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Review article

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A framework for understanding effective allyship

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Abstract

Highly publicized instances of social injustice have raised awareness of inequities and motivated people with advantaged identities to work to end oppression and advocate for members of marginalized groups — in other words, to act as 'allies'. When successful, engaging in allyship can promote marginalized individuals' belonging and well-being. However, actions meant to convey allyship can be ineffective or harmful. Thus, it is important to understand how people might act as effective allies — that is, how they might enact allyship efforts that marginalized group members identify as meaningful and that promote psychological benefits for these groups. In this Review, we outline a framework of effective allyship that posits four key and related components: awareness, authentic motivation, action orientation and all-inclusivity. More specifically, taking part in allyship entails acknowledging systemic bias and privileged identities, being motivated by personal values, engaging in high-effort and consistent ally actions, and supporting all members of a marginalized group, including those with multiply marginalized identities. We discuss research supporting the importance of each element, focusing on work with marginalized individuals, and we describe ally interventions. When carefully considered and tailored to relevant marginalized groups, these four components are crucial to acting as an effective ally and fostering welcoming climates.

Sections

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Introduction

In the past 15 years, highly publicized instances of social injustice have sparked national and international social movements to raise awareness and address societal inequalities. For instance, the #MeToo movement, which was a reaction to rampant sexual harassment and violence against women in Hollywood, gained momentum in 2017 (refs. 1,2). The Black Lives Matter movement, started by three Black women in 2013 following the murder of 17-year-old Trayvon Martin, was reinvigorated with organized protests in 2020 after the murder of George Floyd[3,4]. Around the same time, the COVID-19 pandemic disproportionately harmed Black American communities, further shedding light on disparities embedded within society in the USA[5]. Since 2022, there has also been a dramatic rise in anti-trans legislation and bills across many states in the USA that aim to ban books featuring the LGBTQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer) community[6,7].

These events, and many others, have motivated people to advocate against injustices and act as 'allies' as part of social movements and during their everyday interactions (for example, at work[8,9]). Allies are broadly defined as people with privileged, high-status, or advantaged identities (that is, who belong to a social group that have historically had resources and power within a given society) who are working to end oppression and uplift members of marginalized groups (a group that has been oppressed, experienced mistreatment and faced discriminatory laws and policies that hamper social mobility[10–12])[13–16].

Unfortunately, many attempts to express support for marginalized groups and signal allyship in response to societal inequalities have fallen short, appearing insincere and transient[17–19]. Indeed, some people probably want to seem like supportive allies for self-serving reasons (for example, for monetary gain, to appear egalitarian or to gain prestige in social movements[20,21]). At the same time, other people might be genuinely inspired by an awareness of injustice but might not know what is needed to engage in allyship and can feel uncertain whether asking is even appropriate[22]. Attempting allyship but falling short is harmful and can backfire, hurting the groups one might have intended to help. Thus, to truly support marginalized individuals, it is crucial to understand what they want from those enacting allyship.

In this Review, we aim to address this issue by outlining a framework for effective allyship from the perspective of marginalized individuals. First, we describe the benefits of allyship for marginalized individuals. Next, drawing from research focused on the experiences and beliefs of marginalized groups, we introduce the 'four As' of allyship framework, which emphasizes four critical components for successful allyship: awareness, authentic motivation, action orientation and all-inclusivity. We then highlight existing interventions that might encourage effective allyship in oneself and others. We end by discussing remaining questions for future research.

We conceptualize allies to be individuals who are advantaged along at least one identity dimension advocating for individuals who are marginalized along the same dimension (for example, men acting as allies for women or white individuals acting as allies for Black individuals). In this way, allyship differs from the related term 'solidarity', which refers to supporting others who share one's identity or possess a similarly marginalized identity[23]. Finally, 'effective allyship' can be an ambiguous phrase, potentially indicating an ally's ability to enact social change or address discrimination[24,25]. Here we define 'effective' as engaging in allyship efforts that marginalized group members identify as meaningful and beneficial and that promote psychological benefits for these groups.

Benefits of allyship

When enacted correctly, allyship has many benefits. Allyship efforts can support social movements and encourage societal change[12,25,26], but here, given our focus on effective allyship from the perspective of marginalized individuals, we describe the benefits for marginalized group members.

People often feel a sense of belonging when they enter a space with others who look like them or share important identities[27–29]. Advantaged individuals demonstrating allyship can also promote these feelings of trust, comfort and belonging. For example, women and Black and Latine people in the USA anticipate stronger feelings of trust, belonging and interest in an organization or working group when they know that male or white allies are present in that space compared to when there are no obvious allies[30–32]. Female Black and Latina students in the USA also feel more belonging in their school, field of study and classrooms when there are advantaged outgroup members acting as allies in that space compared to when there are not[27,33,34]. Positive contact with supportive advantaged group members can also broadly support marginalized individuals' feelings of belonging and inclusion in society. For instance, refugees and asylum seekers from regions experiencing war often face social exclusion when migrating to a new country[35]; developing connections with welcoming advantaged group members in the new country can mitigate this social exclusion[36,37].

Advantaged individuals can help to ensure that environments are inclusive and welcoming[38], and can confront bias and mistreatment[39,40]. Watching advantaged group members speak out against unjust treatment also empowers individuals with marginalized identities and improves their psychological well-being[41]. For example, when Black Americans watched a non-Black person confront racism, they assumed the environment had anti-bias norms, which encouraged feelings of belonging and inclusion[42]. Seeing a man (versus a woman) confront sexism led women in the Netherlands to report higher confidence, to perform better on a subsequent IQ test and to indicate a higher likelihood of reporting sexist behaviour[43]. LGBTQ+ college students in the USA indicated higher self-esteem and general well-being when they viewed their non-LGBTQ+ roommates as taking more (versus less) action to support the LGBTQ+ community[15]. In sum, successful allyship efforts can promote feelings of belonging, inclusion and empowerment for marginalized individuals.

Understanding effective allyship

Drawing from existing work and theorizing, we posit that four key components underscore effective allyship: awareness, authentic motivation, action orientation and all-inclusivity (Fig. 1). This framework centres on the perspective of marginalized groups, because a person cannot simply self-proclaim an ally title; rather, marginalized individuals must believe the person is engaging in effective allyship. In fact, marginalized individuals might not view 'ally' as a stagnant title that can be earned or achieved; rather, they might believe that engaging in allyship requires constant actions, with advantaged individuals consistently advocating for and working with marginalized groups[44,45].

In this section, we highlight research with individuals from marginalized groups that supports the critical nature of each component. Although awareness is often the first step in working toward allyship, these components are interrelated and can actively influence each other. Moreover, every person has multiple identities, so that individuals can have several marginalized identities or a combination of marginalized and advantaged identities. Importantly, people belonging

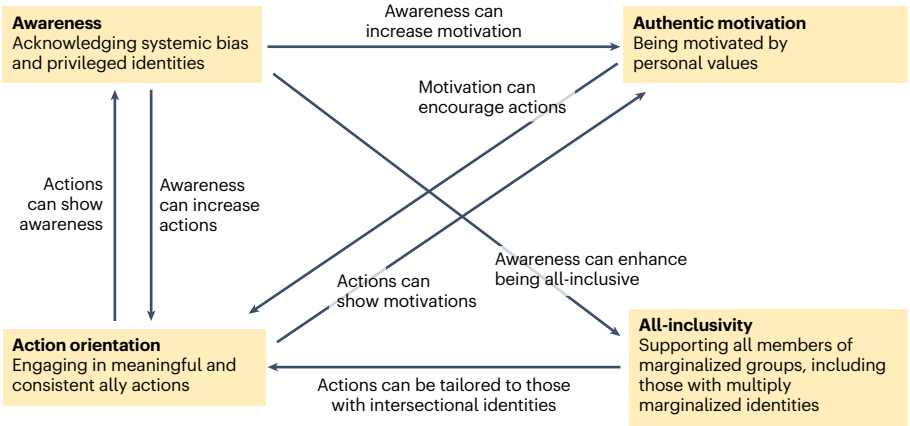


Fig. 1 | The 'four As' framework for effective allyship. To enact effective allyship for marginalized groups, advantaged individuals must recognize subtle mistreatment and acknowledge systemic bias and their privileged identities (awareness), be motivated by personal values (authentic motivation), engage in high-effort and consistent ally actions (action orientation) and support all members of a marginalized group, including those with multiply marginalized identities (all-inclusivity). These components are interrelated and can actively influence each other.

to multiple marginalized groups (multiply marginalized) have unique experiences. We highlight this perspective when discussing all components of effective allyship, demonstrating the essential nature of this theme within our allyship framework.

Awareness

Awareness of a group's marginalization and societal mistreatment is vital to successfully supporting that group[46]. Indeed, reviews of allyship in the workplace and healthcare settings emphasize awareness of biases as a critical first step in demonstrating allyship[13,38,47,48]. Critically, having awareness necessitates recognizing the multiple ways bias can manifest and harm marginalized groups at different levels[11,13].

Bias at the interpersonal level can emerge in overt and formal ways (for example, saying one does not want to hire a person because of their gender, race and/or sexual orientation) or in more subtle ways (for example, directing questions only to men or to white individuals[49,50]). Subtle bias can be challenging to detect[51,52] but is still harmful[53]. Specifically, subtle bias undermines feelings of trust and comfort in an environment[54], impairs cognitive function[55,56] and harms test performance[57]. Thus, noticing when subtle interpersonal bias occurs is crucial for taking action and confronting discrimination[58,59]. Marginalized individuals are unlikely to view advantaged group members as engaging in allyship if they witness mistreatment and fail to intervene[41].

Importantly, even individuals with good intentions can have subtle biases, and therefore enacting allyship entails recognizing and ultimately correcting one's own prejudices[60,61]. For example, white adults in the USA who are more willing to acknowledge racism and how their biases might manifest in ways outside their control are more likely to seek out interactions with racial outgroup members and to indicate lower anxiety during these intergroup interactions, and are more willing to discuss issues of racism with their children[62,63]. Admitting that one is affected by automatic stereotyping and prejudices is also crucial to reducing one's biases[64]. Unsurprisingly, marginalized individuals expect that those acting as allies do not harbour biases against their ingroup; thus, working to eliminate personal prejudice is fundamental to successful allyship[15,65].

Individual-level prejudices and stereotypes do not manifest in a vacuum; rather, they are affected by the larger societal and cultural context[10,66–69]. Specifically, systemic biases (hierarchies that are built into history, culture and society to maintain status structures[11]) undermine the advancement of marginalized groups and perpetuate inequalities[70–72]. Within the USA, people of colour are generally more aware of systemic biases than are white individuals[73,74], and members of racially marginalized groups in the USA favour ally messaging that acknowledges societal-level bias[75]. More generally, marginalized individuals prefer discussions that focus on the harmful consequences of societal hierarchies rather than on promoting harmony between groups[76,77]. For example, Palestinian students engaged more in conversations about between-group conflicts and power dynamics than conversations that emphasized group similarities and respect[78].

However, individuals from advantaged groups are more comfortable conceding individual-level biases and discussing group commonalities[76,78–80], in part because admitting the existence of societal-level biases would require reckoning with their privileged position in society[80,81]. Thus, awareness requires recognizing systemic bias as well as how one might be privileged by such biases. For instance, people of colour in the USA view white individuals as allies when they actively acknowledge societal power structures and recognize how these systems privilege their experiences as white individuals[65,82], and women in the USA prefer to work with men who are willing to admit their privilege than with men who are not[83].

Thus, advantaged individuals attempting allyship must develop a form of critical consciousness[84,85] – they must recognize the societal and historical forces that lead to inequalities, privilege certain social groups and result in personal-level biases[86–88]. Critical consciousness promotes an understanding of large structural biases, which helps advantaged individuals to recognize intersectional oppression and the fact that people can face distinct and compounded mistreatment and marginalization owing to multiple identities (for example, being both Black and a woman or being gay and having a disability)[86]. Knowing that a group experiences marginalization can make it challenging to recognize that individual members of that group might also be advantaged by their other identities[89]; possessing critical consciousness ensures that advantaged individuals recognize the unique harm experienced by multiply marginalized individuals[90–92].

Critical consciousness can also benefit people with marginalized identities. Specifically, it can help people with marginalized and advantaged identities to reflect on the ways they are both privileged and are oppressed owing to historical and societal structures[86,93]. This reflection, in turn, can spark motivation to work with other marginalized groups to dismantle social hierarchies[23]. Indeed, awareness of the intersectional nature of biases is a precursor to action orientation

because it is associated with intentions to engage in activism that supports marginalized groups[94].

Authentic motivation

Various motivations can underlie someone's decision to act as an ally, with crucial consequences for effective allyship. Specifically, motivations can range from authentic and internal to inauthentic and external[95]. Inauthentic motivations are often performative. Performative allyship is externally motivated — typically through individual motives to improve one's public image — and frequently results in easy, low-cost and publicly visible behaviours[96].

Lacking authentic motivation or being externally motivated is problematic because allyship is unlikely to persist without external rewards under these conditions[97]. For instance, white individuals in the USA who are externally motivated to avoid being prejudiced are more likely to endorse stereotypes or act in a racist manner when they do not feel others are evaluating them compared to when they feel others are evaluating them[21]. A person who is motivated by these self-presentation concerns might primarily focus their behaviours on their self-interests and on gaining prestige rather than engaging in actions that are meaningful and helpful to marginalized individuals[25,95,98]. Similarly, advantaged group members primarily motivated to promote their own group's status might enact allyship only in ways that ironically maintain unequal power relations between groups, such as co-opting social movements and viewing marginalized groups as weak and needing help[99–101]. Marginalized individuals dislike these types of status-preserving behaviour[102]. Thus, perceiving helpful actions from advantaged group members as externally motivated can lead marginalized group members to feel threatened[103] or to discount the efforts altogether[104].

By contrast, allies that are authentically motivated perform meaningful behaviours that are motivated by internal values and a personal desire to support the marginalized group above their own individual or group needs. For instance, people might be motivated to align themselves with a disadvantaged group out of a genuine interest in promoting social justice or moral outrage at unequal treatment[95]. Crucially, marginalized individuals prefer and benefit from allyship that is authentically motivated. For example, refugees seeking asylum in Spain were more interested in working with Spanish people who engaged in allyship and collective action that the refugees believed were motivated by egalitarian values (for example, addressing inequalities because they are unfair) rather than paternalistic (for example, helping refugees because they seem weak and in need of assistance) or performative motives[105]. In a similar way, women in Germany, Spain and Mexico felt more empowered after viewing a man confront sexism when the confrontation was rooted in beliefs about the unjustness of gender inequality rather than by beliefs that fragile women need help[106]. Black individuals in the USA also expressed higher self-esteem when a white individual confronted racism owing to internal (versus external) motivation[41].

Marginalized group members are probably rarely privy to advantaged individuals' true motivations, and ascertaining these motivations can be difficult. Societal norms pressure advantaged group members to avoid appearing prejudiced[21,107], which can raise marginalized group members' suspicions about potential allies' motives[108]. Marginalized group members often rely on potential allies' actions to disambiguate motivations[109]. Specifically, marginalized individuals are likely to attribute an advantaged person's behaviour to authentic motivation when they view the action as going above and beyond expectations and when the action is performed consistently across situations and time[110]. Moreover, the costs and rewards associated with a given behaviour can suggest inauthentic versus authentic motivation. For instance, women in Australia were more likely to view a man engaging in allyship as genuinely motivated when he acted in the face of costs compared to when he was rewarded for his actions[111]. Thus, authentic motivation is closely tied to action orientation, because advantaged individuals can demonstrate their motivation only through their behaviour.

Action orientation

Being action-oriented is a crucial precursor to effective allyship. Indeed, engaging in informed, supportive actions differentiates individuals who people of colour in the USA consider to be friends (people with whom they are close but not romantically involved and who might not provide support during race-related conflicts) versus allies[65]. Moreover, having a roommate who participates in ally-related efforts prospectively predicted psychological well-being among LGBTQ+ students in the USA[15]. Marginalized individuals routinely rely on actions to discern whether a potential ally is sincerely motivated. Authenticity is signalled through high-cost and meaningful behaviours that exceed normative expectations and, perhaps most crucially, by consistently engaging in supportive activities across situations[112]. Indeed, one review argued that allyship is ultimately defined as a series of continuous actions[45]. Notably, minor, context-specific 'ally gestures' (low-cost, small actions that signal support for a marginalized group) can be helpful under certain conditions (Box 1), such as during brief interactions with socially distant others. However, consistent effective allyship is necessary to promote inclusion and trust during sustained interactions with closer others[15] (Table 1).

Prior work has identified two classes of allyship behaviour: proactive and reactive[45]. Proactive actions can occur at any time to enhance feelings of respect and acceptance among marginalized individuals. By contrast, reactive actions directly respond to a discriminatory event and aim to reduce harmful bias and practices in people or institutions.

Participating in conversations about bias and mistreatment signals awareness of these issues and can function as a meaningful proactive action. For instance, LGBTQ+ individuals in the USA identify a willingness to discuss anti-LGBTQ+ discrimination as a pertinent characteristic of allies[15], and individuals with disabilities in the USA view others as allies when they are willing to learn about the experiences and social implications of having a disability[44]. Relatedly, white and Black women in the USA view advantaged outgroup members as allies when they speak out about the importance of equality in the workplace[31,113] or when they acknowledge the unique challenges faced by the marginalized ingroup[32,114].

Reviews on allyship in healthcare and clinical settings in the USA also emphasize the importance of having conversations about injustices and health disparities with patients[47,48]. Conversations about bias can occur in response to a societal event or might be unprompted but relevant to the context (for example, a doctor discussing health disparities with their patient). Thus, these discussions can represent reactive or proactive actions depending on the situation[45]. Such conversations might happen interpersonally between small groups[15,32,65] or entail an advantaged person speaking out broadly against existing inequalities in an institution or society[13,75].

Providing interpersonal support for marginalized individuals is another proactive behaviour that aims to foster feelings of inclusion and acceptance among marginalized individuals[45]. These actions can and should occur often and do not need to be elicited by a specific

Box 1 | Benefits of small ally gestures

According to our framework, one must fulfill all four allyship components — including engaging in meaningful, high-cost and consistent behaviours — to be a true and effective ally for marginalized individuals. Indeed, small ally gestures (minor low-cost actions that show support for a marginalized group) have been criticized for requiring no effort, for being performative[17–19] and for being used to gain esteem and influence (for example, getting more followers on social media)[20,185].

However, research has not always found that small gestures (such as wearing a Black Lives Matter pin, using a rainbow filter on Facebook, or briefly mentioning one's support of marginalized groups) produce adverse outcomes. In some instances, a small gesture can indicate allyship and promote belonging and trust among marginalized individuals[31,114,186,187]. For example, when Black participants imagined an interaction with a white physician wearing a Black Lives Matter pin (versus not), they expected the physician wearing the pin to be a better ally for Black individuals and reported more trust and comfort with the physician[186].

Crucially, a person can engage in small ally gestures while also participating in more meaningful behaviours, and a minor gesture might indicate that a person does additional high-cost actions (for example, confronts instances of bias). However, this interpretation of minor gestures depends on the nature of the interaction. Participants in the study described above might have thought the physician was someone they would see only once a year during an annual check-up, and so they would not have opportunities to learn about more ally-related behaviours than the Black Lives Matter pin. It may even seem disingenuous for a physician to do multiple unprompted ally actions during a single check-up. However, the physician's willingness to wear a Black Lives Matter pin can suggest that the physician engages in other supportive behaviours, and a marginalized patient would have no evidence to the contrary. By contrast, if participants had considered a therapist who has multiple in-depth conversations with patients, a Black Lives Matter pin might not have been sufficient to signal allyship. Having a white therapist wear a Black Lives Matter pin without performing other ally actions might appear performative and inauthentic, given that marginalized individuals would have more opportunities to interact with the therapist and would eventually expect to see other evidence of allyship. Thus, minor ally gestures might spark trust during brief interactions (for example, a single doctor's visit, a short exchange with an acquaintance or work colleague)[31,186]. By contrast, small and inconsistent ally gestures might suggest inauthentic external motivation and be threatening when enacted in more sustained interactions and meaningful relationships[15,96,115].

Relatedly, having someone signal support for a marginalized social category (for example, women) during brief interactions might also cue support for another marginalized group (for example, Black individuals)[33,129]. Broad statements supporting diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) efforts and all marginalized groups (that is, not tailored to a specific identity) might also be helpful during brief exchanges[188,189]. However, again, what is required during more sustained interactions might look different. Lacking evidence of ally actions directed towards one's specific identities across multiple exchanges provides evidence that a potential ally really cares only about another marginalized outgroup (for example, women) and is not concerned with supporting one's ingroup (for example, Black individuals), and allies might need to show support for an individual's unique set of identities in long-term relationships[15,126–128]. We encourage researchers to systematically explore conditions under which minor ally gestures are beneficial versus harmful and to examine social relationships and the level of closeness as moderating factors.

event. Supportive behaviours include being available to talk and listen to concerns, ensuring inclusion in various activities (for example, an informal lunch with colleagues), sponsoring marginalized individuals for promotions or awards, and ensuring that marginalized voices are heard (for example, saying, "as my colleague just said…" in a meeting)[115]. Indeed, when asked to reflect on the characteristics of allies, racially marginalized individuals in the USA indicated that allies are more interpersonally helpful than non-allies[14]. Advantaged individuals can explicitly note that they are willing to help and provide encouragement, which promotes a sense of belonging and trust among marginalized group members[31,114]. However, evidence of previous supportive actions can be a stronger indication of allyship[32,34]. For instance, individuals with disabilities in the USA reported that allies must show they have personal connections with and are comfortable around people with disabilities[44]. Moreover, Black individuals in the USA anticipated having better interactions with a white person when they knew that person had Black friends[116,117] compared to when they did not, and Black female students in the USA viewed white professors at a historically Black college/university as better allies for Black women than white professors at a primarily white institution[27]. Being endorsed by a fellow marginalized ingroup member is also a powerful indication that an advantaged outgroup member is a trusted ally[32,34].

Beyond proactively raising awareness and offering interpersonal support, individuals might also engage in reactive actions. Actively confronting discrimination can be a beneficial and effective reactive action because it reduces biases and promotes lasting behavioural change in those who are confronted[118,119]. At the same time, people often dislike having their biases called out, resulting in negative interpersonal consequences for the confronter[24,119]. Thus, engaging in confrontation is high-cost because advantaged individuals might be disliked because of this action. However, advantaged individuals (such as men and white individuals) incur fewer penalties for confrontation behaviour than do marginalized individuals (such as women and Black individuals)[40].

Although the primary goal of confrontation is to reduce prejudice, marginalized people also value and achieve psychological benefits when advantaged outgroup members challenge bias. For example, seeing a man or white individual confront discriminatory actions enhanced feelings of belonging and inclusion and increased self-esteem among women and Black individuals in the USA compared to when a man or white individual failed to confront an instance of bias[41,120]. From the alternative perspective, being in an environment where no one confronted instances of bias undermined Black and Latine American students' feelings of support and their perception that they had allies in their field of study[121].

Table 1 | Helpful actions based on a level of closeness

Level of closeness	Example relationships	Action requirements	Example actions
Brief interaction with socially distant other	A single interaction with a doctor A once-a-year interaction with a colleague A conversation with a cashier	A small gesture suggesting that the advantaged individual supports marginalized individuals broadly	Wearing a Black Lives Matter or rainbow flag pin Stating support for marginalized groups Quickly acknowledging a privileged identity
Sustained interaction for a finite amount of time	An instructor teaching a class A doctor you must interact with across multiple appointments A supervisor overseeing a temporary project	Consistent actions Evidence that one has authentic motivations	Having a diversity statement on the syllabus Incorporating the perspective of marginalized individuals in lectures Discussing how one's medical practice is culturally responsive
Consistent interactions with close other	A close friend A mentor–mentee relationship A colleague who is worked with daily	Consistent meaningful actions to demonstrate awareness and authentic motivation Small ally gestures must be accompanied by higher-cost actions Evidence that the potential ally specifically supports a marginalized individual's ingroup or combination of identities	Confronting discrimination Acknowledging injustice Advocating for marginalized groups in organizations or large social movements Centring the voices and needs of the marginalized group

Other effective reactive actions include fighting against injustice in large social movements and participating in advocacy behaviours (such as working for equal pay, equitable healthcare and education or protesting against police brutality)[25,98]. For example, LGBTQ+ individuals in the USA viewed going to protests in support of the LGBTQ+ community as evidence of allyship[15]. Similarly, people of colour and individuals with disabilities in the USA identified engagement with activism as a critical facet of allyship[44,65]. Indeed, participating in social movements requires time and effort and can be a compelling indication that someone is an ally.

However, demonstrating allyship through activism is complicated by the perceived goals of the outgroup member activists[12,122]. For marginalized individuals to view advantaged group activists as authentically motivated, the advantaged group activists must have a low level of influence in social movements and take a more supportive role to uplift the voices of marginalized individuals[25,98,123]. Moreover, marginalized groups who are victims of past historical atrocities (such as Jewish individuals living in Germany) prefer empowering messages (such as messages that note the importance of elevating their power and position in society) to messages that focus on acceptance between groups[124]. Thus, particularly in instances of historical and ongoing conflict, marginalized individuals want activism-related actions that restore their power and enhance their status[124,125]. Advantaged individuals can support these aims in two ways: by engaging in activism to remove the structures oppressing marginalized groups and by taking supportive, low-power positions in social movements[15,65,98].

The literature is mixed on whether ally actions need to be tailored toward a specific marginalized group to indicate support for that group. For instance, some research suggests that individuals with multiply marginalized identities require actions tailored to their unique combination of identities or to the identity they find most important and relevant[114,126–128]. At the same time, other work indicates that signalling support for one marginalized group (such as white women) can also suggest support for another unrelated group (such as Black individuals)[33,129]. During quick interactions, minor ally gestures for one group might generate trust from all marginalized groups; however, longer-term and more meaningful interactions might require evidence that allies support an individual's specific ingroups or combination of identities (Table 1). Thus, being an effective ally for marginalized individuals requires actions that uniquely support multiply marginalized people.

All-inclusivity

Effective allyship necessitates being all-inclusive or supporting all marginalized group members; however, doing so might require effort and overriding default processes. Seminal work introducing the concept of intersectionality asserted that discussions of discrimination have historically ignored people with multiply marginalized identities and primarily focused on individuals who were marginalized along one dimension and privileged along many others[91]. Thus, for large and complex social categories (for example, women) it might be easiest to act as an ally for individuals who are singularly marginalized in that category (white women) and who best exemplify the group or are typical of that group[66].

According to theorizing published last year, the perceived 'typical' member of a social group (for example, a race or gender category) is shaped by dominant cultural beliefs and historical factors[66]. Within society in the USA, this process has led to perceptions of social group members that centre their relationships on white individuals and men[130,131]. For instance, Black women in the USA were viewed as lacking femininity to justify their manual labour and separation from children during slavery[132,133]. Consequently, Black women are not seen as prototypical women. However, they are also not seen as the typical Black person because Black individuals in the USA are stereotyped as masculine and possessing male attributes[134,135]. Cultural factors in the USA also render East Asian men (generally used to refer to men from China, Korea and Japan), South Asian people (generally considered to be from India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka), and Afro-Latine individuals (people who identify as ethnically Latine and racially Black) as non-typical of their respective groups (East Asians, Asians broadly, and Latine Americans, respectively)[136–139], leading people to overlook these subgroups when considering the subordinate category[140,141].

The invisibility of individuals in these subcategories is problematic because they experience unique forms of stereotyping and discrimination, which influences how allies should provide support[66,142]. For instance, in the USA, Black women face discrimination when applying for stereotypically feminine positions (for example, librarian), whereas East Asian men experience discrimination when applying

for traditionally masculine jobs (for example, security guard)[143]. East Asian women in the USA might feel the need to downplay their femininity in masculine workplaces, whereas Black women in the USA might worry about acting too aggressively[144]. By recognizing these distinct experiences and forms of discrimination, people acting as allies can ensure that they confront all types of bias (for example, admonishing a colleague who calls a Black woman aggressive) while acknowledging and addressing multiply marginalized individuals' concerns about mistreatment.

Acting as an all-inclusive ally involves considering which identities are most relevant and important to multiply marginalized individuals across situations. Crucially, the identity that feels pertinent to an advantaged observer might differ from the multiply marginalized person's perspective. For example, in the USA, perceivers view Black women through the lens of their gender identity when there is a gender disparity in a given context and gender is particularly salient or front of mind[145]. Consequently, well-meaning advantaged individuals might aim to support Black women by providing gender-related resources. In reality, multiple pieces of evidence indicate that Black women in the USA prefer race-relevant (versus gender-relevant) ally messaging[114,128], and gender-related resources can make Black women feel invisible and unwelcome[128,146].

Social identity complexity theory is a valuable model for discerning which identities are most fundamental and applicable to multiply marginalized individuals. According to this theory there are four distinct patterns of identity structures: intersectional, dominance, compartmentalization and merger. People with an intersectional identity structure view the combination of their identities as most crucial, define the ingroup as those sharing all of their identities, and require allyship that supports their unique blend of identities. People with a dominance identity structure have a primary identity, view their ingroup as those who share the dominant identity and require allyship that helps the primary identity. A compartmentalization identity structure is more flexible, such that the most relevant ingroup and identity are situationally dependent. Thus, for people with a compartmentalization identity structure, which identity requires ally support depends on the context and whether a given identity is threatened (for example, owing to a lack of representation or an instance of bias against that identity). Finally, people with a merger identity structure view all identities as important, perceive anyone with an overlapping identity as an ingroup member, and benefit from allyship that supports any of their identities[147,148].

Historical context and ongoing conflicts probably shape individuals' identity structures. For example, Black women in the USA hold a racial dominant identity structure and benefit from allyship that supports their racial (not gender) ingroup[27,128,149]. This identity structure might reflect the fact that the USA has a long and ongoing history of racism that Black individuals discuss with their children from an early age[10,11,150,151], and the fact that Black women in the USA are stereotyped as masculine, which erases their femininity and their connection to white women[66].

Moreover, a racial dominant identity structure might lead Black women in the USA to trust Black men more than they trust white women[27]. Consequently, white women might need to explicitly state how they support racially marginalized women for Black women to view them as allies[114]. Moreover, white women who focus on their gender oppression as a means of fostering solidarity with Black individuals appear inauthentic, and such behaviour elicits distrust[152]. Thus, sharing a single marginalized ingroup identity is not sufficient to engender trust from other ingroup members who are multiply marginalized. Indeed, social movements have been criticized for their failure to recognize intersectional oppression. For example, feminist movements have been accused of focusing only on the interests of cisgender white women[153–155], and protests against police brutality have been accused of ignoring violence perpetuated towards Black women[156].

Allyship interventions

People might be personally motivated to become better allies yet be unsure how to start this process, and organizations might hope to encourage allyship among their employees to promote more egalitarian workplaces[157,158]. In this section we describe research on interventions that could be applied at the individual education level or organizational training level to spark awareness, authentic motivation, action-orientation and all-inclusivity (Table 2). However, engaging in effective allyship from the perspective of marginalized individuals requires careful consideration of a given group's needs and efforts must be tailored towards that group (Box 2).

Effective allyship necessitates learning about marginalized groups' mistreatment or to encourage awareness. Indeed, many formal diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) workshops aim to promote awareness of bias and ability to detect subtle forms of discrimination[159,160]. These workshops can increase awareness and reduce biases. However, they are also resource-intensive (that is, they require time, money and trained facilitators). Thus, other interventions have used low-cost, engaging movies and videos to enhance awareness through compelling stories that show instances of bias[161–163]. For example, an unpublished preprint that has not undergone peer review found that participants across the many countries who watched a documentary that highlighted research and emotionally evocative stories about gender harassment in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) arenas indicated more awareness of gender bias in STEM and stronger intentions to create more welcoming climates for marginalized groups at their organizations relative to those who had not yet watched the film but had signed up for future screenings[164].

Although recognizing interpersonal biases is crucial for prompting individuals to regulate their prejudice[60,61], inequality is also perpetuated systematically through unfair structures[10]. Ignoring the historical and systemic causes of inequality enables individuals with advantaged identities to rationalize group disparities as the result of individual shortcomings, reinforcing societal meritocratic views[100]. Thus, it is crucial to learn about societal-level bias and the historical context that has perpetuated the oppression of certain groups in addition to individual-level bias[73]. For instance, an intervention that presented stories of Black individuals' oppression across multiple contexts (healthcare, education and housing) to show the systemic nature of racism in the USA increased participants' awareness of systemic bias, motivation to combat personal and societal biases and support of policies helping Black individuals, compared to an intervention that encouraged non-Black participants to reflect on their personal biases[165]. Effective allyship also entails reflecting on how systemic bias privileges one's ingroups[93], and increasing advantaged individuals' awareness of their privilege can spark ally actions[166–168]. Importantly, acknowledging privilege refocuses attention on changing practices and structures that lead to marginalization rather than thinking of ways to 'fix' those harmed by systemic bias[48].

In addition to learning about interpersonal and systemic biases, individuals must recognize how biases can intersect to create unique and harmful experiences for those with multiply marginalized

Table 2 | Studies testing ally interventions

Targeted component	Intervention	Participants	Effect of intervention compared to a control condition (unless otherwise specified)	Effect size	Ref.
Awareness	An 11-minute podcast on the history of racism that specifically discussed how discriminatory policies in the USA created Black ghettos	White women in the USA (n = 387)	Greater awareness of systemic racism	d = 0.27	73
			Greater feelings of having historical knowledge of racism	d = 2.92	
			Greater actual historical knowledge	d = 1.41	
			Stronger beliefs that the government in the USA created Black ghettos through housing policies	d = 1.37	
	Writing reflections about a handout or video on male privilege	College students at a university in the USA (n = 131)	Greater increase in awareness of male privilege in the video condition	d = 0.57	166
			Lower modern sexism scores at time 2 in the video condition	d = 0.71	
			No effects in the handout condition	d = 0.39–0.45	
		College students at a university in the USA (n = 257)	Better awareness of white privilege at time 2 in the video condition	d = 0.57	167
			Stronger feelings of white guilt at time 2 in the video condition	d = 0.21	
			No effect in the handout conditions	d = 0.02-0.15	
	Short (~5 minute) videos of interviews with experts in gender bias or entertaining stories that illustrated the gender bias discussed in the expert interviews	Adults in the USA (n = 583)	Greater awareness of gender in science	d values = 0.24–0.32	163
			Greater knowledge of gender inequity broadly	d values = 0.25–0.38	
			Better ability to recognize subtle bias in new situations after the expert video but not after the story video	Expert: d = 0.26 Story: d = 0.01	
Awareness and action orientation	Short (~5 minute) videos of interviews with experts in gender bias or entertaining stories that illustrated the gender bias discussed in the expert interviews	STEM faculty attending the National Academies Summer Institute in the USA (n = 148)	Greater awareness of gender bias in science immediately after the video	d values = 0.55–1.16	161
			Greater awareness of gender bias one week later	d values = 0.64–1.13	
			Lower modern sexism scores immediately after the videos	d values = 0.45–0.93	
			Lower modern sexism scores one week later	d values = 0.42–0.73	
			Stronger behavioural intentions to support women in the sciences immediately after the expert video and both videos but not after the story video	Story: d = 0.33 Expert: d = 0.58 Both: d = 0.50	
			Stronger behavioural intentions to support women in science one week after the story video only	Story: d = 0.51 Expert: d = 0.36 Both: d = 0.36	
	Watching a documentary that featured stories of women facing gender bias and harassment in STEM	Adults from across the world who had watched (or were planning to watch) the documentary (n = 1,255)	Greater awareness of gender bias	d = 0.53	164
			Stronger intentions to seek out more information about gender bias	d = 0.34	
			Stronger intentions to donate to causes that help women in STEM	d = 0.22	
			Stronger intentions to create a positive climate in their organization	d = 0.38	
			Stronger intentions to enact new policies that would support women (for those in a leadership position)	d = 0.43	
Awareness, action orientation and authentic motivation	Reading about Black individuals' experiences with racism in the USA (societal-level) or being confronted about reliance on stereotypes (personal-level)	Non-Black adults in the USA (n = 485)	Greater recognition of societal-level bias in the societal-level versus personal-level condition	d = 0.20	165
			Greater motivation to combat personal bias in the societal-level versus personal-level condition	d = 0.23	
			Greater motivation to combat societal-level bias in the societal-level versus personal-level condition	d = 0.31	
			Greater support of policies that benefit Black Americans in the societal-level versus personal-level condition	d = 0.28	

Table 2 (continued) | Studies testing ally interventions

Targeted component	Intervention	Participants	Effect of intervention compared to a control condition (unless otherwise specified)	Effect size	Ref.
Authentic motivation	Testimonials explicitly expressing appreciation for gender- and race-based allyship	White men working in the USA (n = 423)	Stronger ally intentions after the intervention	d = 0.17	176
	Reading a story in which a male leader discussed a situation where he saw another male colleague advocate for women, and it helped him to realize that he wanted to be an ally	Men working full-time in the USA (n = 190)	Participants identified more with the male leader	d = 0.35	179
			Identification with the male leader was associated with stronger ally intentions	R^2 = 0.35	
	Reading information about how white individuals have unearned advantages or how marginalized groups are disadvantaged	White adults in the USA (n = 88)	Lower esteem for racial ingroup in the advantaged versus disadvantaged condition	d = 0.47	172
			More support for policies aiming to reduce inequality between white and racially marginalized individuals in the advantaged versus disadvantaged condition when the policies were framed as decreasing white Americans' advantages	d = 0.84	
			No difference in support for policies aiming to reduce inequality between the advantaged and disadvantaged conditions when the policies were framed as helping marginalized individuals	d = 0.20	
Action orientation	Infographic that discussed how being from a low (high) socioeconomic background results in disadvantages (advantages)	Adults in the USA (n = 1,861)	The disadvantaged framing was viewed as more unjust than the advantaged framing	f^2 = 0.011	175
			The disadvantaged framing led to higher collective action intentions than did the advantaged framing	f^2 = 0.007	

STEM, science, technology, engineering and mathematics; d is Cohen's d; R^2 is the coefficient of determination; f^2 is Cohen's f^2.

identities (that is, engage in all-inclusivity)[169]. Conversations about intersectionality encourage beliefs that having one marginalized identity does not preclude individuals from experiencing privilege from another identity[93]. Only focusing on one form of marginalization (for example, gender) in DEI training might lead individuals who only face stigmatization along that single dimension of identity (for example, cisgender heterosexual white women) to focus only on their mistreatment in society and to fail to engage in allyship for others who face stigmatization along multiple dimensions[66,89,170]. For example, reminding white women in the USA of sexism decreased their support for Black and Latine individuals[170]. Moreover, emphasizing mistreatment along a single identity (such as combating gender or racial bias) can downplay the distinct needs of non-prototypical members of marginalized categories, such as Black women in the USA[134].

Critically, learning about systemic biases and one's privilege might also encourage the authentic motivation required for effective allyship. In particular, reckoning with privilege can be an aversive experience[171]. Luckily, working to dismantle systems that afford privilege — such as allyship — is an effective coping mechanism to combat uncomfortable feelings regarding unearned privilege[81,172,173]. For instance, learning about privilege can undermine esteem for the ingroup, but engaging in supportive actions for a marginalized outgroup helps to restore positive feelings about the ingroup[81,172]. Indeed, advantaged individuals care about being moral and accepted during interactions with marginalized individuals[30,174], and engaging in ally behaviours provides one route to fulfilling these needs[125]. Thinking about ways in which marginalized groups are disadvantaged can also be motivating because it increases perceptions that society is unjust and prompts a desire to undo this injustice[175]. Finally, it can be inspiring to learn how marginalized individuals have been helped by allyship. For example, white men working in the USA reported stronger intentions to engage in ally behaviours when they read testimonials from women and people of colour discussing how they have benefited from and appreciated such actions, compared to men who had not read the testimonials[176].

People are more motivated and more likely to be action-oriented when they have evidence that other ingroup members care about confronting bias compared to when they do not. Indeed, people feel compelled to demonstrate allyship when it is framed as normative and in line with the ingroup's values[177,178]. For example, men working in the USA were inspired to act as allies when they learned that male leaders cared about supporting women[179]. Additionally, people were more likely to confront an instance of bias (a high-cost and meaningful ally action) after witnessing another person call out discriminatory behaviour[42,121,177]. Viewing others confront bias is particularly beneficial when it also sparks 'psychological standing', or feelings that speaking up and engaging in allyship is a legitimate behaviour. For instance, non-Black students in the USA who witnessed racially biased behaviour were more likely to confront bias after another person explicitly stated that the racist behaviour was appalling and inappropriate compared to when the other person just noted that the action was racially targeted[121]. It is also imperative for advantaged group members to learn about meaningful ally actions, because uncertainty regarding what steps to take can hinder allyship[180]. More specifically, if people are only made aware of bias without information on how to address the issue they will lack the necessary confidence to help others[180].

Finally, training to promote effective allyship should discuss inadvertently harmful behaviours, such as taking on leadership positions in social movements or emphasizing positive group stereotypes[98,115] (Box 3). Because potentially well-meaning actions to convey allyship can be harmful and can undermine inclusion for marginalized

group members, it is critical that advantaged individuals know what behaviours are helpful and what actions to avoid.

Summary and future directions

Attempts at expressing allyship in response to highly publicized instances of social injustice have been perceived as insincere and ineffective[17–19], leading to the question of what makes a successful ally. In this Review we have answered this question by considering the experiences and viewpoints of marginalized individuals and highlighting four critical and related components of effective allyship: awareness, authentic motivation, action-orientation and all-inclusivity. Allyship can produce multiple positive outcomes for marginalized individuals, including promoting belonging and well-being while addressing harmful biases that threaten feelings of inclusion[27,41,121]. Thus, understanding the antecedents of effective allyship is crucial for fostering welcoming climates in which marginalized individuals are empowered and can thrive.

There are many remaining questions and fruitful future research directions. For instance, we have described interventions that might help to encourage the components of effective allyship. However, a systematic review and meta-analysis of this research is needed to identify the most effective techniques for promoting allyship. For example, such an analysis could focus on which interventions best promote authentic and internally motivated allyship.

Additionally, although research has explored how to broadly encourage ally actions for specific marginalized groups (for example, women and Black individuals)[121,176,179], future research needs to explore how to promote allyship for multiply marginalized individuals. When individuals act as an ally for a large social category (for example, women), it is easiest to consider the needs of those who are singularly marginalized (for example, white women)[66,91,142]. It is therefore unsurprising that most interventions have focused on enhancing allyship along one identity dimension. Future research should explore whether teaching people about the intersecting systems of oppression that render specific subgroups (for example, Black women) invisible prompts individuals to override default processes and to consider the needs of multiply marginalized individuals.

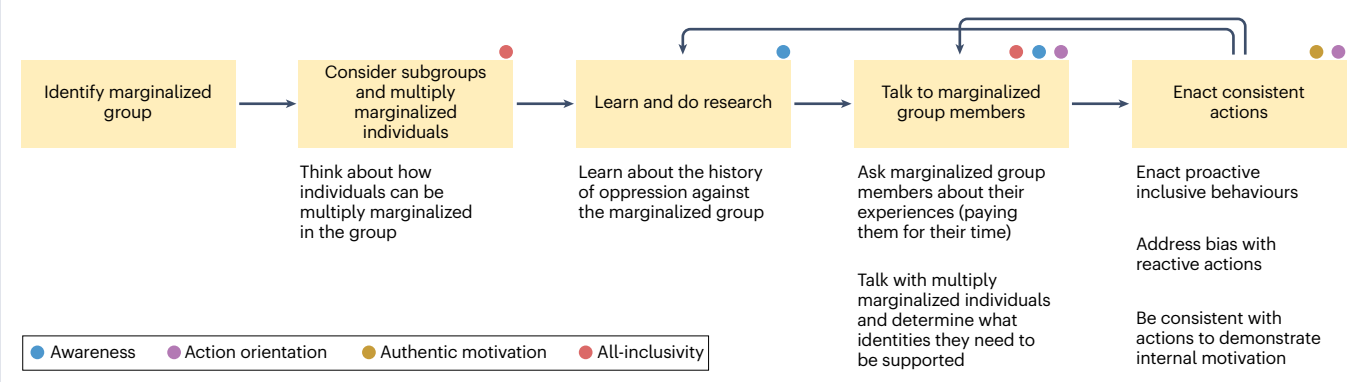
We discussed marginalized individuals' perspectives on allyship in relatively low-conflict and high-conflict situations (for example, women in the workplace and Palestinian people in Israel[31,181], respectively). Crucially, the level of conflict can affect what marginalized groups desire from allies[182]. For instance, marginalized group members indicate more interest in taking part in collective action during times of high (versus low) conflict but less interest in working with advantaged

Box 2 | Applying the allyship framework

Here we outline steps (see Box 2 figure) that researchers and practitioners can take to address the four components of effective allyship in a flexible manner that recognizes the diverse experiences of marginalized groups across contexts.

The first step to effective allyship entails identifying the group one hopes to support (for example, Latine students majoring in physics or individuals with disabilities working in large corporations) and contemplating how individuals could be multiply marginalized within those groups. One should learn about the history of oppression against the group and ask people from the group and subgroups about their experiences (for example, via open-ended response surveys, focus groups and interviews), compensating people for their participation. During these discussions, it is critical to ask what actions would help marginalized individuals to feel supported. Indeed, there are excellent examples from the ally literature in which marginalized individuals identify what they perceive as helpful behaviours and successful allyship[15,82]; this work is a model for future research and practice.

After learning from the marginalized group, advantaged individuals can enact proactive, inclusive behaviours and address any bias or mistreatment with reactive actions. Engaging in consistent and high-cost behaviours will ultimately signal authenticity, and advantaged individuals should ensure that they approach allyship with genuine motivations. Importantly, what a given group needs might change depending on current events, and individuals from advantaged groups must continuously reflect on the best ways to support marginalized individuals. Thus, acting as an effective ally from the perspective of marginalized groups is an ongoing and iterative process and requires constant engagement with ally efforts[44]. Individuals should continue to expand their awareness and knowledge, to make sure they are authentically motivated, to engage in consistent actions and to reflect on whether their actions support everyone within a marginalized group[84].



Box 3 | Harmful ally attempts

Advantaged outgroup members are not always beneficial for social movements[190–192]. Moreover, ally efforts are not always successful, and they can harm marginalized group members when they fail. Examples of failures that might have initially been spurred by good intentions include sharing personal information when attempting to be supportive (for example, outing someone as part of the LGBTQ+ community), suggesting that a marginalized group has good qualities by relying on positive stereotypes about a group, suggesting that an individual is not the typical member of a marginalized group, encouraging a person to not fully express their marginalized identity, and downplaying a marginalized group member's concerns[115,193,194]. Critically, experiencing more of these ineffective attempts at allyship in their workplace is associated with higher anxiety and lower feelings of trust and comfort at work among marginalized individuals[115].

Trying to be an ally for marginalized groups also runs the risk of being paternal or acting as a saviour for these groups[101,102]. For instance, although being an activist in social movements to uplift marginalized groups can be beneficial, marginalized individuals dislike it when advantaged individuals centre themselves in movements and take on key leadership roles[25,98,123]. Marginalized individuals dislike allies who support causes to improve their own personal appearances, power and influence[98]. Additionally, seeking to help marginalized groups because of viewing them as weak, fragile, and in need of support is disempowering and can harm marginalized group members' well-being[102,105,106].

The examples discussed above are ultimately harmful behaviours[115], but even positive and helpful actions can be detrimental when they are not consistent[111,112]. Engaging in consistent allyship actions is crucial for conveying authentic motivation and action orientation. Thus, conveying allyship with certain behaviours but not others can signal dishonesty and undermine trust[195]. A lack of consistency also suggests that advantaged individuals are not motivated by their personal values[21], and viewing supportive behaviours as externally motivated undermines their effectiveness, enhances threat and damages belonging[103,196]. Thus, there are many ways in which even well-meaning ally actions can fall short, undermining any positive benefits and actively hurting the groups these actions are intended to support.

groups in such collective action efforts during times of elevated conflict and harm[183]. Thus, when there is active fighting between groups or high-profile events that highlight past atrocities, marginalized individuals might want advantaged individuals to openly acknowledge the ongoing oppression and either not participate in social movements or take on supportive, low-power roles[98]. Each country has a unique history and ongoing tensions. Thus, where allyship is enacted plays a critical role in how advantaged individuals should support marginalized groups and address past harm[10]. Discussing how these contextual factors (time in history or location) influence what marginalized individuals specifically need from allyship is beyond the scope of this Review but should be explored in future theorizing.

The research highlighted in this Review has primarily focused on the perspective of Black individuals, women and LGBTQ+ people in the USA, because much of the work on the belonging and inclusion benefits of allyship has studied these groups in the USA (whereas there is more research outside the USA examining the impact of allies on social movements, which was not the focus of this Review). Other marginalized identities will require distinct types of ally support. For example, individuals with disabilities desire allies who are not condescending, who recognize their autonomy and who do not enforce acceptance of help (for example, by insisting on helping a person who is blind cross the street when they did not ask for such assistance)[44,184]. Additionally, when considering multiply marginalized individuals, we discussed the experiences of Black women in the USA, who have a racial-dominant identity structure, in part because this social category has been the focus of ally research taking an intersectional perspective[114,149]. However, other individuals with various combinations of identities within and outside the USA will possess different identity structures, requiring different versions of ally support.

Thus, acting as an effective ally from the perspective of marginalized individuals is a complex and dynamic process, which necessitates considering the unique needs of different groups, the experiences of multiply marginalized individuals within those social categories, and the socio-historical context. How advantaged individuals engage with the components of effective allyship highlighted here will differ depending on the specific marginalized social category and for multiply marginalized individuals within that group.

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Competing interests

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