that encourage individuals' progression through the stages. In doing so, our conceptualization indicates several pathways for future research. In this section, we offer a discussion of future research on allyship and its development in order to spur a new area of scholarship at this critical juncture in diversity research.

We have presented our conceptualization as one that is linear and progressive in nature. Although we believe our conceptualization represents a common trajectory, many individuals' paths as allies will not follow our predictions linearly. We acknowledge that people may progress between the stages at different speeds and for different reasons, skip certain stages, remain stagnant at one stage indefinitely, or have experiences that cause them to regress and revisit certain stages. Indeed, some have highlighted the potential pitfalls associated with assuming linearity or finality in the development of ally identities (Collis and Chlup, 2014; Douthit-Cohen *et al.*, 2023; Squire, 2019).

In addition, future ally research should examine how experiences at different levels influence ally identity development and the expression of ally behavior in different contexts. Allies could move across the stages because of their own individual learning or experiences (individual level), interactions with others (interpersonal level), interactions with or observations of groups (group level), or social structures and policies (societal/ organizational level). As an example, an ally could develop at a new job because they have read a new book (individual), have a colleague from a marginalized group (interpersonal level), observe the treatment of a group at their organization (group level), learn of organizational policies about marginalized people (organizational level), or learn of laws in their state or nation (societal level). It may also be important to consider the perceptions of others, as Warren and Schwam (2023) found that dissonance between one's own perceptions of allyship and others' perceptions contribute to poorer social justice outcomes. Thus, we encourage future research that includes both allies themselves and those they are allied with.

Although our conceptualization of ally identity development is based in the literature, we noted at the outset that this literature is challenged and hampered by a variety of labels, overlapping stages, and different concepts when different marginalized groups are involved. Our hope is that this synthesis and reconceptualization of ally development stages will unify these disparate perspectives to provide a common language, and thus better research, on ally development. It will be key to rigorously evaluate whether this model of ally identity development is valid. We recommend that a first critical step is the development of measures to assess ally development. For instance, scholars with expertise in psychometrics could develop and validate scales to measure at what stage an individual might currently be at and practitioners could use these scales to establish baseline measures and track individuals' progressions over time. Scales that are multidimensional could also help identify which aspects of allyship particular individuals could improve upon.

Relatedly, an understanding of common stages of ally identity development may be especially beneficial in allyship and/or diversity training contexts. A pre-assessment could help establish what stages participants might be at in their allyship development, and intervention efforts could then be tailored to meet each of their needs. Different trainings could even be designed for each stage, focusing on the knowledge and behaviors for each stage transition. Such targeted interventions would likely be more effective than the traditional, one-size-fits-all training approaches wherein trainees might receive information that is developmentally mismatched, with some people receiving information that they are not ready for (e.g. Apathy and Dissonance receiving encouragement for Integration) and others receiving training that is too simplistic. Finally, our review was necessarily limited by the current literature. One notable limitation of this current literature is that it does not discuss the impact of time related to how allyship attitudes or behaviors may change. For instance, it is unknown whether people tend to spend more time in one stage than another or whether it takes different amounts of time for people to progress between stages. Similarly, the current literature has not built off of itself over time in a logical way. Different models have emerged at different points in time, some of which draw principles from previous models and some of which do not. Thus, it is difficult to conceptualize how these concepts have changed over time. Future research should consider the important role of time and the interaction of time and context in understanding allyship behaviors and attitudes change in terms of progression and potential regression.

Conclusion

It is critically important to understand the psychological processes associated with how individuals come to identify as allies because allies can be powerful forces in combating prejudice and discrimination. Our integrative conceptualization synthesizes the available literature on ally identity development, offering a relatively simple yet comprehensive understanding of this process. Our hope is that our work provides a clear perspective of this phenomenon and inspires further research to better understand the nuances associated with ally development.

Note

1. The authors recognize that stigma is context-dependent and that some groups may be stigmatized in some contexts but not in others.

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