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Moving Toward an Inclusive Model of Allyship for Racial Justice

Viraj S. Patel

This paper is prompted by a single question fueled by a lifetime of wonder. If I, an Asian American, work in the interests outside of my racial group to end a system of racial oppression from which I suffer and benefit from, is that considered allyship? Within the context of working towards racial justice, allyship refers specifically to White people working to end the system that oppresses people of color. By challenging a binary model of allyship, which I argue continues to perpetuate the binary status quo of dominance; I draw upon Paulo Freire's work to begin a discussion for an alternate way to view acts of allyship that is inclusive of all people. The binary system of viewing race can be challenged by placing such theoretical ideas in the context of a higher education case study in order to show how horizontal oppression can affect the lives of professionals working in the field of Higher Education.

This paper is prompted by a single question fueled by a lifetime of wonder. If I, an Asian American, work in the interests outside of my racial group to end a system of racial oppression from which I suffer and benefit from, is that considered allyship? The concept of being an ally (Reason, Scales, & Millar, 2005) refers to a person in a dominant position of power working toward ending the system that gives power in the interest of a group with which one does not share a particular social identity. Within the context of working towards racial justice, allyship refers to White people working to end the system that oppresses people of color.

While research has been conducted to discuss the development of social justice allies in higher education as well as the phenomenon of allyship within the context of activism for social justice, all have focused on a binary vision of allyship where people are separated into dominant and subordinated groups (Bishop, 2002; Broido, 2000; Broido & Reason, 2005; Edwards, 2006; Reason, Scales, & Millar, 2005; Washington & Evans, 2000). The binary model for allyship reinforces a top-down

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vision of racism that relies on a number of assumptions, which I will discuss later, that inhibits the agency of social justice activists and oversimplifies the way race is viewed. Engaging in discussion about the shortcomings of a binary model in which people are split into White/Non-White categories, and acknowledging that subordinated people also engage in a process of racial identity exploration, the need for a new term to address subordinated racial group members who work in the interests of racial groups outside of their own becomes clear.

In section one, I review contemporary literature in the discussion of allyship and then launch into a critique of such a model, pointing out its assumptions and the importance of addressing individual racial identities. In section two, I introduce the phenomenon of horizontal oppression and liberation theology. I conclude in section three with a discussion of the way horizontal oppression and liberation theology can work with theoretical foundations of allyship to explore new pathways in the fight for racial justice that break out of the racial binary.

A Binary Perception of Allyship

Contemporary discussions of allyship rely upon a binary vision of race where race is viewed as either White or non-White (Bishop, 2002; Broido, 2000; Broido & Reason, 2005; Edwards, 2006; Reason, Scales, & Millar, 2005; Washington & Evans, 2000). This is problematic because binaries essentialize experience and can perpetuate oppressive systems by forcing people into one category or another (Banerjea, 2002). When referencing race, identities that are not White are lumped together under the label “people of color.” While there is value in building coalitions and creating a common identity, I argue that the phenomenon of viewing allyship for racial justice in the context of such a binary is dangerously close to a color-blind approach. A color-blind approach is when interracial relations of subordinated racial groups are not considered and incorporated into discussion of allyship for fear that discussing race will lead to further problems, and instead race, or color, is ignored in place of discussing the impact of race. In the following comment, Young (2000) asserted that although there is a common history of oppression among subordinated populations, that history is comprised of varied legacies and consequences for each group.

In the most general sense, all oppressed people suffer some inhibition of their ability to develop and exercise their capacities and express their needs, thoughts, and feelings. In that abstract sense all oppressed people face a common condition. Beyond that, in any more specific sense, it is not possible to define a single set of criteria that describe the condition of oppression in the above groups. (p. 36)

An emerging body of canonical literature insists on the disaggregation of racial groups and points out that each group, although still a part of the subordinated population, has its own histories and is affected by the systems of oppression in

unique ways (Takaki, 2008).

The binary model also presumes that subordinated racial populations share a common identity as people of color and that any action taken in the name of racial justice by a subordinated activist is in the interest of all racial groups. A recent study that explored stereotypes held by Black students found that Black American college students have stereotypes about different racial groups that affect the way members of the group view other people:

Black Americans mostly appear to think about competency and trustworthiness in terms of what they feel is most attributable to their own racial group members and Asian Americans and Latinos in comparison to people generally and Whites specifically. That is, they view Asian Americans and Latinos as being generally more competent and trustworthy than people generally and Whites specifically...Asian Americans are perceived as being less trustworthy than Black Americans. Whites, however, are viewed as being the least trustworthy of all the targets. (Nunally, 2009, p. 257)

The findings in Nunally's (2009) study indicate that there is not a cohesive people of color identity and that there is a stratification among racial groups at even the most basic levels of trustworthiness and individual competency. While Nunally's findings suggest that a common people of color identity exists since, ultimately, it is the White population that is deemed least trustworthy among participants, the findings also point to the fact that there is a distinction made among different racial groups since "Asian Americans are perceived as being less trustworthy than Black Americans" (Nunally, 2009, p. 258). If the notion that a common "people of color identity" exists is true, there would not be a difference in levels of trustworthiness among different racial populations.

There is also a need to recognize that people who come from subordinated populations are not automatically born with an understanding of their racial identity and the way that identity informs their worldviews. As White students develop their racial identity, so do students of color (Reason, Millar, & Scales, 2005). Outside of the many racial and ethnic identity development models, the scholarship of Torres (2009) addressed students (in her study, Latino/a students) from subordinated racial groups engage in a process to make meaning of internalized racist thoughts or comments:

...participants were also externally defined by how the outside world saw Latino identity....They did not possess the cognitive ability to recognize the multiple perspectives needed to understand that there are poor neighborhoods for all races and that people of all races can be gardeners. (Torres, 2009, p. 515)

Inkelas (2004) found that Asian Pacific American (APA) students who participated in ethnic student organizations experienced a heightened understanding and connection to their ethnic and racial identity versus their APA peers who did not participate in such organizations. This shows that students of color also engage in critical understanding and meaning-making of their social identities through outside resources and group activity, and that understanding of social identities is not innate.

The binary model of allyship also relies upon the assumption that White people only benefit from a system that affords privileges. While I do not discount that such privilege exists, I wish to challenge the notion that White people are not adversely affected at times by the racial binary system that denies ethnic plurality and culture. Antiracist activist Tim Wise (2008) wrote in his autobiography: “Whites pay enormous costs in order to have access to the privileges that come from a system of racism – costs that are intensely personal and collective, and which should inspire us to fight racism *for our own sake*” (p. xii). In this autobiography, Wise recounted examples of when White people had been adversely affected by systems of racial privilege. For example, during the 1999 shooting at Columbine High School, law officials were slow to enter the building to help the students at the predominantly White school. Wise asserts that because of the privilege afforded by many of the students, law officials were afraid they might get sued if something went wrong. If the officials were not nervous because of previous exercises of privilege among the local population in resistance to law officials, the building would have been secured more quickly.

By considering engagement with a binary model, recognizing the agency of subordinated peoples, and challenging the notion that White people are not also affected negatively by White culture and legacies of dominance, a path is opened to explore a pluralistic perspective of allyship for racial justice among multiple racial groups. The concepts of horizontal and lateral oppression must be incorporated into conversations in order to move towards a pluralistic model of allyship for racial justice.

Horizontal and Lateral Oppression

While there is a binary concept of oppression (the dominant group and the oppressed group), there is a sub-phenomenon deemed horizontal or lateral oppression. Drawing upon themes of internalized oppression (when the oppressed believe the views of the oppressor) horizontal hostility suggests that the:

internalized self-hatred because of one’s membership in a ‘minority group’...can easily be extended to the entire group so that one does not see hope or promise for the whole. It is safer to express hostility toward other oppressed peoples than toward the oppressor. (Pharr, 1997, p. 61)

Horizontal oppression is a manifestation of internalized oppression that is projected onto those with a similar social identity.

Horizontal oppression can take two forms: targeted-to-targeted and advantaged-to-advantaged. “Targeted-to-targeted horizontal oppression is the conscious and/or unconscious attitudes and behaviors exhibited in interactions among members of the same targeted group that support and stem from internalized subordination” (Hardiman, Jackson, & Griffin, 2007, p. 47). An example of targeted-to-targeted horizontal oppression in the United States is the 1992 riots in Los Angeles between Black and Korean populations. The internecine riots, which erupted over boycotts of Korean-American merchants in predominantly Black and Latino neighborhoods, were highly publicized in the mainstream media and perpetuated images of dysfunctional communities of color. The riots were violent, resulted in deaths, and left a legacy of horizontal violence in Los Angeles. While the definition provided above lumps Black and Korean people under the same targeted group, I argue that within the same targeted group, there is evidence of subsections of ethnic identity that shows the existence of group identities that go further than a “person of color” identity. The Korean or Black identity was more salient than the identity as a “person of color” as cited in Kim (2000):

Getting involved...meant protecting their [Korean-Americans] collective position within the racial order and thereby the order itself. Using the hallowed notions of colorblindness, equal opportunity, and the American Dream...the Korean American counter mobilization sought to return things to the status quo ante...Korean American leaders only had in mind protecting their group interest, not fortifying an oppressive system that keeps Blacks on the bottom of American society. (p. 158)

As seen with the example of the 1992 riots, horizontal oppression not only continues to oppress people of color, but also upholds the normalized narrative of dominance – in this particular case, White dominance. Black and Korean people were fighting for limited resources that were the result of White gentrification – instead of challenging the dominant powers that created the situation, the oppressed continued to fight with each other to create another layer of dominance and subordinated status.

Advantaged-to-advantaged horizontal oppression is “the conscious and/or unconscious punishments that oppressor groups bestow on other members of their group who violate the ideology of the oppressive system” (Hardiman, et al., 2007, p. 47). A hypothetical example is the risk White people take when they engage in discussions about race and address racist behavior within their own community and are rejected as a result of that behavior.

While this article focuses on the connection between targeted-to-targeted horizon-

tal oppression in connection to allyship and liberation theology, the existence of another facet of horizontal oppression is important to consider. For the remainder of this paper, when I refer to “horizontal oppression,” it is only in reference to targeted-to-targeted horizontal oppression.

Horizontal oppression is also connected to classrooms in colleges. Ethnic studies programs and departments, which grew out of the 1960s Civil Rights Movement, were created with the intention of legitimizing the experiences of historically marginalized communities in the classroom as well as creating venues to challenge and foster scholarship (Umemoto, 1989). However, there is a trend of students majoring and/or minoring in Race/Ethnic Studies programs but then continuing on to a degree in a more “traditional” field based on the realities of the capitalist economy as well as in-group pressures:

On college campuses, the culture of upwardly mobile racialism runs counter to the values of ethnic studies, and yet the epistemology of pluralism in the latter tends to facilitate the former. Our classes fill up with brave students who read longingly about the origins of the social movements of identity, but whose own social location makes those struggles romantically distant. (Prashad, 2006, p. xvii)

Just as horizontal oppression can affect experiences inside the classroom, it is also pervasive outside of the classroom on college campuses. As Nunnally (2009) found, students (in this study, Black students) possess negative stereotypes of other subordinated racial groups that continue to uphold a dominant White paradigm and reduce venues that build coalitions to challenge the aforementioned dominant White paradigm. Torres (2009) studied the impact of internalized oppression and the way it can affect students’ relationships with people of their same racial and/or ethnic identity on a college campus. The study found that while Latino students have different interpretations of racist ideas based on experiences of privilege, the participants created a “critical developmental tool for challenging those negative beliefs [racism]” (Torres, 2009, p. 518). Since students experience internalized oppression and racism in different ways, there are many different methods for challenging such beliefs, which can range from personal meaning making to encouraging in-group dialogue of such phenomena.

Horizontal oppression has not received much attention in the student affairs literature and is a phenomenon that demands further exploration within discussion of diversity and social justice. A pathway beyond a binary vision of oppression is developed by incorporating a framework of horizontal oppression to the discussion of allyship. Additionally, a need to address the agency of students participating in the active oppression (and anti-oppression efforts) of other subordinated populations exposes a gap in language and social justice theology which does not have a response to horizontal oppression and the way that subordinated racial groups

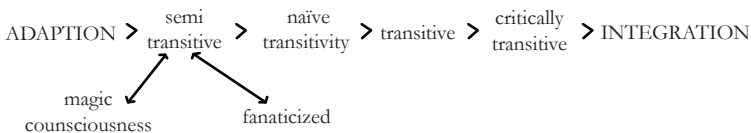
work to help one another. The link between allyship and horizontal oppression becomes clearer when overlapped with concepts of liberation theology.

Liberation Theology

In the way that an act of allyship responding to dominant-to-subordinated oppression also frees the oppressor, an act of allyship from a person of color responding to targeted-to-targeted horizontal oppression liberates all subordinated parties. The works of Freire (1973 & 2009) can help to provide a framework not only for what education and allyship can look like, but also the way liberation can be achieved.

In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire (2009) discussed that the oppressed cannot be liberated by the oppressor. If the oppressor is the one liberating, then the status quo does not change. Instead, the oppressed must work to liberate themselves. In the binary construction of allyship, an act of allyship is not achieved by working to liberate people of color, but rather by creating venues for people of color to liberate themselves. In a classroom or staff meeting, this could be achieved by, depending on one's dominant identities, simply choosing not to speak first and making space for other ideas to be brought into the conversation.

In *Education for Critical Consciousness*, Freire (1973) asserted that there are different stages of consciousness, which are determined by the extent to which one is able to question their surroundings and historical context. Freire presents a model that describes various states along the path to achieving critical consciousness. I will provide a brief description of each state below and will then consider Freire's concepts in the context of a student affairs case study. In order to achieve a process of education where individuals can liberate themselves, a state of consciousness (deemed "transitive consciousness") must be achieved. Different states of consciousness, displayed on a continuum, show different levels of engagement with integration. Adaptation, which is a precursor to integration, is characterized on an individual level by the inability to make choices and being subjected to the choices of others. The person is viewed as an object whose decisions are no longer their own. Integration, on the other hand, is characterized by the capacity to adapt in addition to a critical capacity to make choices and to transform reality. The person is viewed as a subject who develops a critical engagement with the definition of culture. The diagram below demonstrates Freire's (1973) different levels of consciousness as well as characteristics associated with each level:



As seen in the diagram, people start in a semi-intransitive state of consciousness where individuals are deemed by Freire as illogical. As one becomes increasingly aware of their own reality, not as it is shaped and taught by others, they either move to a state of magic consciousness, a side track from Freire's continuum characterized by the development of a fatalistic view of reality, or move along the continuum to naïve transitivity, which is the next step in the path toward a critically transitive state. The state of naïve transitivity is characterized by the oversimplification of problems, nostalgia for the past, and underestimation of the common person. From naïve transitivity people either slip into fanatized consciousness, where people are seen as objects and are irrational or move along the continuum towards a critically transitive consciousness, where subjects are fully engaged with reality and can make decisions on their own. To achieve a critically transitive consciousness, one must pursue intervention and integration with their cultural context in place of accepting, without question, the status quo.

A breakout model of allyship complicates this interpretation of Freire's (1973) work. Consider the following scenario:

Serena, a residence director who identifies racially as Asian, is in her weekly meeting with one of the RAs she supervises. Jamie, the president of the school's Latin@ student organization, has heard that Oliver, the president of the school's Asian/Asian American organization, is concerned that his organization has not been allocated enough money by the Student Government Association to cover the costs of their annual Moon Festival celebration. Jamie is frustrated that Oliver has been heard complaining to multiple administrators that Jamie's group has been allocated too much money for their Day of the Dead celebration and that some money should be pulled from their budget to cover the expenses for the Moon Festival celebration.

Serena has multiple options in this scenario. As a self-identified Asian, she could simply do nothing and benefit from a potentially greater Moon Festival celebration. This act would fuel the horizontal oppression that occurs on her campus. A second option would be to address the issue privately with Oliver. As an active member of the Asian/Asian American community, she could speak on behalf of Jamie's organization and ask Oliver to stop commenting about the Latin@ student organization's budget. However, this plan of action would not empower Jamie to explore the situation herself and to find a comfortable solution. While Serena can and should feel empowered to discuss the impact the situation has on her with Oliver, the discussion should not include speaking on behalf of Jamie. Instead, the third option – and the one that I argue would be an act of allyship – involves Serena working with Jamie to explore the impact of Oliver's comments with herself, her student organization, and her community. Other prompting questions can include discussion of what may be compelling Oliver to make such comments as well. While there is no set answer to these questions, Jamie has at least engaged in working towards what Freire (1973) terms transitive consciousness, the final

step in achieving a consciousness where one can liberate oneself. Serena's role as a facilitator of learning, and not as a lecturer, encourages Jamie to figure out how to go about addressing the situation and understanding how it affects her on an individual and group level.

Another key point made by Freire (1973) is that education must be a mutual process. Education has traditionally relied upon a "banking concept of education" (Freire, 2009, p. 72), such as through lecture formats, which does not engage students in the process of their own learning and maintains the status quo of inequality by encouraging memorization and recitation in place of mutual dialogue. However, education, which works to liberate oppressed populations, engages students and teachers to work together in the process to learn and challenge existing ideas. As illustrated in the case study above, people from marginalized identities can work together to educate and liberate themselves from a system that creates not only top-down, but also horizontal modes of oppression.

Bringing It All Together

The phenomenon of targeted-to-targeted horizontal oppression does not yet have a place in the discussion of allyship and liberation. By challenging a binary model of allyship, which I argue continues to perpetuate the binary status quo of dominance, I draw upon Paulo Freire's works (1973 & 1999) to begin a discussion for an alternate way to view acts of allyship that is inclusive of all people. By altering the model to include all racialized people as individual agents of allyship, I argue that the binary system of viewing race can be challenged. Placing such theoretical ideas in the context of a case study in student affairs shows how horizontal oppression can affect the lives of professionals and ways that such situations can encourage self-liberation and be turned into opportunities for acts of allyship.

While this paper is largely theoretical, there are opportunities for field research at institutions of higher education in the United States to discuss the creation of alternate models and definitions of allyship. One potential project would be to interview staff members at different cultural identity centers across campus to discuss the ways, if they exist, collaboration between centers occurs to address intersecting identities are discussed. Student groups that collaborate together to share resources could also be interviewed to determine how horizontal oppression has been addressed and how to work successfully across social identities. By engaging subjects in defining what allyship means to them and considering ways that horizontal oppression has affected the climate, a model can be developed to address the unique needs of allyship as a response to horizontal oppression.

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