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Actors against Ableism? Qualities of Nondisabled Allies from the Perspective of People with Physical Disabilities

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We report the results of an interview-based study of the qualities that people with physical and sensory disabilities use to describe effective nondisabled allies. Participants (n = 16) were asked to describe a nondisabled person in their life who understood and cared about the concerns of people with disabilities. A thematic analysis of their responses suggested that they appreciated nondisabled people who offered appropriate help, were trustworthy in their understanding of disability identity, made personal connections, advocated and acted against ableism, were willing to learn, and communicated effectively. Consistent with research about White allies to people of color, participants emphasized both political and social dimensions of being an ally.

Psychological research on efforts to oppose discrimination or dismantle systems of oppression has, among other foci, attended to the behaviors and qualities of activists (e.g., Curtin & McGarty, 2016; Duncan & Stewart, 2007) and allies (e.g., Brown, 2015). Allies are typically described as members of dominant groups who are committed to and work on behalf of the liberation of a nondominant group (e.g., Case, 2012; Droogendyk, Wright, Lubensky, & Louis, 2016; Fingerhut, 2011;

Selvanathan, Techakesari, Tropp, & Barlow, 2017). The current article examines the qualities of allies in the domain of disability through an examination of disabled individuals' descriptions of nondisabled people whom they consider "allies."

Studying Allies and Allyship

It is important to acknowledge at the outset that among social justice organizers both within and beyond the academy, "ally" is a contested concept. Some emphasize that "ally" must be understood as a verb, rather than a noun; being an ally is an ongoing process grounded in critical self-reflection and engaged action, not a label or an identity (especially not one that one can confer on oneself; see, e.g., http://www.peernetbc.com/what-is-allyship). Others offer cogent critiques of the term itself, arguing that true liberation will only come when dominant group members are willing to "weaponize their privilege" as accomplices—not "allies"—in the struggle (http://www.indigenousaction.org/Accomplices-Not-Allies, 2014, p. 6).

Additional support for conceptualizing "ally" as a verb comes from psychological research on allyship, most of which has examined heterosexual allies to LGBTQ people (e.g., Asta & Vacha-Haase, 2013; Brooks & Edwards, 2009; Conley, Devine, Rabow, & Evett, 2002; Fingerhut, 2011; Goldstein & Davis, 2010; Grzanka, Adler, & Blazer, 2015; Montgomery & Stewart, 2012) and White allies to people of color (e.g., Alimo, 2012; Brown, 2015; Brown & Ostrove, 2013; Case, 2012; Kivel, 2002; Kordesh, Spanierman, & Neville, 2013; Selvanathan et al., 2017). In one study, for example, people of color's descriptions of the qualities of their specific White allies fell into two broad categories: affirmation (focused on demonstrating interpersonal qualities such as respect, caring, and connection) and informed action (focused on acknowledging identity-based differences and taking action to address discrimination; Brown & Ostrove, 2013). Similarly, Droogendyk, Louis, and Wright (2016) demonstrated the benefits of "supportive contact:" "friendly cross-group contact in which the advantaged group member demonstrates personal engagement in opposing inequality and/or supporting social change" (p. 318). Allies, then, tend to act respectful and caring, and must be willing not only to critically examine their own privileged identity/identities but also, as "ally activists" (Curtin, Kende, & Kende, 2016), to affiliate with and take action on behalf of the liberation of nondominant groups (see e.g., Broido, 2000; Goodman, 2001; Mio, Barker, & Tumambing, 2009; Reason, Millar, & Scales, 2005; Selvanathan et al., 2017; Washington & Evans, 1991).

Importantly, cross-group alliances are based in relations of power; as Curtin et al. (2016) noted, "the collective disadvantages of the [non-dominant] out-group [exist] possibly as the result of the [dominant] in-group's privileges" (p. 267). Being an ally, therefore, requires that dominant group members recognize the oppression faced by groups with whom they are in alliance (Roades & Mio, 2000);

understand and oppose their own group's role in creating and sustaining that oppression; and work toward dismantling the systems that support and maintain hierarchy, power imbalances, and unequal distribution of resources. Although we use the word "ally" as both a noun and a verb in this article, we emphasize throughout that allies must be actively engaged in a never-ending personal, interpersonal, and political process.

Allies in the Domain of Disability: Attending to Ableism

Disability is a burgeoning domain in which to study allies (see, e.g., Evans, Assadi, & Herriott, 2005; Ostrove & Crawford, 2006; Ostrove, Cole, & Oliva, 2009; Ostrove, Oliva, & Katowitz, 2009). Evans et al. (2005) suggested that "the pervasive societal view of disability as an innate medical condition rather than a creation of societal oppression *precludes an understanding that individuals with disabilities would benefit from or need [social justice] allies*" (p. 68, emphasis added). Indeed, the medical model of disability has dominated most of psychology's focus on disability (see, e.g., Olkin & Pledger, 2003), although a more social perspective on disability has characterized important recent work in the areas of intergroup relations, stereotypes, and social identity (see, e.g., Bogart, 2014; Dirth & Branscombe, 2018; Nario-Redmond, Noel, & Fern, 2013; Silverman & Cohen, 2014; Wang, Silverman, Gwinn, & Dovidio, 2015). This social perspective emphasizes that disability, like race or gender, is socially constructed (see, e.g., Wendell, 1996), is grounded in relations of domination and subordination, and must be understood in the context of ableism, or "stereotyping, prejudice, discrimination, and social oppression toward people with disabilities" (see Bogart & Dunn, 2019). The social perspective, with its emphasis on understanding and eliminating oppression as a key force in shaping the lives and experiences of people with disabilities, opens a potential space for nondisabled allies who act against ableism.

Ableism has motivated long-standing physical and psychological segregation of people with disabilities in the United States, making disability a particularly important domain in which to study cross-group alliances (see Ostrove & Crawford, 2006). Many people with disabilities have been systematically isolated from the rest of society (e.g., Davis, 1997); the rate of institutionalization of people with many different kinds of disabilities has, historically, been extremely high (Braddock & Parish, 2001). Segregation is also enforced by the "there but for the grace of God go I" quality of the reaction of many nondisabled people to the presence of people with apparent disabilities: disabled people often serve as unwitting catalysts in forcing nondisabled people to examine their own vulnerability, fragility, and mortality (e.g., Davis, 2002). This physical and psychological segregation both results from and perpetuates ableism, which can take the form of cultural stereotypes of disabled people as dependent, incompetent, and asexual

(Nario-Redmond, 2010), persistent negative explicit and implicit attitudes toward people with disabilities (e.g., Cahill & Eggleston, 1994; Fox & Giles, 1996; Makas, 1988; Pruett & Chan, 2006; Rohmer & Louvet, 2018), and discrimination against disabled people in education, employment, housing, healthcare, and many other domains (Bogart & Dunn, 2019).

Recognizing ableism—knowing and despising it when you see it (Gill, 2001)—is a key component of allyship in the domain of disability. Nondisabled allies also make an effort to "learn who their disabled associates are in their full glory and full ordinariness . . . [they] are the ones who 'get it'" (Gill, 2001, p. 368). Gill's emphasis on both the structural/political and interpersonal dimensions of being a nondisabled ally suggests that there are important parallels between the work reviewed earlier on allies in the domain of race and those we examine here in the domain of disability (nor, it is critical to note, are these mutually exclusive categories of social identity).

Using the existing literature on attitudes toward people with disabilities and extrapolating from literature about allies to members of other marginalized groups, Evans et al. (2005) suggested the following strategies for encouraging disability ally development: develop positive attitudes toward individuals as a necessary but not sufficient first step; increase one's awareness of disability issues and connection to specific people with disabilities; become more educated and seek out accurate information; develop specific skills that include ways to counter oppression and strategies to dismantle structural and attitudinal barriers; and support the leadership of people with disabilities. More recently, Forber-Pratt, Mueller, and Andrews (2019) proposed that nondisabled individuals could demonstrate allyship by "showing up" in a number of specific ways, including by: understanding intersectionality; asking and respecting language and terminology choices; embracing principles of universal design; acting as an ally (for example by making changes related to accessibility, or asking questions about policy); recognizing problematic representations of disability in the media that reinforce pity, objectification, and an emphasis on "overcoming" disability; being aware of current disability rights issues facing the community; checking internal ableist biases; and honoring the experiences and perspectives of *all* disabled people (across, and regardless of, the type of disability/impairment).

Evans et al. (2005) conducted a phenomenological study of the out-of-classroom experiences of students with both physical and psychological disabilities in which the students were asked to identify ways in which students without disabilities could be supportive. Their participants wanted nondisabled students to (1) be encouraging and helpful in interactions with them, while also recognizing their autonomy and (2) increase their awareness and learn accurate information that would help dispel myths and fears. Our own work on nondisabled allies to people with physical or sensory disabilities revealed similar themes (Ostrove & Crawford, 2006; Ostrove et al., 2009; Ostrove et al., 2009). In all of our work,

including the current study, we asked disabled or Deaf people themselves to characterize effective allies. In a qualitative study of women with physical disabilities' positive and negative experiences with nondisabled people, the women we interviewed appreciated nondisabled people who were respectful, accommodating, and saw them as people with multiple identities (not only as "disabled"). They did not want to be treated in a condescending way, pitied, or ignored (Ostrove & Crawford, 2006). Focus groups with Deaf women about the qualities of positive relationships with hearing people revealed the importance of effective communication and being treated as a whole person:

> Virtually all of the hearing people whom our participants liked and found trustworthy were good communicators, in most cases because they knew sign language. These allies were also mindful that their deaf friends were deaf, but that they were not "only deaf." That is, there was clear acknowledgment of the participants' identity, but this was not the defining feature of their personhood (Ostrove et al., 2009, p. 383; see also Ostrove & Oliva, 2010).

The Current Study

The current study was intended to continue our efforts to understand the qualities of effective nondisabled allies from the perspective of people with physical and sensory disabilities. Although research on allies from a social psychological perspective is increasing, it is still a relatively understudied topic, particularly in the domain of disability and specifically from the "insider's perspective" (Oyserman & Swim, 2001): target group members themselves. The extant ally literature tends to include as allies dominant group members who engage in specific acts on behalf of a targeted group, rather than dominant group members who are specifically nominated as allies by target group members (see Brown & Ostrove, 2013, for further discussion of this point). Disabled people have experienced a long history of exploitation as research participants, and knowledge about people with disabilities has often been used for "management and control" rather than to achieve social justice (see Hurtado, 2010, for an analysis of this phenomenon in the domains of race and gender). It was therefore important that we ask disabled people themselves to be our key informants about the qualities of nondisabled allies. This kind of inquiry lends itself well to qualitative methodologies, which not only emphasize "exploration and immersion" in narrative data (Marecek, Fine, & Kidder, 1997, p. 475) but also encourage explicit attention to the role and position of the researchers (see, e.g., DelBusso, 2007), an issue that is particularly important when studying relationships across differences of social identity in general, and disability in particular. The rallying cry of the disability rights movement— "nothing about us without us" (Charlton, 1998)—made us acutely aware of the need to account for our own relationship to disability as researchers (O'Toole, 2013).

Method

Participants and Procedure

Sixteen disabled individuals (6 women, 10 men) between the ages of 28 and 70 years agreed to be interviewed for this project. They were recruited over a period of one month during the summer of 2014 through personal contacts in the Minneapolis-Saint Paul disability community, by contacting local disability advocacy organizations, and by posting flyers in an accessible housing complex in the Minneapolis-Saint Paul, Minnesota (USA) metropolitan area. Some interviewees recommended friends or colleagues they thought would be interested in our study. No one who expressed interest in being interviewed was turned away.

Three participants identified as people of color; the rest were White. Participants had a wide variety of physical and sensory disabilities, some of which were acquired later in life (e.g., spinal cord injuries) and others they were born with (e.g., cerebral palsy, blindness). Participants also varied widely in their levels of education and their employment status; about half worked in higher education or in disability-related organizations, the remaining participants worked in other industries or were not employed for pay and lived on public assistance.

The interviews were conducted in person or via Skype by one of two nondisabled interviewers at a quiet location of the interviewee's choosing. After providing written or oral (recorded) consent, all interviewees were asked, "Can you think of a non-disabled person in your life who understands and cares about the concerns of people with disabilities? How would you describe that person?" After these initial prompting questions, the direction of the interviews was led primarily by the participants, with the interviewer making requests for elaboration or specific stories and examples. All interviews were audiotaped and lasted between 45 minutes and 2 hours. Interviewees were paid $45 for their time and assistance.

In preparation for the interviews, we (the three coauthors) read Josselson's (2013) *Interviewing for Qualitative Inquiry: A Narrative Approach*; discussed our own social identities, especially our current status as nondisabled people inquiring about disabled people's perspectives: and practiced asking interview questions and troubleshooting potential challenges. Before conducting the interviews, one of our fears was that the open-ended nature of our questions and the interviewers' status as nondisabled people would mean that our interviewees might be unable or unwilling to recall specific examples in response to our prompts. Our actual experience of the interviews was in direct contradiction to these fears. The interviewees seemed very willing to open up to us and share their experiences, even those that were particularly painful for them. We felt keenly aware of our own positions as ablebodied interviewers in such cases.

Table 1. Results from thematic content analysis

Theme	Total number of times coded	Average number of times coded	Intercoder agreement
Offer appropriate help	87	5.8	73%
Be trustworthy with respect to identity	75	5	69%
Make a personal connection	61	4.07	74%
Advocate and act	57	3.8	83%
Be willing to learn	33	2.2	78%
Communicate effectively	15	1	54%

Content Coding

Recorded interviews were transcribed and then analyzed using an inductively generated coding system developed by the three coauthors and three additional undergraduate students—one of whom identified as having a disability. We developed the initial codebook by independently identifying the most salient themes present in a subset of three randomly selected interviews (see, e.g., Ando, Cousins, & Young, 2014). The codebook was refined and intercoder agreement established on three additional interviews. Using the final coding system, all of the interview transcripts were independently double coded and all disagreements were resolved through discussion. Every mention of a theme, in every interview, was recorded. We did not notice differences between the disabled coder and the nondisabled coders with respect to how the content from the transcripts was analyzed. Final intercoder agreement percentages for all interviews ranged from 54% (effective communication) to 86% (advocate and act; see Table 1). We believe that the low intercoder reliability for "communicate effectively" was a function of two issues: (1) it was a heterogeneous category that included a range of ally behaviors ranging from being respectful and direct to a willingness to engage in disagreement and (2) it was relatively infrequently mentioned among participants relative to the other themes.

Results and Discussion

Six key themes emerged from the data: (1) *offer appropriate help* (e.g., provide help when it's solicited, know when and how to ask if someone wants assistance;

recognize agency and autonomy); (2) *be trustworthy in understanding identity* (e.g., understand that disability is important but not the entirety of an individual's identity; provide space to discuss challenges related to disability); (3) *advocate and act* (e.g., take political and organizational actions on behalf of disabled people's rights, access, etc.); (4) *make a personal connection* (e.g., be comfortable around people with disabilities, have a capacity to relate and develop a sense of intimacy); (5) *be willing to learn* (e.g., indicate an openness to understanding the social or physical meanings or implications of a person's disability, history, lived experience); and (6) *communicate effectively* (e.g., engage in respectful and noncondescending communication).

Table 1 presents the total number of times each theme was coded, as well as the average (calculated by adding the number of times the theme was coded across all of the interviews and dividing by the total number of interviews). It is important to acknowledge that these numbers represent the extent to which these themes emerged spontaneously across interviews; interviewees were not explicitly asked questions concerning each of these themes, therefore any interpretation based on frequency of theme should be made with extreme caution.

Offer Appropriate Help

The provision of appropriate help was the most common theme across interviews ($M = 5.8$, range $= 1$ to 13), and included mentions of two different kinds of help: the provision of tangible assistance, and support for making social change. Although many people with disabilities live interdependent lives in which they rely on others for assistance with the tasks of daily living (see Mingus, 2010), the pervasive stereotype of incompetence associated with disability (Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002; Nario-Redmond, 2010) means that they are often the recipients of patronizing and unsolicited help (Wang et al., 2015). Research on individuals with chronic illness suggests that helpers' overinvestment in making things "better" for those they are close to ultimately drives them away from the person they are trying to help, a phenomenon known as "miscarried helping" (e.g., Coyne, Wortman, & Lehman, 1988). Our participants were clearly describing help that was, in fact, helpful. One important aspect of tangible assistance that comes from those whom participants would describe as allies is that it is *solicited*. The participants in our study appreciated being asked whether or not they needed or wanted help, and described allies as "People that ask you, 'can I open the door for you,' or in the store, 'can I grab that for you?'" Help was also a characteristic of allies if it was supportive and not controlling, reminiscent of Nadler's (2002) distinction between autonomy- and dependency-oriented help (see also Droogendyk et al., 2016). As one participant said, "Allies are people that help support you by, you know, by helping you create the outcome you want without doing it for you."

Be Trustworthy in One's Understanding of Identity

The opening line to Pat Parker's (1990) poem "For the white person who wants to know how to be my friend" is "the first thing you do is to forget that i'm Black/Second, you must never forget that i'm Black" (1990, p. 297). A need for allies to exhibit a deep trustworthiness in their capacity to understand disability identity and the (apparent) contradictions associated with identity was the second most prominent theme in our interviews ($M = 5$, range $= 0$ to 13). Participants described ways in which nondisabled individuals whom they considered allies did not ignore disability, but engaged with them as people, not just people with disabilities. As one said, "The coolest thing is that they get beyond the chair and they actually see the person." These responses reflect the importance of individuation efforts in intergroup relations (e.g., Prati, Crisp, Meleady, & Rubini, 2016).

Responses in this category also included those that described nondisabled people with whom participants could be honest about their lives without being defensive or risking evoking pity or condescension: "[With allies I am] able to sometimes talk about not just the things that are working in my life, but also sometimes how much disability-related barriers really suck. And that doesn't mean that I am angry or haven't adjusted or anything."

Finally, responses in this category illustrate a trustworthy capacity to understand disability identity in a way that reflects Brueggemann, Garland-Thomson, and Kleege's (2005) conversation about teaching disability studies as professors with disabilities. As they described it,

> We don't want [nondisabled people] to forget [our disabilities] but what we do want, I think, is for them to realize that our impairments no longer have the determining force of a master status . . . . We want to redefine, to reimagine, disability—not make it go away. But, also, not have it remain with its stigmatic force. So we want it to go away in a way that *we* want it to go away (p. 15).

One of our participants described it this way: "It's not to be . . . pulled out and be treated extra special, but that's hard to do because . . . you know, I'm different and . . . by gosh, don't treat me different but don't take away my disability parking either."

Make a Personal Connection

Droogendyk et al. (2016) and Brown and Ostrove (2013) noted that allies must not only take action, but must also be interested in or demonstrate a personal level of friendly engagement and connection. Our participants also emphasized the ways in which the capacity to make a personal connection ($M = 4$, range $= 0$ to 11) was characteristic of those they considered effective allies. For some participants, the importance of personal connection was a function of the

ways in which disability sometimes necessitated a particular kind of intimacy: "[allies are] very intimate with you, in a way, cause they know all your . . . basically your daily needs, and so they know what I'm going through on a daily basis." Mingus's (2011) notion of "access intimacy" is particularly relevant here, as it offers a critical framework for understanding "that elusive, hard to describe feeling when someone else 'gets' your access needs" (para 4.). Emphasizing the interpersonal and interdependent nature of human connection, Mingus (2017) noted:

> Cultivating access intimacy is a way to directly challenge ableism and the relentless isolation that disabled people endure, especially disabled folks who are part of other oppressed communities. Access intimacy at once recognizes and understands the relational and human quality of access, while simultaneously deepening the relationships involved. It moves the work of access out of the realm of only logistics and into the realm of relationships and understanding disabled people as humans, not burdens (para. 17).

Shelton, Trail, West, and Bergsieker (2010) emphasize the critical role of intimacy in interracial friendships, noting the importance of acceptance, validation, and caring as Black and White individuals become friends. Demonstrations of acceptance were evident in the response of an interviewee who shared an anecdote about her nondisabled friends at an organization she joined. These nondisabled people conveyed their desire for inclusiveness and connection, rather than the kind of condescending treatment she was accustomed to from others. She said, ". . . the women, and a few of the men, in that club will be like, not head patting but really supportive, and you're one of us, and we want you there." Finally, evidence of personal connection emerged in an attitude or way of being that distinguished nondisabled allies from other nondisabled people. As one participant described it, "[allies are] way more at ease with other disabled people [than non-allies are]."

Advocate and Act

Although among the most common features of allies in the scholarly and popular literature (e.g., Curtin et al., 2016), being an advocate or taking action was a clear, but not common, theme across our interviews ($M = 3$, range $= 0$ to 10). One participant described a specific person who worked for him as a personal care attendant but went above and beyond her role as his employee to take consistent action on behalf of his rights and well being: "I don't know why she stayed and continued to fight. She looked at me and said, 'Whatever happens, I'm always gonna be here, even if I'm not working for you. As long as I'll be in [living in this state], you're never gonna be left in bed.'"

Another participant offered a more general description of an ally that illustrates the theme of advocacy and action: "An ally is someone who gets it and will stand up for you, or at least recognize that this needs to be done, this needs to become more accessible . . . [who says] let's make it right." Both of these ways

of describing the role of advocacy and action among allies represent the socially and politically engaged dimension of allies described by Droogendyk et al. (2016) as "personal engagement in opposing inequality and/or supporting social change" (p. 318).

Be Willing to Learn

The extant allies literature suggests that an interest in being informed and aware about the history, culture, and lived experiences of target group members is an important hallmark of individuals who act as allies (e.g., Gonzalez, Riggle, & Rostosky, 2015). The disabled student informants in Evans et al.'s (2005) study noted that nondisabled students who wanted to be allies should take the initiative to increase their awareness about the lives and experiences of people with disabilities. Gill described nondisabled allies as those who were willing to "learn who their disabled associates are in their full glory and full ordinariness" (2001, p. 368). The participants in our study said that allies, as one participant put it, "need to come with an open mind" and a willingness to learn ($M = 2.2$, range $= 0$ to 10). For example, one participant could sense the qualities of this willingness in a new personal care attendant (PCA): "I have a young PCA that's working for me now who doesn't really know very much about being around people with disabilities at all, but she's open to asking questions, she's open to, you know, trying to figure it out." Finally, one participant described an ally as being willing to say "'okay, this is a little bit awkward, but I really do need to know [how this is going to work]' or saying 'how do you wanna handle this?' instead of just [assuming I can't do something]."

Communicate Effectively

A few of our participants ($M = 1$, range $= 0$ to 5) noted the role of clear, straightforward communication that was not characterized by fear or hesitation in their descriptions of nondisabled allies. One participant said that an ally "can look at me, and talk to me, you know?" Another said, "Oh they've got to have people skills. They've got, besides getting out in the community to get to know the disabled, they've got to have communication skills and people skills." Noting the ways in which [s]he appreciated a lack of concern about protecting her feelings combined with a willingness to say difficult things, one participant said, "I think [allies] can choose to disagree which is really excellent because they will give you perspective, you know, by communicating disagreement." The comments coded in this theme reflect key findings in the literature on the role of intergroup anxiety in predicting positive interracial interactions: intergroup anxiety interferes with both dominant group members' and nondominant group members' willingness to engage (e.g., Plant, 2004; Plant & Devine, 2003). Dominant group members

are concerned about doing or saying something "wrong"; nondominant group members are concerned about being the target of bias. Our participants clearly valued their connections with nondisabled people who did not let fear interrupt their willingness to engage or even to disagree with people with disabilities.

General Discussion

Taken together, the six themes that emerged from our interviews suggest that nondisabled allies must have some self-awareness about their own positionality and able-bodied privilege, including not only a sense of how to use that privilege to effect social change but also an acknowledgment of the limited nature of their own knowledge and experience. In describing cross-identity alliances, Pheterson (1990) emphasized that dominant group members must be willing to share resources and power, give up their prejudices and a belief in their own superiority, and be flexible in relation to nondominant others. The importance of being trustworthy in one's understanding of identity; being willing to learn, advocate, and act; and knowing how to provide meaningful help and forge effective connections described by our participants is consistent with these theoretical propositions.

Although our content analysis of interviews with disabled people revealed six themes that characterized the behaviors and actions of effective allies, it is important to acknowledge that a variety of other topics emerged during the interviews. Participants' stories illustrated the problems they encounter balancing working for pay and living on disability benefits (see also Longmore, 2003), the challenges of accessing affordable care and health resources, and the often-present social stigma they faced. As we listened to their stories as nondisabled researchers, we were surprised and humbled by the openness and honesty with which participants shared their lives. Some participants shared very personal instances of oppression and abuse, loneliness and isolation. After hearing these stories, we struggled to make sense of the concept of an "ally" amidst thick layers of disability-related (as well as class-, gender-, and race-related) oppression revealed in the interviews. How could we search for examples of allies without acknowledging the many examples of "non-allies"? The interviews ultimately served as powerful reminders of the importance of nondisabled allies who were willing to confront and work against the ableism that pervaded many of our interviewees' stories.

Given the history of ableism, many people with disabilities are understandably wary of nondisabled people's participation in disability activism (see, e.g., the exchange between Drake [1997] and Branfield [1998] in *Disability & Society*). Our work suggests that nondisabled allies—activist-oriented or not—may be welcome, but they would do well to cultivate particular ways of being and doing. Participants in our study appreciated nondisabled people who could offer appropriate help, be trustworthy in their understanding of identity, make personal connections, advocate and act against ableism, be willing to learn, and communicate effectively.

Consistent with research about White allies to people of color, our participants emphasized both political and social dimensions of being an ally (Brown, 2015; Droogendyk et al., 2016).

Many of the themes that characterize nondisabled allies who "get it" about disability and work in large and small ways to oppose ableism are reflective of work about dominant group allies in other domains (e.g., Droogendyk et al., 2016; Fingerhut, 2011). All systems of oppression will be dismantled both through mutually respectful intergroup engagement as well as through political acts of resistance and opposition. It is important to acknowledge, however, that experiences of ableism and racism are not analogous (though they may share key characteristics) and therefore what one looks for or wants in an ally in the domain of disability might be quite different than what is desirable in the domain of race. It is possible that allies in the domain of disability have some unique characteristics (particularly with respect to the provision of appropriate help and tangible assistance; see also Ostrove & Crawford, 2006). The existing literature on dominant group allies (and activists) also relies mostly on samples of people who are identified as such because of organizations they belong to or actions they take, not because they were identified as allies by the nondominant group members whose oppression they oppose. Our work is important because it relies on disabled people themselves as our primary informants of who and what constitutes an ally. Only by asking other nondominant group members directly about the characteristics they look for in allies (see, e.g., Brown & Ostrove, 2013) can we know whether the qualities identified by our participants are unique to the domain of disability or are relevant descriptors of allies in other domains. Although our numbers were much too small to make definitive claims, the only interviewee in our sample to raise issues about race and racism—and their intersection with disability—was a person of color. This participant noted that those who are considered effective allies in relation to disability are not necessarily effective in the area of race.

Limitations

One important issue our study is unable to address is whether the actions and qualities that our participants—who had physical or sensory disabilities—appreciated in nondisabled allies would emerge among a sample of individuals with other kinds of disabilities. What are the effective qualities of allies from the perspective of people with nonapparent disabilities, cognitive or developmental disabilities, or chronic illnesses? We are not only limited in our capacity to generalize to other kinds of disabilities, but we are also limited in generalizing to other individuals with physical or sensory disabilities. Although our participants ranged widely with respect to education and occupational status, we interviewed a relatively small sample of disabled people, most of whom were White and all of whom lived in the Minneapolis/Saint Paul metropolitan area. We might

expect that disabled individuals who live in less populated areas, in areas with even more highly organized disability rights communities (such as New York or the San Francisco Bay Area), or who are also members of other marginalized communities (e.g., who are also people of color or LGBTQ) would have different conceptualizations or expectations of nondisabled allies. Except as noted above in reference to the participant who explicitly discussed issues of race and racism, we did not notice thematic differences between our participants of color and our white participants, although the number of participants of color were quite small. We also did not notice differences between participants with congenital disabilities and those with acquired disabilities, or between the women and men, in their mention of particular themes. It will be important for future work in this area to attend much more explicitly to intersections of disability and race and other forms of social identity, and also to explore potential differences in the representation of allies between those with congenital and acquired disabilities. As Forber-Pratt et al. (2019) noted, understanding intersectionality in the context of alliance building is critically important not only because all forces of oppression—along axes of disability/ability, gender, race, sexuality, class, religion, etc.—are deeply intertwined and constitutive of one another (see, e.g., Berne, 2015, for an analysis of the specific connections between ableism, white supremacy, and other forms of domination and exploitation) but also because any given individual is simultaneously shaped by multiple forms of subordination and domination and occupies multiple social locations across multiple social contexts. The task of engaging in allyship and building alliances, then, is never a "single issue" project, even if one key form of oppression—in this case ableism—is a primary focus.

Implications

Our work has implications for advancing relations between disabled and nondisabled people, as well as for social policy. Our participants suggested that nondisabled people can cultivate personal connections based in respect for disabled people's full humanness and agency, can support disabled people to get things done in their personal and professional lives, and can engage in political and social justice work aimed at ending disability oppression. Efforts to pass legislation that improves the lives of people with disabilities requires, as one of our participants noted, "temporary allies" who will make a critical phone call, "lobby a city council [member], a legislator or some policy maker" or endorse a piece of legislation. Disabled people are significantly underrepresented as policy-makers; it is critical for that to change. In the meantime, nondisabled allies play an important role in advocating for much-needed changes related to educational access, employment, affordable housing and health care, attendant care, technology, etc. As Andrews et al. (2019) noted, the current political situation in the United States has significantly jeopardized legislation that supports services that many disabled

people depend on; nondisabled allies—as legislators or voters—can (and, given the current political underrepresentation and disenfranchisement of disabled people, must) play a critical role in supporting the maintenance and enhancement of policies that advance rights and opportunities for people with disabilities.

Contemplating the policy implications of our work raises important questions about whether or not people with disabilities *want* nondisabled allies. Our participants made it clear that they did not want nondisabled people in their lives who were going to make their lives more difficult, or abuse them, or pity them. They also recognized that, sometimes for personal reasons, and sometimes for politically strategic reasons, it was useful to have nondisabled people in their lives who could and would offer respectful and meaningful support. Future research would do well to take up the question of whether or not people with disabilities *want* nondisabled allies, as well as what motivates nondisabled people to engage in allyship with respect to disability.

Conclusion

One final conclusion from our work is the need for a more expansive, flexible notion of "ally." Some participants had experiences of people in their lives who "got it" about disability, but they would not necessarily label them "allies." Some participants described people in their lives who acted as personal allies, who understood their needs and desires. Others spoke of allies as people who could help them achieve a certain political outcome, or someone who addressed a moment of injustice at the grocery store or at the gym. An ally could be a friend, a family member, a home health aide, a legislator, and even an organization. Some participants had few if any experiences of allies, but provided incredibly valuable insight into the challenges of living with a disability in an ableist society. The diverse content of these interviews was illustrative of the diverse nature of the disability experience. As researchers, we sought to strike a balance between recognizing and honoring those differences, while also naming and recognizing shared experiences and patterns across participants. While we sought to acknowledge the complexity and contradictions among participants' experiences, we searched for commonality across stories; there is power in being able to name both experiences of oppression and the tools to combat it.

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