BLACK LIVES MATTER – NOW WHAT?:

ALLYSHIP AND ACTION IN RACIAL JUSTICE MOVEMENTS

by

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ALLYSHIP AND ACTION IN RACIAL JUSTICE MOVEMENTS

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ABSTRACT

Historically, most researchers have studied allyship in the context of identity development and defining the key characteristics and qualities of allyship through the perspective of "self-identified" allies. I study allyship in light of the protests and uprisings after the murder of George Floyd in May 2020. Analyzing opinion editorials, I aimed to understand and analyze the perspectives of Black activists and authors in terms of white allyship to racial justice movements. This study offers information about what behaviors allies should engage in, what practices to avoid, and what solidarity towards racial justice movements may look like moving forward. For further exploration, researchers should incorporate social media analysis into their study.

"I can't breathe." These words, uttered by George Floyd on May 25, 2020, and by many others before him sparked a summer of protests where thousands of people—of all races, backgrounds, and socioeconomic groups—took to the streets to protest racial injustice and police brutality.

Introduction

The year 2020 was a year of tension. With a global pandemic that has claimed thousands of lives and has disproportionately impacted people of color in the United States, an economic recession, and a contentious election, the issue of race and racism in the United States struck a new chord. Data collected by Pew Research shows that in 2016, only 4 out of every 10 Americans expressed support for Black Lives Matter, whereas June 2020 data shows that 60% of Americans expressed support for the movement, attending protests, or looking for ways to be more involved in the movement toward racial justice. Though Black communities have centered issues of justice for years, 2020 demonstrated an increased interest by white individuals in addressing racial justice and equality.

In this study, I examine the role of white allies in social justice movements in a post-George Floyd context. Through a qualitative research approach, I aim to understand the perspectives Black authors have about white allyship and solidarity with racial justice movements. The intention of this study is to understand the role of white allies in social movements for racial justice from the *perspectives* of people of color. In contrast to existing literature that focuses on understanding white allyship from the perspective of self-identified white allies, this study offers insights to how people of color who are engaged in racial justice movements perceive the role of white allies.

In the literature review, I provide an overview of the current literature concerning white allyship in racial justice movements. First, I discuss the definition of the "ally" and how the term can have different meanings in different contexts. Next, I examine the characteristics and qualities that researchers have identified in allies, including demonstrating understanding, awareness, active listening, and commitment to change. Next, I provide information about the action steps and strategies for allies as outlined by the literature. The discussion concludes with an examination of the detractors from allyship, including performativity, which I also identified in my own analysis.

In the methods section, I provide context for the topic which I am studying and its relevance to contemporary research. I discuss data selection for the study as well as methods used during data analysis. I provide justification for the opinion editorials chosen, with a special note on the importance of the inclusion of primarily Black authors. I outline data analysis and the methods I used to code and organize the findings. Finally, I address my position as the researcher and how my race, social status, and other facets of positionality impact my relationship with the research and data.

In the findings section, I synthesize data from the opinion editorials, outlining the three major themes associated with the topic of white allyship in racial justice movements. The major themes I identified include repetition, practices for allies to engage in, and practices for allies to avoid. In addition to an analysis of these themes within the literature, I examine how authors invoke particular emotions as a strategy of tone to discuss the concept of allyship and white individuals. I make special note of the expressions of frustration, exhaustion, as well as an undertone of hope in the editorials.

Finally, in the discussion and conclusion, I consider the implications of the study in the field of sociology and for hopeful allies. I provide suggestions for future avenues for study as well as revisit the literature, noting the contribution of this research to the field.

Literature Review

Defining the Ally

Since the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, researchers have had an increasing interest in the role and position of white individuals who choose to take part in movements toward justice and liberation for people of color. With an increase in research on this topic has come a better, and more complicated, view of what allyship means. Scholars have attempted to define the term, flesh out what it means practically, and determine what and who it includes.

In general, researchers define allyship as a relationship between an individual of a dominant group with an individual who is a member of a minority group. Ostrove and Brown (2018) define allies as "members of dominant groups who build relationships with and take stands against the oppression of members of nondominant groups" (p. 196). In their examination of strategies for white allies, Sue et al. (2019) define white allies as "individuals who belong to dominant social groups and through their support of non-dominant groups, actively work toward the eradication of prejudicial practices they witness in both their personal and professional lives" (p. 132). Many researchers note the importance of abandoning hierarchical relationships and working collaboratively *with*, and not for, people of color. (Ford and Orlandella, 2015)

The definition of an ally may differ depending on specific contexts and social institutions. In a study of "allyship" toward Afro-Diasporic women in the workplace, Erskins and Bilimoria define "allyship" as a

> Continuous, reflexive practice of proactively interrogating Whiteness from an intersectionality framework, leveraging one's position of power and privilege; and courageously interrupting the status quo of predominantly White corporate leadership by engaging in prosocial behaviors that foster growth-in-connection and have both the intention and impact of creating mutuality, solidarity, and support of Afro-Diasporic women's career development and leadership advancement in organizations (p. 319)

This definition demonstrates that being an effective ally in the workplace, particularly to non-White women, means questioning the status quo and engaging in prosocial behaviors to build solidarity, as well as using one's own power and position to support the advancement of Afro-Diasporic women. In the context of an educational institution, a study of how male faculty and administration in engage in ally work toward both women and students of color, Patton and Bondi define allies as "people who work for social justice from positions of dominance" (p. 489). These allies work in partnership with marginalized persons and direct attention to oppressive systems and processes.

Other researchers have observed how the term "ally" can take on different meanings when analyzing or discussing antiracist persons or those working toward racial justice. In their study of activists involved in the Indigenous-led movements, Kluttz, Walker, and Walter (2019) questioned whether "allyship" is really what antiracists should aspire to, noting how allied work could perpetuate colonization and segregation by supporting or upholding systems of domination. Instead, the researchers focused on *decolonizing solidarity*, a term which they defined as "[refocusing] on Indigenous sovereignty and active challenging of epistemicide, settler superiority, capitalism, and the darker sides of modernity." (Kluttz, Walker, and Walter, 2019 p. 55) They note that the problem with the designation of the term "ally" is that it can

create a false "notion of having 'achieved' a status that does not invite continued questioning and constant un-settling." (p. 53) Their statement is in line with Erskins and Bilimoria's (2019) argument that allyship is not a noun but rather a verb which involves active and lifelong practices of unlearning and reevaluating. Ford and Orlandella's (2015) reiterate the practice of unlearning and reevaluation in their research where they note that "being an ally to people of color is an ongoing strategic process in which we look at our personal and social resources, evaluate the environment we have helped to create and decide what needs to be done" (p. 288).

In her work on digital allyship, Clark (2019) defines *White folks work* as "the anti-racist efforts undertaken by White people to combat White Supremacy through education, discourse, and activism" (p. 520) In research on the challenges of becoming an "ally," Sue (2017) uses an analogy of a conveyor belt to describes phases of white racial identity including active racists, unintentional racists, non-racists, and anti-racists, which he defines as those who work against racism and attempt to disrupt it (p. 707).

The research on "ally-ship" and the variety of ways the term is defined shows that there is not one way to define the term or think about the roles of allies. It is a fluid and ever-changing, aspirational goal.

Characteristics/Qualities

While researchers have defined allies in a variety of ways, many share a general consensus regarding the types of qualities that allies possess. While exact terminology used among researchers may differ slightly, the main ideas include understanding of racial injustice, awareness and acknowledgement of racial privilege, active listening and support of BIPOC, and commitment to social change and using privilege to challenge and interrupt racism.

In general, researchers note the importance of aspiring allies' knowledge about topics such as racism, institutional racism, white supremacy, and whiteness. These subjects should be engaged with not only intellectually, but also individuals' everyday lives. Understanding topics like whiteness, which Helms (2017) defines as "overt and subliminal socialization processes and practices, power structures, laws, privileges, and life experiences that favor the White racial group over all others" (p. 718) and how various practices uphold it, brings whiteness into the light which can be part of the process of dismantling it.

The literature also emphasizes the importance of awareness and acknowledgement of one's own racial privilege and positionality as a key characteristic of being an ally. This includes developing an increased awareness of white racial identity, acknowledging the privileges inherent in whiteness, recognizing the invisibility of whiteness, and identifying own racial biases. (Ford and Orlandella, 2015) In his research on the challenges faced on the journey toward antiracist allyship, Sue (2017) notes that two of the most important characteristics of white allies include continual self-reflection of one's own racism and a commitment to use racial privilege to promote equity.

A third important characteristic is the idea of listening and supporting individuals and communities of color. Ostrove and Brown (2018) define allophilia as "explicitly positive feelings toward an outgroup, which is strongly associated with affirmative behaviors toward or on behalf of outgroup members" (p. 196). This relational piece of allyship is important, and Calderon and Wise (2014) confirm this in their code of ethics for white allies where they specifically speak about listening to constructive feedback and being willing and able to alter methods based on the criticism of people of color. Brown and Ostrove (2013) note that the "willingness to offer

support to nondominant people" (p. 2212) is a key distinction between allies and low-prejudice individuals.

Finally, one of the most central characteristics of allies is the willingness and commitment to continually challenge racism and work towards equity and justice. Ostrove and Brown (2018) describe this as *informed action* which they explain as the willingness, based on the knowledge and awareness one has of their own privilege, to engage on behalf of non-dominant group members. Researchers focused on strategies of white allies note that allies surpass individuals who merely refrain from partaking in oppressive behaviors because "they are motivated to take action at the interpersonal and institutional level by actively promoting the rights of the oppressed" (Wing Sue et. Al 2019 p. 132). Allies should commit to continual examination of the structures that perpetuate oppression, how they are complicit in these structures, and what they can actively do to dismantle them (Kluttz, Walker, and Walter, 2019).

Strategies and Action Steps for Allies

Beyond focusing on the specific qualities that allies possess, much of the literature focused on the specific strategies and action steps that allies took or used as praxis. Much of this literature specifically focused on identity development of aspiring allies, including understanding their role and positionality as it pertains to whiteness; other literature focused on specific actionable items that allies do in their work.

Part of the process of allyship is an "internal and painful self-reckoning" (Wing Sue, Alsaidi, Awad, Glaeser, Calle, and Mendez, 2019) which includes: personal understanding of one's own position as a racial and cultural being, acknowledgement of personal biases, confrontation of motives for engaging with anti-racist work, and an understanding of how their lives would be better without oppression. Ford and Orlandella note that white individuals must

develop a sort of "double-consciousness" whereby they acknowledge historical and structural advantages but proceed as a "traitor to white privilege" (p. 290). Case (2018) notes that "by developing skills to interrupt one's own racist thoughts and notice one's subtly racist behaviors, they may move to a deeper analysis of unconscious racism rather than being consumed by the disappointment and guilt that often results from such instances" (p. 93).

However, beyond the internal work that white allies must do, their allyship should extend beyond personal reflection. During the time of the Civil Rights Movement, researchers note that the role of white allies looked differently to what it does today. At that time, white individuals were often the only people available with the legal training, societal connections, information, and money that the movement needed; they provided some hope that there was some "good" white people (Chappell, 1996). In today's context, because of the various advances that society has made in terms of racial equality, allyship might look different and includes a variety of action steps: from every day "microinterventions" (Wing Sue et. al, 2019) and engaging in "prosocial behaviors" (Erskins and Bilimoria, 2019) which confront racism at an institutional level, to building coalitions and solidarity.

In their study of strategies for white allies, researchers defined *microinterventions* as everyday words or actions that communicated to the targets of microaggressions "validations of their experienced reality, value as a person, affirmation of their racial or group identity, support and encouragement, and reassurance that they are not alone." (Wing Sue et. al, p. 134) The specific strategies of this include: making the "invisible visible" (135) by calling awareness to the microaggression; disarming the microaggression by communicating disagreement or disapproval to the perpetrator; educating the offender by facilitating a discussion about why their

action or speech was offensive; and seeking external reinforcement or support which communicates that such action will not be tolerated.

Erskin and Bilimoria outline prosocial behaviors as positive deviance which interrupts the status quo. Specifically, as it pertains to their research on allyship of Afro-Latina women in the workplace, they call awareness to actions such as advocating for proteges or coworkers of color and sharing power; these are "intentional behaviors that depart from the norms of a referent group in honorable ways" (p. 326). Institutionally, individuals should locate "cracks in the walls of whiteness" (Ford and Orlandella, p. 297), such as shifting dominant narratives educationally or in workplace practice, intentionally creating spaces to challenge understandings of race and racism, and encouraging action of allyship for racial justice.

The literature shows that there are an abundance of ways to engage with coalitions and create solidarity for racial justice work. In her research about digital allyship, Clark (2017) asserts that white allyship in social media spaces allowed individuals to develop their own racial consciousness which often results in the decisions to confront, educate, and invite other white individuals to participate in movements for justice; she noted that this allyship must include *signal boosting* which is the idea of amplifying the voices of marginalized individuals (p. 528). In research specifically focusing on the allyship of white women, MacIntyre (2020) notes that it is the responsibility of these individuals to challenge contemporary feminist discourse that is dominated by white women and push for a more intersectional feminism in solidarity with racial justice.

Detractors of Allyship

Much of the research gently touched on the idea of missteps in the realm of "allyship," but a few named this phenomenon explicitly – "performative" allyship. Erskin and Bilimoria

(2017) define this as a phenomenon in which "well-meaning people with power and privilege show interest in becoming an ally but do not engage in the ongoing emotional labor, self-reflection, continuous education, courage, commitment, and exchange of power inherent in true allyship" (p. 329). This part of the literature examined some of the failures in the movement toward allyship and solidarity with people of color.

Crittle (2017) explains the idea of "performative wokeness" as a sort of paradox where white individuals have a desire to be perceived as good and virtuous and so they engage in actions to cleanse themselves of their group's past transgressions. Thus, instead of being seen as a true act of anti-racism, it is seen as a sort of compensatory act. The primary goal is to prove that an individual is a "good person" (Helms, p. 721). Actions in this realm include: preaching or proclaiming superior knowledge, disdaining other whites, and distancing oneself from the guilt of experiencing the benefits of whiteness (p. 724). In this vein, white individuals might vilify other white people's racism to establish their own credibility of a racial ally (Ford and Orlandella, 2015). This "guilty white liberal troupe" (p. 290) can reinforce racial power structures and lead individuals to refrain from engaging personally with their own complicity in whiteness. Research observes that much of this is driven by a need for validation as opposed to genuine concern or engagement with challenging systems.

Another aspect of performative allyship is the phenomenon of centering whereby white individuals make "issues of race or intersectionality about themselves and their feelings." (MacIntyre 1970, p. 45) This is problematic because it reinforces colonial and racist structures which actively harm and oppress BIPOC communities; this reinforcement is doing by prioritizing the white experience and invalidating communities of color. Only one narrative, the

dominant, white story, is being told. This can often be done by phenomena such as an emphasis on harmony or sameness without recognizing the ways that this can inhibit social action.

On May 25, 2020, George Floyd was murdered in Minneapolis. Over the next few months we watched as there appeared to be a sort of reckoning across the United States about race and racism in this country. Society is witnessing a unique moment when many have proclaimed interest and solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement in the face of previous silence. The idea of allyship has been studied in historical contexts as well as through the lens of allies themselves. In contrast, I will be studying what social movement activists, namely BIPOC individuals, define as a good ally – or even whether there is a term for the solidarity shown with racial justice movements.

Methods

Case Study

In the wake of George Floyd's murder on May 25, 2020 came an outpouring of support for the Black Lives Matter movement. Though Black activists had been resisting systems of oppression and disrupting the status quo for years, the summer months of 2020 saw an uptick in interest from so-called "white allies." This phenomenon is what framed this research. The intent of this research is to better understand what makes an effective or "good" white ally to racial justice movements from the perspective of Black and other POC activists.

In light of the sensitive nature of the topic, I decided to analyze opinion pieces written by people of color in the time period of May 25, 2020 to September 30, 2020 about allyship and solidarity by white individuals to the Black Lives Matter movement. I chose this time frame because this time period directly followed the death of George Floyd and includes the ongoing protests, which I believed would provide insight about allyship that are particular to this moment

of social movement activism and racism. This was a decision made for ethical purposes so as not to burden Black or other people of color with the task of educating an audience and expending unnecessary emotional labor.

Data Collection

For data collection, using Alliance for Audited Media's list of the top ten reliable media sources I looked at websites including *The New York Times, The Washington Post,* and *LA Times.* I used this list of sources to examine media that reached large audiences. For each website, I located the search bar and did a preliminary search using the term "white allies." Before doing any more investigation, I looked at the top articles listed to see if any pieces were opinion articles related to identifying the important features of allies in race-based social movements.

The search functions of the various websites varied considerably; some websites allowed more advanced searches that constrained results to a particular time frame while others required more extensive searches. To locate a range of articles across site with different functionality, I extended search terms beyond "white allies" to include terms such as "ally," "Black activists," "Black Lives Matter," and "White people." Op-eds largely appeared on pages categorized as "Opinion" or "Perspective."

In addition to the news sources from the top 10 list, I also sought opinion pieces from Black-owned media sources such as *The Root* and *The Grio* utilizing similar search terms. I chose to look at these media sites in addition to those with top circulation, because in seeking information about the perception of allyship by Black individuals, I felt it important to utilize Black-owned media sources whose primary readership are non-white individuals. In total, I analyzed 11 articles written by authors from a variety of news sources. All authors are people of

color, which I felt was important given that the existing literature often focused on self-identified white allies more than the perspectives of people of color.

See Table 1 for details regarding the data analyzed in this study.

Table 1. Data Sources

Title	**Author**	**Source**	**Date of article**
When Black People are in Pain, White People Just Join Book Clubs	Tre Johnson	*The Washington Post*	June 11, 2020
Portland's Protests were Supposed to be about Black Lives. Now, they're White Spectacle.	E.D. Mondainé	*The Washington Post*	July 23, 2020
Black Activists Wonder: Is Protesting Just Trendy for White People?	Nikita Stewart	*New York Times*	June 26, 2020
White People have Gentrified Black Lives Matter. It's a Problem.	Erin B. Logan	*Los Angeles Times*	September 4, 2020
Mass Unrest Complicates a Crisis; The Do's and Don'ts of Being a Good White Ally	Erika D. Smith	*Los Angeles Times*	June 5, 2020
To my White Friends and Colleagues: How to be an Ally to the Black Community	Adrienne B. Pitts	*Chicago Tribune*	June 5, 2020
An Open Letter to my White 'Friends' who Remain Silent	Blue Telusma	*The Grio*	May 27, 2020

10 Ways Good White People Can Help Black America (If 'Good White People' Exist)	Michael Harriot	*The Root*	July 29, 2020
Portland Shows that White Allies can Play a Vital Role in Social Justice Movements	David A. Love	*The Washington Post*	August 5, 2020
OK, We've Finally agreed that Black Lives Matter. Now What?	Sandy Banks	*Los Angeles Times*	July 2, 2020
Well-meaning White People asking for Black Help to End Racism is a Trap	David J. Johns	*The Grio*	June 3, 2020

Data Analysis

I approached the analysis of data from a grounded theory perspective, which privileges an inductive approach to the data that emphasizes the importance of observing themes as they emerge rather than identifying and locating pre-determined themes. Accordingly, I did a preliminary read of each of the articles, taking notes and highlighting common terms and language. This initial read allowed me to gain an overall perspective of the major ideas and topics that presented themselves across the sources.

After the initial read, I engaged in selective coding and identifying key themes and categories for coding. I primarily focused on highlighting the themes that appeared most frequently in the preliminary review of the articles, as well as making sure to note how the author framed the issues they addressed. From here, I completed the same process with each of the articles, coding themes and creating new codes as new themes arose.

After coding each of the articles, I created a master coding document where I identified each of the dominant themes that presented themselves throughout the research and made note of the instances in which they occurred throughout the data. From here, I reorganized the codes into larger themes and smaller sub-categories. The data I present represents the primary three themes that I identified across the data.

Positionality

As a college student, my study of Sociology and Comparative Race and Ethnic Studies has enhanced my understanding of the histories of race and racism which has provided me with a more sophisticated understanding of social movements. In addition, throughout high school and college I have been involved with antiracist efforts and organizations, such as the TCU Justice Coalition and the ACLU of Utah.

However, I recognize my positionality as a white woman. I am part of a demographic which often embraces racism and white supremacy over liberation. As such, I inadvertently participate in systems of whiteness and benefit from White supremacy. As a white person, I also lack the perspectives of a person of color, particularly as they pertain to the issue of allyship. I exist as someone who attempts to disrupt and work against systems that disproportionately harm others, while I simultaneously benefit and participate in these systems as well.

Findings

Throughout the opinion editorials, there was a clear sentiment among the authors: there is no clear cut answer to the question of how to be an ally. The work of being a white ally has far less to do with specific actions or specific tasks that one must complete and has far more to do with simply taking action and rejecting apathy. The authors, who came from a range of backgrounds and media sites, indicated that the responsibility for this action lies in the hands of

white individuals and that white people must recognize their own participation in systems of oppression and figure out how they can best disrupt these systems on an everyday basis.

A key pattern that emerged throughout the editorials was the idea of repetition and the emotional implications that it carries, specifically, the repetition of injustice, of disappointment, and of the failure of white people to do better. Authors mentioned that it oftentimes felt like they, as Black people, were living in a time loop. In his article, "*When Black People are in Pain, White People Just Join Book Clubs*," Tre Johnson writes about the different instances throughout his life when he has felt the pain and fright of being a Black man in America. He emphasizes how each instance brings him back to all the times in the past that he has felt that emotion. In addition, he connects this feeling of being stuck in a loop with the reactions and responses of white people. There is a feeling of disappointment and dismay that comes with the recognition that no matter how many times the pattern repeats, white people still have not managed emerge from this rut.

> I am at a beer garden in Fishtown when the Trayvon Martin murder case reaches its conclusion. I am home in bed, curled like a question mark, crying over the news that Philando Castile has just been shot in front of his partner and their child. Freddie Gray is dead and I am standing in the district office of the Camden City School District, mourning with black co-workers. And I am all these things at once again when I watch my white colleagues, friends, acquaintances and long-ago classmates reopen this time loop. Still learning how to be allies yet never making amends to us. (Johnson 2020)

He goes on to speak about the slow progress of activism, how the patterns of signaling and performing block real progress. While Black Americans are forced to emotionally deal with

the impacts of race and racism each time a tragedy occurs, White people are allowed to "cop out" by saying that they are still learning or do their quick actions to prove they aren't racist and can then go back to "normal life." This pattern, all authors referenced, goes on and on.

In his Op-Ed, "Portland's protests were supposed to be about black lives. Now, they're white spectacle," E.D. Mondainé speaks to the historical origins and implications of current racial justice movements and how what Americans are seeing now is nothing new. There is a pattern and a long-standing history of repetition of oppression over time. Referencing the origins of slavery and tracing it to contemporary racial justice issues, he addresses that the crimes of America have finally caught up with them but that they are nothing new. Similarly, in his piece, "*10 Ways Good White People Can Help Black America (If 'Good White People' Exist),"* Michael Harriot addresses that it seems lost on people that this movement is not new, saying, "You should be aware that Michael Brown wasn't the first unarmed Black person killed by a police officer and George Floyd won't be the last… We been doing this shit" (Harriot 2020).

This element of tradition and history repeats itself throughout many of the articles. In her piece, "*White people have gentrified Black Lives Matter. It's a problem*," Erin Logan references the fact that the issue of racism in America cannot get lost in one presidency or time period. The struggle will persist. Blue Telusma confirms this, saying "This keeps happening." In the column, "*OK, we've finally agreed that Black lives matter. Now what?,"* Sandy Banks notes that in addition to the struggle for racial justice being imbedded in the history of Black America, movements for justice have often been ignored by white people, stating that this sharp contrast can be disorienting.

> Now suddenly there are huge multiracial crowds standing with us, protesting the death of an ordinary Black man dragged into martyrdom by the weight of a

> policeman's knee on his neck. It's as if the world has suddenly snapped into focus for people who'd been blinded by privilege to Black people's daily realities. (Telusma 2020)

The repetition that exists historically and contemporarily can be exhausting for Black people. The authors reference the combination of frustration and exhaustion that exists as a result of hundreds of years of feeling stuck in a racial "ouroboros," (Johnson 2020) or never-ending cycle. Authors address a variety of feelings that Black people may experience as they watch white friends and acquaintances go through the same "motions" after each travesty occurs without necessarily doing much to make change. Erin Logan speaks about the frustration at the way that the Black Lives Matter movement has become something "chic." Institutions and organizations that previously left racial issues untouched are now marketing and incorporating it into their branding. Activists are frustrated that it took a global pandemic and "another death at the hands of the police to push white people to publicly embrace the movement." (Stewart 2020)

Adrienne Pitts speaks about the exhaustion of the "endless struggle to confront race (Pitts 2020). Similarly, in her piece, "*An open letter to my white 'friends' who remain silent*" Telusma speaks about the depletion she feels at a deep, almost cellular level. The feelings of sadness, exhaustion, and frustration go hand-in-hand. Coupled with these emotions is the doubt that follows. A clear theme throughout the opinion pieces is skepticism at white people's ability and desire to make substantial change. Authors point out the repetition and history of contemporary events, noting the number of times that white people could have chosen to participate previously but didn't. The question is: What's different now? And even more so, as Stewart asks in her piece, *"Black Activists Wonder- Is Protesting Just Trendy for White People?"* Will the commitment of white people endure? Activists worry that the movement for racial justice could

become a trend or that the levels of solidarity will fade. According to Harriot, the skepticism that Black people feel toward white people is not malicious in nature, but an act of survival and protection.

> "Think of it this way: Imagine if you were fighting a war and someone showed up at your bunker wearing the same uniform as the people who were shooting at your head. Would you trust them? There is no way we can ever know if most white people are racist but we know that most racists are white" (Harriot 2020).

It is hard to feel optimistic when there is the weight of history upon you. Though there seems to have been a notable shift in increase in White interest and support for the Black Lives Matter movement, this change cannot undo years of history nor the harm that many White people have perpetuated over time. Patterns breed distrust and skepticism.

However, despite the skepticism that some Black Americans feel due to the influx of interest in racial justice movements, patterns emerged in the data about what authors and activists see as the most crucial elements of allyship. The findings can be summarized in two ways: the actions in which allies should engage versus the behaviors that allies should avoid.

Practices for Allies to Engage In

Across the research, there were three primary themes that consistently came up in terms of practices in which allies should engage: taking action, reflection, and standing in solidarity.

Taking action. The primary piece of advice that all of the authors posed to their audience was that regardless of exactly how they may choose to engage, the most important thing of all is to do something and to take action in some way shape or form, whether that be "boardrooms, in schools, in city councils, in the halls of justice, [or] in the smoky backrooms of a duplicitous government" (Mondainé 2020). While it may feel cathartic for white individuals to participate in

protests, the majority of the work that must take place occurs in other spaces. Logan (2020) notes that “Most of what needs to change happens in a civic setting often void of TV cameras. It’s going to take drastic changes in policy and laws.”

On the interpersonal level, authors give the readers a number of suggestions of ways to engage and disrupt cycles of oppression. These include: challenging family members who supported Donald Trump, engaging in the political process outside of voting for president, shopping at and supporting Black-owned businesses, educating kids, and speaking up any time something racist occurs. It also involves considering one’s social circle and the people who one interacts and surrounds themselves with. It includes countering racist opinions and calling people out when they engage in problematic or racist speech or behavior. In her piece, Ericka Smith (2020) notes, “In short, do the work --every day, not just when a black man dies and there's a protest --of dismantling a system that, for too long, has benefited too few Americans” (Smith 2020).

Reflection. In addition to actually doing the work to establish justice, the authors emphasized the importance of reflection in the journey toward ally ship. This awareness includes recognizing involuntary (and voluntary) participation in systems of white supremacy, admission of privilege, and reflection on the way that one may have caused harm in their own lives. Author Michael Harriot emphasizes the importance of grappling with the realities of white supremacy and that white people are inadvertently implicated in systems of privilege and whiteness. By nature, white people are not required to sit in discomfort and critically engage with the ugly realities of racism. Effective solidarity requires that white individuals take the time to reflect upon these systems and abandon the comfort that they are accustomed to when it comes to issues of race in America. This includes confronting one’s own personal biases and they ways that an

individual may have personally caused or contributed to harm in the lives of BIPOC individuals or communities.

> "Comforting as it may be to read and discuss the big questions about race and justice and America, making up for past wrongs means starting with the fact that you've done wrong in the past, perhaps without realizing it at the time: in the old workplace, neighborhood, classroom, softball field. Maybe even the book club." (Johnson 2020)

Solidarity. Solidarity, in sociology, refers to unity and interdependence within and across communities. The literature referenced solidarity as an act of coalition building and disruption. The authors of the opinion-editorials define the act of solidarity much the same. The authors posit that solidarity doesn't require acts of grandeur or brilliance. Solidarity exists in the way that white people stand with and for non-white communities in everyday actions and interactions, whether that be devoting time, energy, or resources, making collective political decisions to halt oppressive policies, or using tax dollars to influence decisions.

Beyond interpersonal activism, solidarity involves disrupting whiteness and "dismantling the systems built by white supremacy" (Johns 2020) in a variety of ways. At protests, this might include amplifying the visibility and voices of Black activists by ensuring that as a white person one does not take up space or attention dedicated for people of color or using the privilege of a white body to protect Black protesters from abuse. In the corporate world it includes asking critical questions about leadership and potentially even giving up one's own positions in order to put more people of color in power. Disruption means building a movement and giving time, resources, and energy required to help sustain a "revolution" (Banks 2020) Disrupting the status quo, whether by rejecting privilege, calling attention to oppression, or making structural changes

in favor of liberation is solidarity and solidarity is action. It involves abandoning privilege and doing whatever is possible to turn belief into action and give what one can offer, "showing" over "telling."

Behaviors to avoid

Throughout the articles there was also an apparent theme of behaviors and practices for promising allies to avoid. This list includes performativity, centering, expecting emotional labor, as well as apathy and inaction.

Performativity. As referenced in the literature section, "performative allyship" refers to a practice of showing interest in some way in being an ally but not engaging in the critical and necessary steps required for true allyship. It often has more to do with a desire to be perceived a certain way – as "good," "moral," or "ethical" – and sometimes less to do with the actual act of allyship itself. Activists mention how they feel as though the protests after George Floyd's death initially seemed intentional but later seemed to become more performative.

Authors referenced one of the primary ways that this performativity manifested itself, stating how social media "has become the marketplace for these kind of performances." (Logan 2020) Social networks have become a place for white people to share "preordained 'amplifying' social media post that just reads 'This,' followed by a link to something profound from a black voice," (Johnson 2020) without requiring any "real" engagement or activism; it is a space where people can "perform" activism without actually changing anything. Performativity also exists in the way that white people interact with one another, joining book clubs or circling up with other white people to talk about black pain. It presents itself in the way that white people talk about race, seemingly having to explain how their friendships, dating life, or adopted children make them a better ally. These qualifiers are an attempt to justify and prove that they are, in fact, an

"good" ally. Author Michael Harriot asserts, "If you are truly about that anti-racist life, there's no need to tell anyone that you are anti-racist. Just show it" (Harriot 2020). Showing it does not refer to publicly expressing how "anti-racist" one is; it means living an anti-racist life in one's everyday actions by disrupting systems of oppression, challenging problematic behavior or statements, and standing in solidarity with people of color. It has less to do with optics and more to do with everyday action.

Performative antics also exist in a corporate context. For instance, in a post-George Floyd context, many companies, colleges, and media sources have adopted the idea of "justice." While authors mention that they appreciate some of the changes being made or stances taken, there is far more to anti-racist work than making surface-level changes. Beyond superficial change, anti-racist work requires that these companies take a look at things like hiring practices, pay discrepancies, and how they can make change at a systemic level to alleviate historic oppression to marginalized communities.

Centering. The practice of centering occurs when white individuals focus on themselves in conversations of equity and justice. This practice can occur in a variety of ways including prioritizing white feelings, speaking for or instead of people of color, distracting from the movement, or choosing one's own comfort or safety over the liberation of others.

When it comes to times of unrest, author David Johns emphasizes that Black people must devote whatever emotional resources they have to survival, saying, "Black people are not obligated to understand and/or prioritize white people's needs and feelings" (Johns 2020). Authors emphasize that this is not the time for white people to talk about how sad injustice makes them or how they feel guilt; this diminishes from the legitimate and long-standing emotions and feelings of oppressed communities. In addition to that, occasionally white people

will engage in tone-policing, criticizing activists and leaders for how they speak about the white community.

Another aspect of performativity is to take center stage and co-opt justice movements by speaking over Black and Brown people or distracting from the movement and drawing attention towards oneself instead of the activists and leaders. Author Michael Harriot notes that in times like this, white people have the opportunity to take a step back and listen to other voices. In addition, there is the problem that white involvement in racial justice movements can distract from the cause at hand, such as in Portland where the actions of protesters such as "naked Athena" drew more media attention to a singular white woman than it did to the actual Black Lives Matter cause. The problem with this, author Mondainé says, is that these actions are misleading and take attention away from the Black activists who are leading these movements toward justice.

When white people chose comfort and safety over justice and liberation, this is another act of centering. The effort associated with justice movements requires that white people leave their comfort zones, which author David Johns believes many are not ready to do. This is another practice whereby white people put their own feelings first instead of disrupting the status quo and abandoning privilege in favor of liberation. When white individuals stay in their comfort zones, joining book clubs or hosting discussions among white peers, they are able to keep the topic of racism abstract and stay removed from its hard realities. And when names leave the news cycle or protests stop disrupting their daily lives, they can slink back into complacency. Authors have noticed this pattern occurring over time, where there is a cycle of interest that eventually devolves into silence.

> "Because I've been here before, I know what happens next. In a handful of Sundays, my social media feeds will no longer have my white allies "This"-ing, or unpacking their whiteness or privilege, or nudging their kids to put down their tablets and march. Their book clubs will do what all book clubs do: devolve into routine reschedulings and cancellations; turn into collective apologies for not doing the reading or meta-conversations about what everyone should pretend to read next; finally become occasional opportunities to catch up over wine. It is hard and harmful to know that all of this keeps them in a comfortable place, even if doing just a little feels like a reach when the Race Alarms are sounded" (Johnson 2020).

Expecting emotional labor. Emotional labor was a term coined by the sociologist Arlie Hochschild in 1983; she defined emotional labor as the work of managing one's own emotions that was required by certain professions (Beck 2018). Emotional labor, in the context of racial justice movements, refers to the expectation, on the part of white people, that Black and other people of color help white people understand racism and can answer any and all questions. While it does not fit into Hochschild's original definition specifying emotional labor as something people experienced on the job, the practice of having to explain racism or race in any context requires managing emotions almost constantly. Authors note this as a problematic action because it exists as another form of violence that perpetuates white dominance. The request "normalizes the disturbing practice of white people running to Black people to teach them how to do the work that they should do, and must do, for themselves" (Johns 2020).

In the wake of George Floyd's death, authors like Smith noted that they received countless messages from strangers asking what they could do; this expectation of free labor and emotional engagement crosses a line because by requesting free labor from complete strangers it can reinforce racial hierarchies. In her piece, "Mass Unrest Complicates a crisis; the do's and don'ts of being a good white ally," Ericka smith notes that the belief that Black people are willing and ready to teach is insulting. These requests have put additional pressure on already stressed and overwhelmed Black Americans.

> "It has gotten to the point that someone has actually developed and distributed a list of canned responses for black people to answer questions from suddenly curious white people. For the culture, I cannot divulge more" (Smith 2020).

Inaction and apathy. Finally, authors make it clear that the worst thing that a white person can do in times of civil rest is to choose apathy and inaction, to choose the comfort of silence and privilege over solidarity and hard work. Author Michael Harriot explained how influential leaders in history have recognized and drawn attention to the harm of inaction, saying "Martin Luther King Jr. wrote that an entire generation of 'white moderates' will one day repent 'not merely for the hateful words and actions of bad people but for the appalling silence of good people'" (Harriot 2020).

Being "good" and an ally requires that one take action and step out of their places of privilege. Solidarity requires standing alongside oppressed groups and getting in the trenches. Inaction and apathy, merely saying one "cares" without putting in any of the work to make change, is harmful. Authors make it clear that to be an ally is less about what one should do and more than one just should do something at all, not sit back and watch as the world passes by.

Hope

Despite the frustration, sadness, and disappointment, throughout the op-eds, there was an thread of hope mixed in with the skepticism. Authors mention that though skeptical, they have hope that there are some "good white people." Throughout history, leaders like Frederick Douglas, Martin Luther King Jr, Fred Hampton, and more have pushed forward with the belief that they could "show the pervasive evil of racism to potentially good white people." (Harriot 2020) The hope that there are good white people and that change can happen exists simultaneously with the frustration and exhaustion of working to overcome systems of whiteness, with Michael Harriot noting the history of fighting for justice is "nothing more than a desperate, faithful search for good white people… If there are no good white people, the only solution is to burn this motherfucker to the ground" (Harriot 2020).

Conclusion

"Good" white people, according to authors, are white people who actively engage in practices and behaviors in line with anti-racist work, those who stand in solidarity with communities and do not allow anything to get in the way of engaging in the necessary work required to overturn systems of oppression. These people are those who do whatever they can to assist racial justice movements and the cause for racial equity. They are reflective, think critically, and engage in practices of solidarity every day.

The literature appeared to indicate that white allyship was primarily, among other things, about taking action – standing against racism and white supremacy. My research found that among the authors, the consensus was much the same. The conception of an ally had less to do with specific actions that were required of an ally and more to do with the simple fact of using one's privilege and power to stand with people of color and fight against oppression. However,

while the literature referred to allyship as a life-long process, the opinion editorials indicated urgency. The authors recognized the fact that "ally" isn't a badge to be earned, but were less lenient with time, indicating that there was a pressing need to engage in the behaviors of an ally now. This can likely be attributed to the circumstantial nature of the past year and the way that heightened awareness of racial injustice and systemic inequity has made the need for changing more pressing than the authors of the literature may have felt it to be.

The literature indicated that there were four key characteristics that allies possess: understanding, awareness, support, and commitment. The qualities of allies, according to the data I found, were much for action based. While emphasizing the need for reflection and interpersonal understanding, the emphasis was on taking stands against injustice and standing in solidarity with communities of color. The data was less focused on identity development, and more on what actions the ally could take to support communities of color. This likely had to do with the fact that the voice of people of color was centered in the data as opposed to the literature which was more focused on the experiences of the white allies themselves.

A large theme of the research had to do with what practices hopeful allies should avoid including performativity, centering, emotional labor, and apathy. While the research relating emotional labor to the context of the past few months was lacking, there was a lot of overlap in terms of the topics of performativity and centering. The literature defined "performativity" well whereas the research demonstrated examples and what it may look like in the context of racial justice movements. Both the literature and the research highlighted the inherent self-serving nature of performativity and centering and how it allows white "allies" to draw attention away from the issues at hand by focusing attention on themselves, referencing how this is often driven by a need for validation, not a need to actually challenge systems.

In general, the research was more quick to call out and call attention to the apathy and inaction of white people than the literature was, which tended to be more forgiving. While the literature generally had a heavier overtone of hope and positivity, there was only a slight undercurrent in the research.

In terms of further research, I believe the logical next step would be to analyze social media platforms to gain a greater sense of the perception of white allyship to racial justice movements by Black and other people of color activists and individuals. Using only opinion editorials limits the ability to gain a deep and broad understanding of the perspectives, as only certain individuals are permitted to write editorials for various news sources. In addition to this, there are certain restrictions on authors when they write for journals or news media sites, which means that the writing may not be as unfiltered as possible. Overall, the limited scope of the information found through these sources means that there is a vast majority of voices who have not been heard from.

Social media would be a beneficial place to find this information, as there are very few restrictions and barriers to individuals sharing information on social media. The barriers of education or power are removed, and people can share their opinions and thoughts freely. By doing a mass analysis of social media, using hashtags or following threads, future researchers would be able to get a more comprehensive understanding of the topic and would have fewer limitations upon the study.

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