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Viewpoint: on the required level of consciousness for authentic allyship

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Abstract

Purpose – In this JOCM Viewpoint article, the author reflects on the expectations of some minoritized group members that power holders and otherwise privileged group members should exhibit authentic allyship. Specifically, it is suggested that these expectations are unrealistic given both the challenges of being an ally and the absence in many power holders of the type of consciousness that enables effective allyship.

Design/methodology/approach – An analysis of the challenges inherent in allyship as well as the criticism that performative rather than authentic allyship frequently occurs is followed by a review of research on consciousness and the implications of the level of consciousness for generating effective ally behavior.

Findings – Different stages of consciousness generate different types of responses to the challenges of allyship, some being more effective than others. Reaching a certain stage of consciousness development may increase the likelihood that the ally will be able to hold space for the emotional well-being of the marginalized and the need for instrumental change, which are both necessary for effective allyship to occur. Without these, an individual's allyship is likely to be absent or at the most performative. Allyship groups can be helpful in supporting this level of consciousness through their group norms.

Originality/value – This viewpoint challenges conventional assumptions that privileged members of society should engage in allyship and suggests only a subset will be able to make the commitment and exhibit the behaviors required of authentic allies.

Keywords Allyship, Consciousness development, Power holders

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At a session on allyship at a recent conference attended by both academics and practitioners in the area of work psychology, frustrations were being shared by several participants who believed that power holders need to just step up and support the marginalized because they could have great impact in terms of reducing discrimination. To me, this appeared to be in some ways the flip of the past focus on women's deficits: organizations for years have come up with different ways to "fix" professional women, such as through mentoring and leadership coaching and by teaching them how to negotiate more skillfully (Babcock and Laschever, 2003; Ely *et al.*, 2011). However, at the same time, it is a similar path: a focus on women's deficits is one way to ignore effects of culture and structure (Ely and Meyerson, 2000; O'Connor, 2011; Zanon *et al.*, 2010), as is a focus on the deficits of power holders. If structural factors account for much of behavior, then a wholesale "fix them" approach to addressing inequity will fail and this is true whether we are trying to fix the power holder or the marginalized individual.

Thus, the purpose of this essay is to urge scholars not to go down this wrong path twice, meaning not to yield to the temptation to ascribe full responsibility to individuals for behaviors that are most likely due to an interaction of structural factors with individual variables. There is a need to recognize how our societal emphasis on hierarchy and the rewards that come with moving up the hierarchy play a role in the attitudes of many power holders toward diversity, equity, inclusion, and sense of belonging (DEIS) efforts. At the same time, the conversation at the conference suggests we should recognize that some individuals are able to overcome these structural barriers and examine how it is they are able to do so. It is proposed in this paper that



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this largely depends on the level of consciousness the potential ally holds. First, a brief background on the concept of allyship is provided, after which some of the challenges to becoming an ally that have already been noted in the literature are discussed. Next, the stages of consciousness development are presented and their implications for effective allyship are examined, including how individuals in each stage are likely to respond to the challenges of allyship. Finally, the role of the ally group in maintaining an effective ally consciousness is considered.

Definition and origin of allyship

Allies are majority group individuals who show support for targets of discrimination by engaging in actions designed to change the status quo for the benefit of a disadvantaged group (Radke *et al.*, 2020; Sabat *et al.*, 2013). Allies exhibit three main types of support, cultural advocacy (or voice), instrumental support (or action) and emotional support (Cheng *et al.*, 2019; Jenkins, 2009). Typically, this support occurs in the moment in response to a precipitating event (Cheng *et al.*, 2019).

Broido (2000) noted the use of this term began during the 1990s in the student affairs literature, particularly referencing heterosexuals advocating on LGBTQ issues and White students trying to address racism (e.g., Bourassa, 1991; Washington and Evans, 1991). Before this time, the concept was discussed without using the term. Subsequently, this term has been used by scholars to refer to advocacy for other marginalized groups; however, the research literature on allyship is still in its early stages of development (Bourke, 2020).

The idea behind allyship is that allies, as majority group members, can be more effective at advocating than the marginalized. This is supported by several research studies. For example, when men confront sexism the complaint is seen as more legitimate than when their female counterparts do so (Rasinski and Czopp, 2010). Women who confront sexism publicly are more likely than their male colleagues to face backlash (Gervais and Hillard, 2014). Also, men who engage in diversity efforts receive a boost in performance ratings whereas women who do so experience a decrease (Hekman *et al.*, 2017). These effects in part can be explained by the different type of legitimacy each group brings (Hussain *et al.*, 2022). Marginalized members who speak up have coalition legitimacy—in other words, others perceive that they are the right spokespersons for the equity issues—but advantaged group members who speak up are more likely to generate issue legitimacy, which is the perception that the equity issues are of strategic importance within business organizations. For example, one study suggested that more powerful allies will be more effective at advocacy and instrumental support (Cheng *et al.*, 2019).

However, there are a number of pitfalls on the way to becoming an ally. Three common challenges will be considered next. Responses to each of these challenges are likely to differ across individuals given their individual stages of consciousness development, which will be considered following a discussion of each challenge.

Recognized challenges of allyship

Challenge 1: Overcoming status-legitimizing beliefs

First, of course, to become allies, individuals must become aware of the inequities. Then they have to accept that they are real and problematic. Contact with disadvantaged group members in which their experiences are shared is one way increased awareness can occur (Tropp and Barlow, 2018); however, awareness of inequities may also occur through initiatives such as diversity literacy workshops that seek to educate privileged group members (Lehman *et al.*, 2023). Many organizations now have programs designed to educate employees about discrimination and enhance their skills interacting with diverse others (Bezrukova *et al.*, 2016).

Acceptance of these inequities as problematic, however, has been more difficult to achieve than awareness of them. Research indicates that most power holders, which many

advantaged group members are, typically become unresponsive to equity differences, instead of working to maintain or increase them, because they are the beneficiaries of inequity (Jost *et al.*, 2004; Lee *et al.*, 2011). They often do this through viewing the social order as legitimate, which has been termed status-legitimizing beliefs (Jost *et al.*, 2004). Status-legitimizing beliefs refer to beliefs that individuals' life outcomes are due to their own efforts and that low status individuals have not worked hard enough to rise in the hierarchy (Jost *et al.*, 2004; Major *et al.*, 2002). For example, power holders appear to work effortfully to maintain stereotypes, rather than relying on stereotypes by default (Goodwin *et al.*, 2000). Furthermore, high status groups are less likely to acknowledge discrimination and more likely to believe that their high status was earned (Adams *et al.*, 2006; Lee *et al.*, 2011). Also, several research studies indicate that men may be unlikely to act as allies for women because they are unable to recognize the impact of individual and institutional sexism when it occurs (Drury and Kaiser, 2014). This research is consistent with research on groups that suggests members of advantaged groups do not like to question the status quo or take actions that challenge the system and may result in taking away their privileged status (Becker, 2020; Radke *et al.*, 2020; Teixeira *et al.*, 2020). Individuals of advantaged groups who do become allies, in contrast, are generally different than individuals with status-legitimizing beliefs in that they tend to have beliefs that allow them to recognize the unfairness inherent in current conditions, such as discrimination against low-status groups (Drury and Kaiser, 2014; Jost *et al.*, 2004; Major *et al.*, 2002). For example, heterosexual allies recognize their own privileged status and how this relates to social inequities (Goldstein and Davis, 2010). Also, individuals who become allies appear to have more motivation to respond without prejudice: White allies nominated by a person of color had lower prejudice and higher internal motivation to respond without prejudice than a group of nonnominated colleagues (Ostrove and Brown, 2018).

Challenge 2: Obtaining ally membership and identifying as an ally

Attitudes have been found to be a way to facilitate entering a group (Eagly and Chaiken, 1993). In other words, having like-minded views will lead a group of allies to accept a new group member. Prior to this attitude formation that leads to their acceptance in a group, allies will typically go through a process of clarification of their own beliefs and values, which might involve learning about the experiences of marginalized group members (Broido, 2000) and overcoming status-legitimizing beliefs, as discussed. However, the potential ally will also need to have contact with the group of allies or encounter social justice opportunities (Broido, 2000) in order to become an ally. Thus, potential allies not only have to clarify their own values and beliefs but also have to detect or encounter social justice groups or opportunities that can help them learn how to enact those values. Finally, allyship requires an identity reformation, meaning the sense of self becomes situated within the category of allyship (Bourke, 2020). Allies have to perceive themselves as having certain characteristics such as being a member of a dominant group and working toward ending oppression. This self-labeling can be enhanced by joining a group with similar values (Postmes *et al.*, 2005) and serves to stimulate the performance of allyship (Anderson and Accomando, 2016). Research suggests that at the same time, the individual's identity as an ally will support the social identity of the ally group that is joined (Postmes *et al.*, 2005).

Challenge 3: Being an authentic ally

A third challenge for allies is that to be an actual and effective ally, they have to simultaneously draw on their advantage and positions of power to advocate for the marginalized community and also push back on that privilege (Bourke, 2020). Acknowledging one's privilege as well as the implicit biases one holds can be difficult to deal with alone, *let alone* when one is trying to interact with and support people from

marginalized groups (DeTurk, 2011; Stewart, 2012). Related to this is the tendency of some allies to view members of oppressed groups as needing saving and the allies as being the saviors, which only reinforces the power differences (Patton and Bondi, 2015). However, at the same time, studies suggest allyship is valued by marginalized groups when it is done without this paternalism (e.g., Cheng *et al.*, 2019, Warren and Bordoloi, 2021). Furthermore, challenging the status quo may require both ongoing commitment and some non-normative actions, which some allies may be reluctant to do because they fear reprimand (Appelbaum, 2017; Kutlaca and Radke, 2023). The difficult work that allies are required to do can result in feeling that they are in a no-win situation (Collins and Jun, 2017). This discomfort is challenging and people may develop coping mechanisms to escape these feelings. DiAngelo (2011) has highlighted the tendency of Whites to flee the discomfort of the guilt and tensions around racism, for example, calling it white fragility.

Therefore, an individual may seek the approval that comes by being labeled an ally (Bridges and Mather, 2015) without doing the difficult work required of a true ally. Allyship can reflect social norms, and allies might take on this identity to deflect attention away from their privilege (Bourke, 2020). This could easily be done by showing support superficially, such as posting a rainbow or #BlackLivesMatter sticker on the office door (Kutlaca and Radke, 2023; Radke *et al.*, 2020). However, members of marginalized groups have called out “performative” allyship in one way or another for a quarter of a century (e.g., Anzaldúa, 2000; Kutlaca and Radke, 2023, p. 3), noting that it can be harmful to both the ally and the marginalized (Kutlaca and Radke, 2023). Performative allyship contrasts with what has been called authentic allyship. For instance, an individual acting in an authentic manner is more likely to focus on moral principles that transcend contextual boundaries (Kutlaca and Radke, 2023). In other words, authentic allies manage the discomfort and take risks not to impress others but because it is the right thing to do. Authentic allyship is both more effective and appreciated by the marginalized: a study of brand management found that brands that were performative allies suffered in terms of their market whereas true allies gained from their allyship, particularly when considering the groups most affected by social injustice (Spielmann *et al.*, 2023).

Consciousness level development as it pertains to allyship behavior

The challenges associated with allyship can be understood more fully by considering individual developmental characteristics in terms of consciousness level, referring to how reality is mapped and meaning is created, since it is these characteristics that can affect how well challenges are handled. Early on in the scholarly discussion of allyship, it was recognized that moral and epistemological development most likely play a role in allyship and other social justice activism (Broido, 2000); however, this discussion has been fairly limited. Therefore, in the following sections, the stages of consciousness development and their implications for effective allyship will be considered. After this, there will be an examination of how individuals in the different stages of consciousness are likely to handle the three challenges outlined in the beginning of the paper.

Levels of adult consciousness development

Models of consciousness development, beginning with Piaget's (1954) model, state that people pass through a hierarchical sequence of stages that result in more complex models of reality (Cook-Greuter, 2000). These are theories of how people know what they know and early models such as Piaget's were psychological in nature but shared commonalities with epistemological models found in philosophy that preceded them (Fabricius, 1983). According to Piaget, there is a constant refining and adjusting of the individual's understanding of the world based on sensory data. Generally, at each stage, people assume reality fits with their map of the world;

however, a new meaning system occurs when enough data has accumulated that doesn't fit with the current meaning-making structure. Each stage can integrate what was known in the prior stage, but the reverse is not true. Piaget focused primarily on cognitive development but later models by others added areas such as moral, emotional and spiritual development, extending the stages beyond what Piaget's model presented (Baron and Cayer, 2011). One example of this is Kohlberg's theory of moral development (1984).

A summary of these different developmental models divides consciousness development into four developmental tiers, from the pre-conventional, which includes most children and ten percent of adults, to the conventional, which includes most adults (80%), to the post-conventional, which is about nine percent of adults, to the ego-transcendent, where only one percent of adults are found (Miller and Cook-Greuter, 1994). The pre-conventional stage is found primarily in children and is about survival, security and identity-development (Baron and Cayer, 2011) and therefore will not be considered further in this paper. However, next, implications of the remaining three stages of consciousness development for allyship, all found at the adult level of development, will be considered.

Allyship in the conventional stage

The conventional level is the stage in which most adults are found (thus, the term "conventional") and refers to the ability to use abstract operations. This level is supported by society's institutions and practices, which is based in the objective and rational-scientific (Cook-Greuter, 2000). One might expect, then, that power holders in the conventional stage of consciousness development will be less likely to be allies and more likely to hold status-legitimizing beliefs, not just because as advantaged group members the prevailing social order benefits them, but also because they will be motivated to maintain the social order that is the foundation of how they know. Cook-Greuter (2000) discussed the conventional stage as being one that is very difficult to move beyond given that it is attached to a rational view of reality and also represents societal norms. Given this, conventional stage thinking defends aggressively against influences that are perceived to be non-rational sources. Thus, we can expect a high level of confirmation bias to occur with adults in this level, meaning confirmation of conventional expectations. For example, when encountering examples of bias provided by marginalized groups, whether during a formal internal complaint process or more informal conversation, individuals at the conventional stage might have a tendency to rationalize or discount the events in order to make the world be what the conventional level suggests it is—a rational world in which those who work hard obtain the benefits of their labor. Thus, they are less able to provide a space for the needs of the marginalized even when it comes to simply listening to and accepting their experiences and the emotional and career effects of them. For similar reasons, those who are in the conventional consciousness stage who do become allies most likely will be performative allies only. They will perhaps want to be part of the trend of allyship and gain any recognition that comes with it that can benefit their careers, but do not really want the social order to change, so will exhibit superficial allyship behaviors that are not likely to make large changes to the social order (See Table 1 for a summary of the consciousness levels and their implications for allyship behavior).

Allyship in the post-conventional level

Essentially, individuals will need to have moved beyond the conventional stage of development to be effective allies. First, rather than ignoring, rationalizing, or discounting reports of bias from members of disadvantaged groups, allies need to be able to hold space for witnessing their experiences and resulting emotions. The concept of holding space refers to serving as a witness in a nonjudgmental and accepting manner, making room for whatever is happening. In other words, one holds space for another to fully be, in all their vulnerabilities,

Level of consciousness	Expected ally behaviors
Conventional Level	More likely to hold status-legitimizing beliefs and less likely to be allies; if become allies, more likely to be performative than authentic allies Largely unable to hold space for allies or the marginalized Tend to accept prevailing beliefs in society; not likely to critically examine them A tendency towards more rigid, normative thinking hampers their ability to be change agents
Post-conventional Level	More likely than conventional stage allies to be authentic allies Able to hold space for emotions of both allies and the marginalized Able to critically examine and challenge previously acquired beliefs Flexible with solutions and more likely than conventional allies to be agents of change
Transcendent Level	Likely to be even more effective than post-conventional allies due to ability to be continuously present Able to hold space simultaneously for different identities and opposing viewpoints Surfaces existing beliefs in an open, nonjudgmental manner Comfortable with accepting and responding to continuous change

Table 1.
Level of consciousness and expected ally behaviors

Source(s): Author's work

including experiences of physical, emotional and economic precarity (Pascoe *et al.*, 2020). Holding space may include listening to the narratives of people who are different from us (Duvall, 2021; Pascoe *et al.*, 2020). This is important because, when individuals do not feel safe to be themselves in a workplace, they engage in masking their differences and needs and are also silent when it comes to expressing their feelings about microaggressions (Buzzanell *et al.*, 2015). Holding space for the disadvantaged is difficult for conventional stage individuals not just for the reasons already discussed but also because the convention in leadership is for leaders to take charge and be decisive and forceful (Weick, 1978) even though this sometimes is negatively associated with productivity (Barge, 1989). In the post-conventional stage, in contrast, a strong action-orientation falls away in the leader and a receptive stance replaces it (Lynam *et al.*, 2020).

Second, allies also need to be able to see how the ego uses mechanisms to protect itself in order to see their own biases and status-legitimizing beliefs. The post-conventional level goes beyond the conventional way of knowing by questioning beliefs and assumptions about reality that were previously acquired. The post-conventional stage, which is sometimes called the construct-aware stage, includes deconstructing previously acquired knowledge such as that learned in school, after which knowledge is seen as being context-dependent. In other words, interacting variables and multiple points of view are considered (Cook-Greuter, 1995). This has also been called the ego-aware stage since there is a realization of the machinations of the ego in its attempts to preserve itself. Construct-aware individuals are aware of the difference between symbols such as words and the reality these symbolize, can regularly turn inwards and observe their own mental practices and are more likely to be able to face their automatic behaviors. This allows them, in contrast to conventional stage allies, to be able to recognize their own biases and behaviors that help maintain discrimination. For example, post-conventional thinkers see boundaries as constructed and knowing as limited and they also realize that much of behavior is based on unconscious motivations (Lynam *et al.*, 2020). The estimate is that only about ten percent of adults have reached the post-conventional stage and beyond, however.

Post-conventional stage allies would appear to have other advantages over conventional stage allies as well in terms of implementing change that increases equity. An ease with uncertainty and ambiguity is critical to their effectiveness as leaders: they are more comfortable with relying on intuition rather than logic and more able to adapt their solution as conditions change (Brown, 2012). Studies have found that they are more likely to redefine

problems and question assumptions, can get their followers and subordinates to see alternative solutions and are more likely to be agents of organizational change (Bushe and Gibbs, 1990; Merron *et al.*, 1987; Fisher and Torbert, 1991; Rooke and Torbet, 1998).

Third, allies need to be able to be flexible and show support for mistakes being made as people are trying to change—in other words, they should be able to hold space for both change related to increasing equity and the emotions associated with these changes. This means they also have to be forgiving of their own mistakes that may still surface regardless of their great motivation to change and ongoing efforts to do so. Although post-conventional stage allies will be much more effective at this role than conventional stage allies, this aspect will probably be best carried out by individuals at the transcendent stage of development. Post-conventional leaders are able to provide space that supports follower growth while also practicing in-the-moment awareness, which together provide for safe risk-taking (Lynam *et al.*, 2020). However, post-conventional stage individuals are largely unaware of the extent to which symbols, such as language, have formed their views of the world. As Cook-Greuter (2000) states, at this point, the individual is “not aware [of] how they automatically privilege some aspects of experience. . . and ignore or are oblivious, to others” (p. 234). Thus, the post-conventional ally is likely to fall into the trap of believing they have adequately changed their language and behaviors and no longer participate in discrimination and will also be resistant to accepting indications that they haven’t changed at the more subtle levels of behavior.

Allyship in the transcendent stage

At the transcendent stage of development that follows the post-conventional stage, in contrast, individuals learn to accept themselves and reality as they are, including continuously changing experience (Cook-Greuter, 2000). (The transcendent phase represents only about one percent of adults.) Rational explanations are not viewed as being necessary and polar opposites can be embraced at the same time both affectively and cognitively. There is an ease with open-ended identities as well as not-knowing and acceptance of beings at all stages of development. This greater comfort with open-ended identities helps them quickly accept someone who says their identity is fluid rather than binary, for example. Transcendent stage allies also are more able to accept continuous change within both themselves and the world, being more likely to be fully present for what is rather than what was expected. This greater acceptance provides the ability to hold the space, without judgment, that is needed for both marginalized and advantaged groups to express feelings, make mistakes and learn from them as changes toward achieving greater equity are implemented. This includes self-acceptance on the part of the ally when biased behavior occurs unintentionally, even at the most subtle levels. Being given the freedom to make mistakes and learn from them in an organization can be key to workplace learning and organizational effectiveness (Streumer and Kho, 2006; Van Dyck *et al.*, 2005), particularly since most learning is experiential and experimental (Goltz and Sotirin, 2022; Vosniadou, 2007). Productive learning from mistakes has to be supported, including providing a space for reflection that can lead to changes (Harteis *et al.*, 2008). This may include an environment in which existing beliefs and assumptions can be surfaced and examined openly, for example.

Consciousness implications for responses to the allyship challenges

At this point it is appropriate to examine how an individual in each stage is likely to respond to each of the allyship challenges discussed earlier in the paper (For a summary, see Table 2).

Challenge 1: Overcoming status-legitimizing beliefs

First, let’s consider the challenge of simply being able to overcome status-legitimizing beliefs. Recall that these refer to beliefs held by many that individuals’ life outcomes are due to their

Challenge	Consciousness level
Overcoming status legitimizing beliefs	Conventional level: Status legitimizing beliefs typically not overcome (need to uphold social order and idea of a rational world) Post-conventional level: Able to overcome status legitimizing beliefs by increased comfort level with ambiguity and multiple viewpoints and less need to maintain the social order Transcendental level: More fully present, so will be faster to surface status legitimizing beliefs but will hold less judgment for those who have them
Identifying as an ally	Conventional level: Challenge not overcome due to a tendency to not be able to listen to and integrate the experience of others and not be able to see own biases. However, may try to be part of the allyship trend and do virtue signaling or exhibit a paternalistic form of allyship Post-conventional level: Challenge overcome because able to listen to the experiences of others (able to take a receptive stance); also can see their own privileges and biases and are more able than conventional level individuals to situate a sense of self within the notion of allyship, which can go against the social order Transcendental level: Challenge overcome by abilities to detect biases even at the most subtle level and nonjudgmentally surface beliefs and assumptions (no need to hide or rationalize). In terms of identifying as an ally, will struggle with this less than individuals at other stages because are more able to accept open-ended identities and see self as ever changing
Being an authentic ally	Conventional level: Not overcome: often unable even to identify as an ally. If do identify as an ally, likely to display performative allyship only because don't really want the social order to change Post-conventional level: Can be authentic allies because of ability to redefine problems, question assumptions, find alternative solutions, seek and lead change. Also are adaptable as conditions change Transcendental level: Authentic allyship occurs through an ability to accept self, others, and the world as an ongoing changing dynamic. Are very present in the moment, which allows for a greater degree of situational responsiveness
Source(s): Author's work	

Table 2.
Ally challenges as
handled by level of
consciousness

own efforts and that low-status individuals have not worked hard enough to rise in the hierarchy. Individuals in the conventional stage are highly unlikely to be able to overcome this belief primarily because of their need to feel that the world is rational and to protect the social order as well as their place within that order. Part of believing the world is rational is believing there is a single reality that must be abided by, e.g., things are true or not true, right or wrong, which can be quite limiting when it comes to examining and changing beliefs. Status-legitimizing beliefs protect the social order. Questioning them introduces a different reality that poses a threat to the social order.

In contrast, individuals in the post-conventional level will have less of a need to protect the social order. They are also more comfortable with examining and accepting different viewpoints and accepting reality as more ambiguous and less black and white. This allows them to question the existing social order without the fears that individuals experiencing conventional stage thinking face. Thus, they will be in a much better position to overcome status-legitimizing beliefs.

The advantage that transcendent stage individuals have over post-conventional stage individuals when it comes to status-legitimizing beliefs is that they are able to be more present, more nonjudgmental and open and hold space for opposing viewpoints simultaneously. This will allow them to surface status-legitimizing beliefs and behaviors based on them more quickly than those at the post-conventional level. Additionally, they will be able to sit more comfortably

with individuals holding contrary sets of beliefs, holding space for various viewpoints. This can give them an advantage at bridging people with very different sets of beliefs.

Challenge 2: Obtaining ally Membership and identifying as an ally

Recall that challenge two involves both finding opportunities to practice allyship and seeing oneself as being an ally. Typically, those in the conventional stage of consciousness development will not be able to overcome this challenge since they will not have been able to fully accept the existence of discrimination, based on their status-legitimizing beliefs. They may, however, identify as an ally because of a need to be part of the allyship trend or to receive accolades for being virtuous, particularly if allyship is seen as a social norm. In other words, conventional stage individuals are likely to see themselves as allies at no more than what others would term a superficial level and their practice of allyship behaviors are not going to be substantive. For allyship, they will be willing to do what has been termed virtue signaling—e.g., they may post rainbows on their office walls ([Kutlaca and Radke, 2023](#)). When it comes to having the hard conversations or trying to make structural changes to organizations, they are going to be less visible. This is because they have not entirely bought into the need to change the social order.

Alternatively, a conventional stage individual identifying as an ally may create an ally identity of being a rescuer, a paternalistic form of allyship. This stems from two conditions found in the conventional consciousness level. First is the need for doing things for social approval and recognition, as discussed, which leads to virtue signaling behavior. Second is the perception of what a leader should do, which then influences how allyship behaviors are viewed. Recall that conventional stage individuals see leaders as needing to be decisive and forceful, taking charge and showing action; however, action-oriented allyship without having the requisite level of awareness to be effective can in fact serve to maintain or even deepen status inequities.

Post-conventional individuals on the other hand will have a greater ability to identify as an ally as well as identify what they can substantively do as an ally in part because they are able to be receptive to stories about discrimination told by others as well as see how they may have played a role in those experiences. Also, because of their lesser need as compared with conventional stage individuals to uphold and be viewed as part of the social order, they are more able to create a sense of self as an ally even when allyship is not viewed as a social trend or norm. In other words, they will not be seeking to be an ally primarily for the accolades but because they perceive the need for change. This results in a lesser need to be viewed as a rescuer, so post-conventional individuals will be less likely to exhibit paternalistic allyship identities than will conventional stage individuals.

As is the case with challenge one, transcendent stage individuals will be able overcome challenge two faster than will post-conventional stage allies. Not only are they very open to hearing stories of discrimination from marginalized individuals, but they will also be able to perceive even the most subtle forms of discrimination, which post-conventional stage allies may not be able to do. Transcendent individuals do not feel the need to uphold the social order and therefore they can very easily see themselves as being allies even when it is not the norm. Furthermore, transcendent stage individuals can be expected to struggle with ally identity much less than individuals at earlier developmental stages because they are more able to accept open-ended identities, including their own, and they also see both others and themselves as ever changing. In other words, their sense of identity is much more fluid in nature.

Challenge 3: Being an authentic ally

To review, the third challenge of allyship is becoming an authentic, rather than performative ally, meaning enacting substantive change as an ally. As has been implied with regard to the previous two challenges, this will be quite difficult to overcome for

conventional stage allies since they still feel the need to uphold the social order including their place in it. Substantive allyship, meaning ally behaviors that might result in true change, are threatening to conventional stage individuals because of the possibility they will actually change the social order, rather than superficially doing so. When they do take steps to change, it is likely to be out of a need for approval and take the form of paternalistic, rescuing behavior that may be resented by the marginalized for continuing rather than truly addressing status differences.

Post-conventional level individuals have more of the characteristics needed for authentic allyship. Not only are they less threatened by social change, but they also have greater problem solving abilities in terms of leading that change. They are more able to question assumptions and redefine problems as well as generate alternative solutions, for example. They are also more able to deal with changing conditions. This higher level of effort and skill are all necessary for fundamental changes to take place in terms of eliminating social injustices. Furthermore, their leadership of change is less likely to be paternalistic in nature because of the post-conventional individual's greater understanding that action is not always what is needed from a leader and that action without adequate awareness can be dangerous.

Although post-conventional level individuals have a valuable set of skills that will make it more likely they can be authentic allies, transcendent individuals can take this to the next level. For example, transcendent individuals will be more likely to detect and change their own behavior that contributes to discrimination. They are likely to be more aware when they are displaying subtle forms of bias. They will not only display less judgment of others, but also of themselves in these situations, which allows them to surface and change their own discriminatory behaviors more quickly. Additional skills of transcendent individuals not found in post-conventional individuals that allow for more authentic and substantive allyship to occur are their greater presence in the moment, their view of the world as being a continuous dynamic and their allowance of space for multiple events and perspectives to occur simultaneously. In other words, how they view situations is both more fluid and less linear. These aspects allow them to have quicker and greater responsiveness to the ongoing behaviors and events affecting marginalized groups. For example, if a structural change is made to correct an injustice but has unintended effects on marginalized communities in other ways, an individual at the post-conventional level might be initially be distracted by the change that was implemented – e.g. happy it occurred and they were part of it—and not see unintended effects of it until much later. The transcendent individual, on the other hand would be quicker to detect and correct the unintended effects.

To summarize, the level of consciousness an individual has can be a major factor in how the challenges of allyship are handled, so this should not be overlooked when putting together allyship programs or expecting leaders and other power holders to display allyship. It is understandable that marginalized communities would want most power holders to take steps to address discriminatory situations, however, there needs to be a recognition that many are unable to do so effectively because of how they view the world.

Although it is being proposed here that an individual's level of consciousness development will play a key role in the emergence of authentic allyship and effective allyship behavior, it is not being suggested that this is the only factor. Typically, allyship interventions in organizations rely on a group, for good reason (e.g., [Anicha et al., 2015](#)). Therefore, the role of the ally group in supporting authentic allyship is briefly considered next.

The role of group norms and consciousness

As discussed, there are many challenges associated with being an ally, which can be stressful. Groups are one way to mitigate stress since discussions with group members can provide socio-emotional support ([Fong et al., 2018](#)). Members of groups feel

psychologically safe when the group shares trust and mental models for interaction and operates collectively to achieve goals (Newman *et al.*, 2017). Aside from the socio-emotional support an allyship group provides, it is important to consider how this group supports a framework for action. Teams have emerging cognitive and social behavior patterns that develop as a result of member interactions over time which result in a shared understanding of how to do things, also called a team mental model (Curşeu, 2006; Rouse and Morris, 1986; Smith *et al.*, 2011). These shared understandings have been found to be important for team performance (Fransen *et al.*, 2011; Maynard and Gilson, 2013).

In fact, it has been suggested that teams, like individuals, have different levels of consciousness that can help or hinder them in terms of dealing with stressful situations, with some groups having mental models that are more transcendent in nature (Goltz, 2023). One would expect then, that allies who are working within a group operating at a higher level of consciousness, such as at the post-conventional or transcendent level, would be more able to be effective given this support than would individuals with higher levels of consciousness operating within allyship groups with lower levels of consciousness, such as at the conventional level. For example, during toxic or otherwise stressful situations, a team's mental model of persistence (staying on task and message) and flexibility along with nonjudgment are thought to serve an important role for members of the group in terms of achieving increased resilience (Goltz, 2023).

It follows from this, then, that an allyship group can serve to help an individual ally deal with the three main challenges of being an ally. This may or may not occur for the first challenge, because overcoming status-legitimizing beliefs is generally needed for acceptance of discrimination to occur and for the individual to seek to become part of a group of allies. However, groups operating at the post-conventional and above levels are likely to be able to help a new ally with challenge two in terms of learning to be receptive to the experiences of the marginalized, detecting their own privileges and establishing and maintaining an identity as an ally even when it goes against the social order. Groups operating at this level can also model for new allies what it means to be an authentic ally rather than a performative or paternalistic one, helping them overcome challenge 3.

Conclusion

In summary, although there is a great desire by the marginalized to see more power holders step up to the task of decreasing discrimination and increasing equity in an authentic manner, this is unlikely to happen primarily because most power holders are at a conventional level of consciousness, holding beliefs that reinforce the current social order. This consciousness does not provide them with the motivation to really change the status quo, nor does it give them the ability to do effective allyship, which requires one to be present for whatever is rather than what is expected, including holding space for both the experiences of the marginalized and the experiences of the privileged, as well as space for the struggles that are inherent in changing the social order.

This is not meant to discourage those who are working for social justice in organizations, but it is meant to provide a more realistic picture of what is likely to occur. At the same time that authentic allies may only be a small fraction of the population, however, the marginalized can continue to tell stories of experiencing discrimination and allies can tell stories of recognizing the role they played in it. This hopefully will contribute to power holders within the conventional stage of consciousness being more able to see that their sense of meaning making is not consistent with reality, stimulating them to grow in consciousness toward a post-conventional or later orientation.

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