



# The ETHIC Model of Virtue-Based Allyship Development: A New Approach to Equity and Inclusion in Organizations

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## Abstract

As organizations take on grand challenges in gender equality, anti-racism, LGBTQ+ protections and workplace inclusion, many well-intentioned individuals from dominant groups (e.g., cisgender men, Caucasian, heterosexual) are stepping forward as allies toward underrepresented or marginalized group members (e.g., cisgender women, People of Color, LGBTQ+ identified employees). Past research and guidance assume an inevitable need for external motivation, reflected in the ‘business case’ for diversity and in top-down policies to drive equity and inclusion efforts. This qualitative study explored *internal* motivations in the form of morally motivated virtues of 25 peer-nominated exemplary allies serving in leadership positions. In-depth life/career story interviews were used to identify the virtues that supported their allyship journeys. Findings demonstrated that they tapped into several virtues that served distinct functions in a 4-stage allyship development process: Stage 1—Energizing psychological investment (compassion, fairness); Stage 2—Thinking through allyship-relevant complexities (intellectual humility, perspective-taking, wisdom); Stage 3—Initiating action (prudence, moral courage, honesty); Stage 4—Committing to allyship (perseverance, patience). We call this the ‘ETHIC model of virtue-based allyship development.’ This study has implications for theory and research on a virtue-based approach to diversity, equity and inclusion.

**Keywords** Virtue · Motivation · Prejudice reduction · Allyship development · Inclusion · Equity

*“Some things just cannot wait. Men must stand up now for women’s equality. Why am I a HeForShe Champion? Not just because I can’t wait, but because I will not wait.”—Rick Goings, CEO, Tupperware Brands, one of 10 Global Corporate Impact Leaders for the UN Women HeForShe Campaign.*

Leaders and employees from dominant social groups (e.g., White, men) are increasingly being called upon to champion for marginalized group members (e.g., People of Color, women) to improve equity and inclusion (see UN Women, 2019a; #Black Lives Matter). In response, Fortune 500 companies are making substantial investments to motivate dominant group champions, or *allies*, to commit to equity and inclusion (see UN Women, 2019b). Washington

and Evans (1991, p. 195) define allies as dominant group members who “work to end oppression in [their] personal and professional [lives] through support of, and as advocates for, the oppressed population.” Given the enormity of this charge, allies must be highly motivated.

In the broader societal context, however, motivation of allies tends to wax and wane with prominent events. For instance, many organizations (e.g., Nike; Schulz, 2017) and White individuals (Clark, 2019) stepped forward as allies toward Black people during the Black Lives Matter movement in 2012 following the shooting of unarmed Black teen, Trayvon Martin (#blacklivesmatter). However, little real system change occurred, and enthusiasm subsided for 8 years until several more high-profile brutal killings such as of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, and Breonna Taylor reenergized White allyship in 2020 (Sobo et al., 2020). Predictably, this energy has faded and will likely be rekindled by the next prominent event. Therefore, it is critical to understand how allies’ motivation can be powerfully sustained over time so that real systemic change can be integrated into the fabric of our institutions and organizations.

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Predominant diversity and inclusion research and practice has been framed via extrinsic motivators—reward and punishment—that are underwhelming. The ‘business case’ for managers to behave inclusively to acquire strategic advantage (i.e., Hoobler et al., 2018) is ineffective in motivating dominant groups (Kalinowski et al., 2013; Kulik & Roberson, 2008). In addition, the deontological moral framework that translates into top-down policies, legal compliance, and mandatory trainings that punish discrimination often elicits backlash and hostility (e.g., Kidder et al., 2004; Sanchez & Medkik, 2004). Both frames are likely to be perceived by dominant group members who do not imbibe the values as hollow political correctness (e.g., Lalonde et al., 2000).

Further, several internal and external challenges demotivate potential allies. Allies can be derogated by their ingroup (Kutlaca et al., 2019), experience backlash because they violate stereotypes (Moss-Racusin, 2014), or be viewed as overly political or radical. Fear of retaliation (Cortina & Magley, 2003; Premeaux & Bedeian, 2003) and perceived risk (Cheng et al., 2020) undermine employees’ willingness to speak truth to power. Beyond external pressures, dominant group members may question their own legitimacy in voicing support (Sherf et al., 2017).

We argue that intentionally cultivating dominant group members as allies could sustainably strengthen organizations’ equity and inclusion efforts. The frequency of interactions (Goodwin et al., 2009) and the time coworkers spend together (Price et al., 2002) offer unparalleled opportunities for relational approaches to inclusion (Nishii, 2013; Randel et al., 2018). Empowering dominant group employees (albeit few) who already wish to support marginalized groups carries potential for expanding organizational assets for inclusion (Lau et al., 2021; Warren et al., 2019).

We argue that organizations should find ways to fuel dominant group employees’ internal motivation by building upon the virtues they value. Our investigation draws from a virtue ethics perspective (e.g., van Dijk et al., 2012) to understand how employees can tap into their virtues and develop into highly skilled allies in the workplace.

## Toward a Virtue-Based Approach to Allyship in the Workplace

In laying a conceptual foundation for a virtue-based approach to allyship in the workplace, we first note several critical features of virtues, and then explain how a set of virtues fueled by moral motivation might support sustainable allyship in the workplace. Virtue ethics offers an attractive alternative to deontological approaches to business ethics, which have been criticized for their reliance on ‘technical rationality’ to help individuals produce appropriate responses based on protocols that may be outdated or

insufficiently tuned to the messy complexities of the work environment (Sellman, 2012). By focusing on the moral agent’s character and contextual discernment (see *phronēsis*/prudence below) rather than formulaic action (Hursthouse & Pettigrove, 2018), virtue ethics seems an especially useful voice in addressing the thorny and rapidly evolving space of social justice allyship.

Virtues are an individual’s most praiseworthy character traits (Audi, 2012) that manifest in varying degrees (Cokelet & Fowers, 2019), and are theorized to develop through social processes and personal reflection (Annas, 2012). Conceptualizing virtues as traits aligns with modern dynamic accounts of personality (e.g., Fleeson & Jayawickreme, 2021; Wrzus & Roberts, 2017), according to which traits are relatively stable (but not static) individual differences that develop, at least in part, through bidirectional person-situation relations.<sup>1</sup> A trait-based conceptualization of virtue anchors virtue-based allyship in existing dispositions that have been cultivated, to a greater or lesser degree, throughout one’s developmental history.

Individuals who strongly possess a given virtue accurately recognize a wide variety of virtue-relevant situations as ‘calling for’ the virtue, and they consistently manifest the virtue in response to those situations (Snow et al., 2020; Wright et al., 2020). A manager may easily recognize the need for courage when delivering a public presentation, but she may not immediately see the courage-relevance of a situation in which Black colleagues demand reforms in performance evaluation procedures. Indeed, her courage may not have been developmentally constructed in reference to the plight of outgroups, and she misses opportunities to courageously stand with her Black colleagues in their fight for justice. Part of virtue development may often entail expanding one’s sensitivity to virtue-relevant stimuli involving outgroups who disproportionately suffer the indignities of injustice. This sort of expanded moral perception may be helped along through structured learning, but is supported internally by *phronēsis* (Lapsley, 2021).

*Phronēsis* (prudence or practical wisdom) provides the reasoning that enables one to live a virtuous life (Snow et al., 2021). Snow et al. (2021) outline four functions of *phronēsis*, two of which we shall highlight.<sup>2</sup> In its *action*

<sup>1</sup> Our view that traits/virtues develop contrasts with traditional assumptions that traits are static, impervious to contextual influences, and reflective of one’s true essence. Rather, our view aligns with decades of empirical evidence showing that traits (e.g., the Big 5) develop across the lifespan (e.g., Roberts & Mroczek, 2008) and can be intentionally cultivated through interventions (Roberts et al., 2017). The same likely applies to virtue traits.

<sup>2</sup> Snow et al. (2021) also believe *phronēsis* involves emotion regulation and reflecting upon the kind of person one is and wants to become. For a similar account of the functions of *phronēsis*, see Kristjánsson (2021).

*guidance* function, *phronēsis* is an internal, constitutive part of each virtue and helps one not only see the injustices suffered by marginalized groups as virtue-relevant, but also guides behavior to appropriate ends. Simply, its action-orientedness and responsiveness to situational particulars (Grint, 2007) suggests that *phronēsis* is indispensable for virtue-based allyship. When a male employee's highly qualified female colleague is turned down for a promotion, *phronēsis* helps him perceive the injustice and come up with the plan to question the fairness of the company's evaluation process before the leader. *Phronēsis* also serves a *regulatory* function in *coordinating the activity of multiple virtues* to produce optimal outcomes for all parties involved. In this role, *phronēsis* adjudicates conflict among virtues, but perhaps more importantly blends and integrates virtues to optimally target the good for marginalized groups, dominant groups, and the organization. *Phronēsis* might help an ally fuse compassion with fairness when explaining to a White coworker that their inadvertent microaggression toward a Black colleague was offensive, ideally serving as a corrective that prevents future microaggressions against Black people while respecting the humanity of the offender and contributing to an inclusive organizational culture. Workplace relationships in particular are often complex and may call for the orchestrated enactment of multiple virtues to bring about equity without burning relational bridges. *Phronēsis* makes this possible.

Central to a virtue-based approach to allyship are the motivations of the ally. Virtues derive their value, as virtuous, in part from the quality of the motivation that accompanies them (Bauman, 2017). Compassionately checking in with a Person of Color who has been a target of racism to see how they would like to be supported would not count as virtuous if the motivation was to curry their favor, or to be viewed positively by eavesdroppers in the hall. Compassion would need to be enacted for reasons that are characteristic of compassion, such as the desire to prevent future suffering and to help the coworker feel respected, valued, and comfortable.

Strong and sustainable allyship is likely supported by several virtues that are energized by moral motivation. We suggest that moral virtues such as fairness and compassion are primary and fundamental to morally virtuous allyship, since their characteristic motivations directly aim to reduce injustice and human suffering while fostering inclusion and care for marginalized groups. These moral reasons for action may enlist other (non-moral) virtues by providing impetus for their practice—for example, enlisting intellectual humility to learn about the current and historical experiences of marginalized groups. Thus, intellectual virtues that build knowledge, and enabling virtues (e.g., perseverance) that broadly support goal achievement, may become infused with moral motivation when directed toward the ends of fostering

justice, inclusion, and care for outgroups. In other words, allyship may rely upon—and serve as an applied context for the practice and development of—several virtues that are either directly or indirectly energized by moral motivation. Such moral motivations may powerfully and sustainably promote allyship action, particularly when they are central to one's moral identity.

### **Moral Motivations as Powerful and Sustainable Internal Motivators of Allyship**

Past research shows that the desire to engage in behaviors aligned with one's moral identity (i.e., sense of self constructed around moral concerns) can be a powerful source of motivation (Hardy & Carlo, 2005). Moral traits (i.e., virtues) are so integral to one's identity that in dire situations individuals may tolerate terrible personal losses (e.g., of memory, personality change) as long as they can hold on to the virtues that are central to their moral identity (Strohinger & Nichols, 2014). A high-profile public example of such moral motivation (albeit of an ingroup advocate) is that of US National Football League player Colin Kaepernick who, despite pushback from fans across many games, knelt during the national anthem to protest oppression against Black Americans, which ultimately cost him his career (Robinson, 2020). Extending this, it is reasonable to postulate that if virtues associated with allyship are framed as the core of one's moral identity, it might be possible to let go of otherwise sticky habits and socialized prejudices (assuming one is made aware of these). Evidence on neurocognitive processes directly supports this—activating moral motivation reduces prejudice and even implicit bias, which is otherwise seen to some extent as inevitable (van Nunspeet et al., 2015). Motivation to behave virtuously may sustain goal motivation even when other sources of motivation fail in the face of challenges (Ntoumanis et al., 2014). Further, motivation to be virtuous (e.g., compassionate) can internally motivate one to develop skills (Stichter, 2018) and expertise that enable one to respond efficaciously and with ease to a wide variety of virtue-relevant situations.

Initial empirical research on allyship motivations points to the relevance of virtues. A study of White men engaged in anti-racism work found that they shared a strong sense of justice which had emerged early in their lives (Krejci, 2007). Their justice motivations led them to seek out learning opportunities and training in anti-racism, which brought them into an ecosystem of helpful mentors and trusting relationships with People of Color that reinforced their motivation.

To develop a more complete understanding of the role of morally motivated virtues as supports for allyship, more

research is needed on how individuals enact virtues in the context of allyship. Empirical research that captures, up-close, individuals' own insider perspectives of their motivations is necessary (Marshall & Rossman, 1995). To address this need, we conducted a qualitative study of exemplary allies.

## Lessons from Exemplars

Bronk et al. (2013, p. 2) posit that “to understand how a complex construct functions and develops, it makes sense to examine the construct in the lives of individuals who exhibit it in an intense and highly developed manner.” In the context of allyship, exemplary allies – individuals who personify the positive extreme in the area of allyship—can be a particularly valuable resource due to a dearth of historic examples of allies from which dominant group members can learn (Roberts et al., 2019). Exemplary allies are likely to have developed a vocabulary and set of emerging practices that go beyond publicly salient expressions of allyship. Although this ‘extreme sample’ (Pratt, 2009) by definition is hard to find, what is considered exceptional today can help pave the way toward a new norm tomorrow.

Exemplars and typical individuals often have similar starting points. Exemplars simply tend to develop qualities, practices, and strategies such that over time they become exceptional in the construct of interest (Colby & Damon, 1992). In many other ways, they remain relatable. Thus, their journeys offer a roadmap for others to become exemplary.

The overarching purpose of this study is to build a new model of virtue-based allyship development in the workplace. Although specific types of industries (e.g., construction, technology, healthcare) may offer unique opportunities for allyship, we sought to identify allyship themes that diverse industries have in common, regardless of the specific type, size, profit-orientation, or location of the institution. Similarly, although specific types of diversity, such as gender, race, and sexual orientation are accompanied by specific prejudice dynamics, the current research explores common themes of allyship in general, regardless of the target outgroup. In short, this study aims to capture a common set of virtues exhibited by exemplary allies from various industries and across different types of diversity, and to glean insights about their developmental journeys toward exemplarity.

## Methods

### Sampling, Informants and Procedures

This qualitative study used the exemplar method (Colby & Damon, 1992)—a purposeful sampling technique.

Accordingly, we: (a) used past literature to develop essential criteria that capture features of exemplars, (b) asked experts to refine criteria for selecting exemplars, (c) asked experts to nominate exemplars who fit the criteria, and (d) invited exemplars to participate in this study. Informant recruitment was conducted in two stages. First, we invited subject matter experts to define exemplary allyship and offer input on essential criteria. Second, we invited nominations for exemplar interviewees who met these criteria.

### Contributions of Experts

14 subject matter experts refined the definitions and criteria for what it means to be an exemplary ally. Based on Colby and Damon's (1992) recommendations, experts were identified from well-established leaders in the field (e.g., acclaimed scholars, executive directors) and were selected from diverse disciplinary backgrounds (e.g., diversity and inclusion, social justice, women and gender studies, Black studies, queer studies, business ethics, sociology, philosophy, religious studies, education, international development, and basic and applied psychology) so they could illuminate the many different facets that the construct might touch upon. Most experts reported inhabiting some form of marginalized identities themselves (i.e., women = 9; people of color = 5). Experts were asked to draw from their disciplinary expertise and personal experience to refine a definition of exemplary allyship and essential criteria for identifying exemplary allies.

### Definition

Based on the literature, a working definition was developed, which was refined by the 14 subject matter experts: *exemplary allyship behaviors are (a) internally motivated actions (b) that stem from one's virtues, values and personal strengths (c) and are deployed to support optimal functioning of underrepresented group members and (d) embrace underrepresented group members as one's own.*

### Criteria

Exemplary allies are those who -

- (1) tap into their values to support optimal functioning of marginalized group members
- (2) listen to, give credence to, and amplify the voices of marginalized group members
- (3) offer support in ways marginalized group members share is in their best interest
- (4) are committed to staying informed about critical experiences of marginalized groups

**Table 1** Informants, gender, age, professional expertise, and type of ally

Informants (pseudonym initials)	Sex	Age	Professional expertise	Type of ally
JK	M	44	Law	White ally
WJ	M	49	Supply Chain & Logistics	Male ally
HJR	M	66	Diversity consulting	White, Male, Heterosexual ally
PH	M	52	Construction	Male ally
MW	M	55	Allyship consulting	White ally
PL	M	42	Mining	Male ally
MM1	M	29	Information Technology	White, Male, Heterosexual ally
LS	M	31	Real Estate	Male ally
DM	M	45	Mental Health	Heterosexual ally
GR	M	62	Public Administration	White, Male ally
KH	F	72	K-12	White ally
BB	M	31	Management Consulting	White, Male, Heterosexual ally
PF	M	33	Non-profit	White, Male, Heterosexual ally
MM2	M	47	Theater	White, Male, Heterosexual ally
ND	M	35	Financial services	White, Male ally
JM	F	45	Higher Education	White ally
SB	F	40	Psychology	White, Heterosexual ally
WR	M	49	Philosophy	White, Male, Heterosexual ally
CL	F	42	D & I	White, Heterosexual ally
RB	M	37	Education	Heterosexual ally
DS	M	55	Public Service	White, Male ally
KA	F	50	Library Science	White, Heterosexual ally
PG	M	44	Social Justice	White ally
MS	M	58	Business Ethics	Male ally
VV	F	32	Equity & Inclusion consulting	White ally

- (5) make space for marginalized groups in places they aren't yet occupying
- (6) go beyond sympathy and 'get in the trenches' to work with marginalized groups
- (7) have a disposition to act according to their ideals of allyship across life domains
- (8) affirm their acts and express the principles and the moral rationale underlying the acts
- (9) possess a willingness to risk their self-interest for the sake of their values of allyship
- (10) leverage their privilege to inspire other privileged group members to allyship action

Based on these definitions and criteria, experts were asked to nominate exemplary allies who met all the criteria. To qualify, nominees needed to possess identities that society perceives as privileged relative to those of the individuals to whom the nominees were allies. In other words, nominees had to be men allies to women, White allies to People of Color, or heterosexual allies to LGBTQA+ individuals. Exemplars were selected to represent a "diverse range of viewpoints and subjective understandings" from a range of industries (Cooper, 2008, p. 1239). The recruitment

process yielded 25 exemplars. They were all White Caucasian individuals, 19 were men and 6 were women, and 21 identified as heterosexual. The age range was 29 to 72 years (Median = 45), and 21 had graduate degrees. They were employed in a diverse range of industries with expertise in law, mining, theater, information technology, public administration, education, construction, among others. Identities of all exemplars were masked (see Table 1 for key characteristics). As an incentive, exemplars were each offered a \$50 gift card or the option to donate that amount to a charity. Eighteen (72%) chose to donate the amount.

### Procedure and Measures

The exemplars participated in a 1.5–2.5 h interview via web-conferencing. To zero-in on the developmental trajectories of allyship in the workplace, rather than asking them to recount their entire life stories, questions emphasized career-relevant stories, with brief touchpoints to early, educational, and other non-work influences (e.g., Maclean et al., 2012). Questions were adapted from the Life Story Interview (McAdams, 2008) wherein exemplars shared a peak experience and low-point experience as allies, a moral



dilemma, and a turning point in their journey as allies. Three questions adapted from the Good Work project (Gardner et al., 2001) captured the virtues that contributed to allyship (“What would people who know you well say are your most salient virtues? How do these qualities drive or bolster your efforts in being an ally? What personal beliefs or worldviews drive you to being an ally?”).

## Data Analysis

The 25 interviews rendered about 39 h of video data. Three assistants transcribed the interviews using the intelligent verbatim method (i.e., verbatim without fillers and pauses). Atlas.ti 8 software was used for qualitative coding and data analysis. Based on Pratt’s recommendations (2009), data were analyzed iteratively by traveling back and forth between data and theory, with attention to how the data illustrated, expanded or challenged past theory, illuminated theoretical gaps, or offered theoretical insights. The analysis was guided by the research questions, namely, what virtues motivated the informants and what were the key processes in their developmental trajectories. The interview questions that asked directly about virtues seemed largely confusing to the informants (many said they had not thought of allyship in this way), suggesting that the term ‘virtues’ in relation to allyship may not be readily accessible to lay individuals, although specific virtues such as compassion came up readily and were distilled from the responses.

Based on Pratt’s (2009) guidelines within each set of stories, we developed provisional categories and first-order codes using open coding. Codes that occurred in responses of 15 or more informants (i.e., at least 60% of the sample) were used for further analysis.<sup>3</sup> The codes were then consolidated into meaningful thematic categories. Finally, the thematic dimensions underlying the categories were identified to understand how the categories fit together (Fig. 1 offers an orienting structure for this process).

Member checks were incorporated into the data collection process such that interpretations were validated for accuracy in follow-up questions during the interview. A final member check was conducted by sharing a draft of the report for feedback to ensure exemplars’ interviews had been interpreted and reported correctly. All exemplars who responded

were satisfied with the way their voice was represented and did not request changes.

## Findings

This study explored which virtues support the behaviors of exemplary allies, and what functions virtues serve in their developmental journeys. Findings revealed that the exemplars’ allyship behaviors were driven by a range of virtues. Commonalities in the underlying virtues were evident across exemplars. Each of the virtues discussed below emerged consistently across most interviews, either as the primary driving force behind allyship, or as a complement to other virtues. Virtues served four major purposes: energizing psychological investment, thinking through the experiences of marginalized groups so as to cultivate intellectual understanding, initiating and regulating allyship action, and committing to allyship over the long-term.

### ETHIC Model of Virtue-Based Allyship Development (4 Stages)

In the following sections, we discuss the roles of specific virtues that emerged from the exemplars’ life stories. The virtues were broad in content and several in number: compassion, fairness, intellectual humility, perspective-taking, wisdom, moral courage, honesty, prudence, perseverance, and patience. Certain sets of virtues systematically played stronger roles during certain phases of the developmental process toward exemplarity. Although the data revealed that each ally had their own unique, sometimes non-linear developmental journey, several cross-cutting themes encapsulated a general developmental sequence.

We organized sets of virtues by locating them in relation to four developmental stages in what we present as the ETHIC Model of Virtue-Based Allyship Development (see Fig. 2): *Stage 1: Energize – Supporting Psychological Investment* involves acknowledging differences and identifying social justice problems, and is fueled by the virtues of compassion and fairness. *Stage 2: Think Through – Supporting Intellectual Understanding* entails seeking knowledge about group differences and learning strategies for allyship that are likely to be effective within one’s situated context. This stage involves the virtues of intellectual humility, perspective-taking, and wisdom. *Stage 3: Initiative – Supporting and Regulating Allyship Action* moves beyond intrapersonal processes into allyship action in the interpersonal and organizational spheres. This stage is fueled by the virtues of prudence, moral courage, and honesty with oneself and others. *Stage 4: Commitment – Supporting Long-Term Dedication* entails establishing long-term engagement, giving allyship ‘legs’ to appreciate and endure challenges in the

<sup>3</sup> According to Braun and Clark (2012), there is no formula for how many codes should be chosen or themes should be developed, and they advise researchers to make choices and decisions based on the data. In our analysis, our goal was to identify themes that represented the voices of a majority of the exemplars. While codes emerging among 13 out of 25 would have represented a majority, 15 served as a more cautious estimate to give us greater confidence in our findings. Therefore, we chose 15, i.e., 60% as a cut off point.

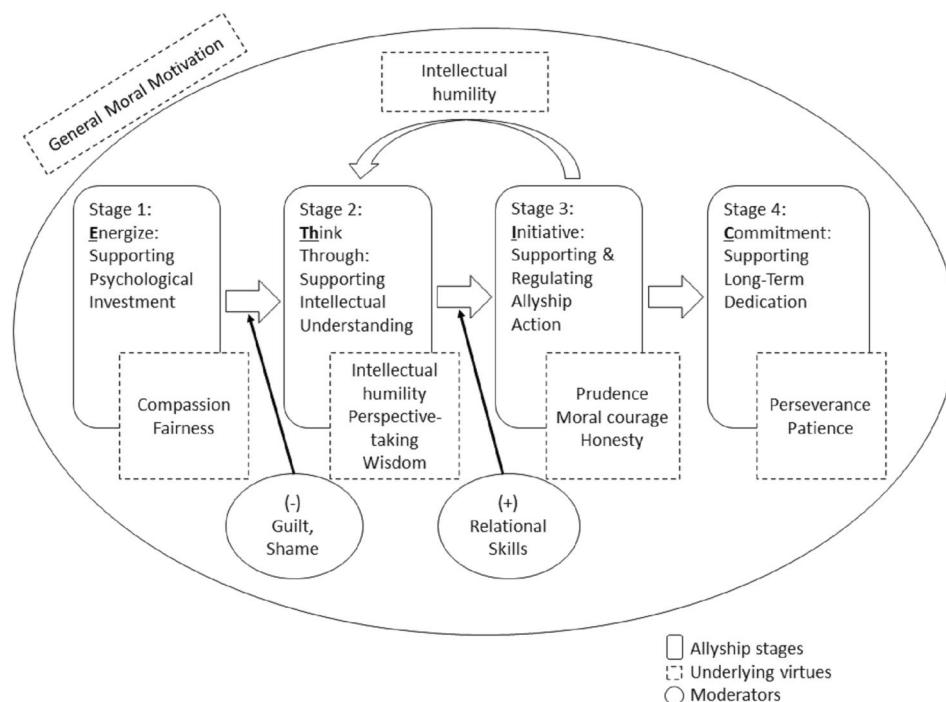


**Fig. 1** Overview of the data structure depicting example statements as first-order codes that were interpreted and consolidated into virtues-based thematic categories, and finally organized into thematic dimensions of stages that support exemplary allyship development

marathon of sustained allyship over time, and draws upon the virtues of perseverance and patience. Encompassing all four stages was exemplars’ general moral motivation (to do the right thing; to be a good person), which supported the

activity of each specific virtue. Finally, we discuss some of the nuanced, iterative, and moderating processes in this model, but first we present evidence of the virtues’ support of allyship one stage at a time.

**Fig. 2** The 4-Stage ETHIC model of virtue-based allyship development



### Stage 1: Energize — Supporting Psychological Investment

An overarching question was: What drives exemplary allies to do what they do? This speaks to the deep investment of dominant group members in serving as allies to marginalized group members. In general, the exemplary allies expressed strongly valued compassion or fairness. While most exemplars mentioned both, those who described themselves as feeling-oriented emphasized compassion (e.g., BB), while exemplars (typically those in male-dominated professions) who described themselves as being logic-oriented emphasized fairness as driving their allyship (e.g., PH).

#### Compassion

Most exemplars identified compassion as one of their virtues or clearly demonstrated compassion in their stories. In contrast with past psychological research that describes compassion as an affective experience (Goetz et al., 2010), Dutton et al. (2014) describe compassion in work settings as a complex interpersonal process that involves noticing others' suffering, feeling empathic concern for others' undeserved suffering, making sense of the suffering, and taking action to reduce the suffering. The exemplars' stories of compassion more accurately fit the latter, multidimensional conceptualization. Whereas many exemplars who expressed compassion also valued empathy, or shared empathic concern for marginalized groups, their stories showcased more than simply feelings of empathy. They undertook concrete

actions to learn about and make sense of the issues that contribute to others' suffering, and reduce that suffering even in the face of social threat to the self.

For example, attorney JK talked about the Ferguson riots that broke out in response to the fatal shooting of an 18-year-old Black man by a White police officer, not too far from where he lived in a southern U.S. city. When he heard that a Black police lieutenant was conducting a presentation on what they could do moving forward, he knew right away that he wanted to attend. As he described, this presentation had a major impact on him and proved to be a turning point in his journey.

It really broke my heart as far as realizing I'm hearing from a guy who's my age. He's had such a different experience in life, and he's been through a lot that I didn't have to go through and it's only because my skin color is White. So that started me down this path that I realized.... I know a lot of White people. How can I try to engage other [White] people to help other [Black] people? How can I help other [White] people have their hearts broken about this like I did? Since that day, literally, I've hosted and planned various events and various intentional ways of engaging people as best we can.

He shared that in his environment, people can "surround [themselves] with, and live in a place that is full of people that look like [them]... and never have to talk to a Black neighbor," and he believes there cannot be empathy unless people across racial and ethnic groups truly get to know



each other. Therefore, he regularly hosts speaker events, racial reconciliation luncheons in the auditorium in his office building, monthly donuts-and-coffee gatherings in his office conference room, and events at local churches and community centers. He began working with senior officials from the local police force and other colleagues to organize a large-scale public initiative that brings together people across races to get to know each other over dinner. Given the context of working in a conservative southern U.S. state, he faces many challenges and much pushback, and worries about how he might be perceived by his extended family and White colleagues who are unsympathetic to the cause. Yet, as his story shows, he not only notices and feels the suffering of marginalized racial groups in his environment, but also seeks out and creates opportunities to learn about the issues and takes concrete actions to build bridges across racial groups.

Contrary to stereotypes about activists, a striking theme in this study was that the exemplars did not reserve their compassion only for individuals from marginalized groups; instead, they often felt compassion for the dominant group ‘transgressors’ too. They expressed empathy for individuals who reminded them of their former selves. Their experiences allowed them unique insight and ability to help their ingroup colleagues. One heterosexual exemplar (DM), a mental health counselor and hospital supervisor who is a strong LGBTQ+ ally, shared:

I knew a colleague who reflected who I had been 20 years ago – a conservative Christian, not really on board with this diversity stuff especially around LGBTQ stuff. ... I recognized where he was at. He was open to conversations, he was smart, and not unkind. But his values - he needed the opportunity to explore how it could be different. ... He said stupid stuff, truly stupid stuff, but I could have compassion for him. Because 20 years ago, that would have come out of my mouth, without a clue as to why it was hurtful and without the intention to be; in fact, with the full intention to be open.

Many exemplars also realized that allyship was a long journey during which they were bound to make mistakes. Thus, they expressed self-compassion, namely, relating to oneself with kindness, mindfulness, increased focus on a common humanity, and reduced judgment of or overidentification with difficult feelings and thoughts (Neff, 2003). As DM continued, “I also give myself compassion and grace. Because I need it just like the next person.” Exemplars were committed to the cause of allyship and social justice for the long-haul, often having served for decades. Taking a balanced perspective toward compassion, such that compassion was expressed to everyone – ‘victims,’ ‘transgressors,’

well as the self – protected exemplars from resentment and compassion fatigue (Beaumont et al., 2016).

### Fairness

All exemplars highly valued fairness. Fairness involves treating everybody with impartiality (Shaw et al., 2012), albeit while addressing people’s differing needs, attending to systemic vulnerabilities from the broader context, and experiencing affective reactions of indignation and/or concern when witnessing injustice (Warren & Narvaez, 2020). For many, fairness was among their most salient virtues, and they were intentional about how they practiced it in the service of allyship. For instance, PH identified his desire to be fair as the reason for being an ally to women in the construction industry (where women make up only 10.9% of employees; US Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020). This motivated him to take on a voluntary role as the employer’s Women’s Network’s executive sponsor—a liaison who coaches women leaders and champions the ideas of the women’s affinity group with the C-suite team.

A critical aspect for many exemplars was that their interest in fairness went beyond a concern for a just world. They not only valued fairness as a motivator for their allyship action, but were also intensely troubled when they witnessed injustice. This sense of fairness, which was expressed not only through actions but also their motivations and emotions, highlights their approach to fairness as a virtue (see Hursthouse & Pettigrove, 2018). For instance, PL, a mine superintendent, noticed women did not have adequate sanitation facilities in their underground sites. Although there were separate facilities for male employees, male contractors, and male visitors, all women had to use the same area. His strong discomfort at the inequity in terms of lack of even basic infrastructure for women motivated him to undertake several large, fraught, and challenging projects to improve the climate for women.

Exemplars’ compassion or fairness enabled them to notice marginalized group members’ suffering, or be perceptive of unjust behaviors and systems and acknowledge the wrongs committed against marginalized group members. These virtues made the challenges faced by marginalized groups hard to ignore, signaling to exemplars the need for allyship in various contexts. As exemplars practiced more compassion or fairness, they became increasingly sensitive to subtler forms of prejudice, rendering the need for allyship evermore pressing.

### Stage 2: Think Through — Supporting Intellectual Understanding

Although the underlying moral motivations described earlier were maintained throughout their career/life history, these

served as the first step—fundamental reasons for becoming initially interested in (and maintaining interest) in allyship. Data revealed a crucial cluster of intellectual virtues that bridged and transformed initial interest and latent good intentions into useful allyship action. This cluster of virtues—intellectual humility, perspective-taking, and wisdom—supported intellectual understanding of the historical and modern contextualized experiences of marginalized groups, and thinking through how to best support outgroup members.

Arguably, most humans possess some degree of compassion and fairness. Yet they do not always channel these in the service of allyship; in fact, allyship is a rare phenomenon (Grant, 2014; Graves, 2014; Wittenberg-Cox, 2014). One reason might be that they lack knowledge about the intensity and extent of challenges faced by marginalized groups. As JK articulated, “I don’t mean to insinuate that everybody’s not smart or that they’re not aware of the fact that there is a cultural divide and that there are tensions, but I think we’re all very ignorant about the kind of reasons, and the details, and the histories.”

Even in organizations that offer diversity and inclusion training, these intellectual virtues play a critical role. According to a meta-analysis of four decades of diversity training evaluations, attitudinal and affective learning decay soon after the training (Bezrukova et al., 2016). Interested individuals need to engage in self-directed learning to keep their knowledge fresh and accessible. Further, when diversity trainings are limited in scope (e.g., due to budget constraints), they tend to be less effective (Bezrukova et al., 2016), precipitating the need for voluntary extended self-directed learning to augment the experience. Each of the virtues discussed next—intellectual humility, perspective-taking, and wisdom—fuel such self-directed learning.

### Intellectual Humility

A striking pattern among exemplars was their intellectual humility. Intellectual humility is defined as the internal recognition and externally expressed awareness of one’s intellectual limitations; and the internal recognition and externally expressed appreciation for other people’s intellect (Porter et al., 2021). Intellectual humility played out in particular ways among exemplars. They prioritized “deferring to the expertise of the people whose liberation is at stake... and a willingness to be self-critical” (PG). They expressed a growth mindset that is symbiotic with intellectual humility (Porter & Schumann, 2018), as MM1 shared:

I acknowledge that who I am and how I perceive gender, race, ethnicity and [sexual] orientation is not a static thing. In [the past], I didn’t stand up for people of a different race or sexual orientation. I look back

now and think that I should have. The most important virtue for me is the ability to change and acknowledge that I’m not a static human being.

In addition, their appreciation for culturally different others manifested as genuine curiosity and respect (c/f, allophilia; Pittinsky et al., 2011). These are critical for listening deeply, seeking knowledge, and gaining understanding. The approach of GR (below) exemplifies how intellectual humility can run deep, and can apply not only for understanding and supporting marginalized group members but also while working with dominant group members who are behaving in discriminatory ways:

One of the reasons I have been successful in my business<sup>4</sup> is because I’m able to sit down with someone who totally opposes a cause I represent and figure out a way to connect ... It doesn’t happen a 100% [of the time], I don’t want to mislead you. But that is generally, what I know I do well. I try really hard to listen to this person and go “As much as [this is difficult] right now, there’s good in everyone. Let’s see what we have in common. Let’s see where I can connect with you.” There’s almost always something.

Accepting the limits of one’s existing knowledge, inviting and constructively using feedback to improve one’s knowledge and allyship skills, and appreciating others’ experiences foster an attitude of proactively engaging in opportunities for learning, whenever available. Thus, they underlie approach-oriented behaviors that fuel intellectual understanding.

### Perspective-Taking

Given that individuals from dominant groups were often unfamiliar with the lived experiences of marginalized group members, their attempts at gaining in-depth understanding of injustice necessitated perspective-taking. In the context of intergroup relations, perspective-taking “involves actively considering outgroup members’ mental states” (Todd & Galinsky, 2014, p. 374). Perspective-taking is considered a capacity that may or may not be virtuous, depending on whether it is directed toward epistemic or moral goals (Snow, personal communication, September 16, 2021), as was the case when exemplars went to great lengths to understand the plights of marginalized group members. HJR shared about a time when he attempted to ‘walk in another’s shoes’:

I had a friend [30] years ago ... who was a gay man. ... I was pro-equal rights, but behaviorally he called

<sup>4</sup> He owns an issue-advocacy consulting business and is past-Senior Policy Advisor to the Governor of Alabama and two Mayors of Memphis.

me out on my sense of discomfort... So, I asked him if we could spend the day walking around the city acting like partners. From 9 am to 9 pm, we spent the day, holding hands, sitting with our arms around each other and even giving an occasional kiss. It was astonishing to see all the reactions that were theretofore invisible to me. People were saying things... It was even scary a couple of times. For him, it was something he was used to. For me, it was incredibly confronting. It radically changed my way of looking at that dynamic for the rest of my life.

It seems that to do justice to viewing situations from another's perspective, non-judgment is essential. When exemplars (e.g., HJR below) encountered individuals (whether from marginalized or other dominant group members) with perspectives that differed from their own, they reserved judgment, and prioritized reflection and understanding.

I was leading a diversity workshop for a newspaper. There was a young White guy who was a pressman... He said, "I feel a little conflicted about this workshop. I grew up in a rural area outside of the city. My dad and granddad were my heroes, they taught me to fish, to hunt, what it was to be a man. Dad was a pastor. He was the best man I ever knew." He pauses, looks up with tears in his eyes and says, "And they were in the Klan." He goes on to say that he understood where his colleagues were coming from. But, to truly embrace it, he would have to see his father and grandfather as evil. I was touched. He was clearly a good man. Yet, he had these views. We had a 45-minute conversation in front of the room about his experience. It was frank and exploratory. Everyone applauded him for his courage. At lunchtime, I saw that he was having a conversation with the strongest Black voice in the room. It hit me that whatever happened there was more effective than the ways we were taught to lead diversity consulting. It made me realize that we'd been trying to do this work with the goal of making people nicer. He was already a good guy. Was it about being nice? Also, I asked myself whether I'd be different if I grew up in his life story. I couldn't say that I would. That led me to explore how this system we're a part of teaches both privileged and marginalized groups how to be. We are all prisoners of the effect of the system. (HJR)

Thus, HJR listened and empathized with the difficulty that the White pressman faced. Such empathy and the frank conversation that followed necessitated suspending judgment to enable perspective-taking. Later, HJR continued to reflect and attempted to walk in the man's shoes, for example, by imagining what it might be like growing up in his story. The back and forth between perspective-taking and

reflection leads to useful insights, as is demonstrated at the end of the above example and is described more fully later.

However, perspective-taking can be harder than it seems. In heated situations, the suspension of judgment that enables perspective-taking took considerable conscious effort. For instance, DS shared his approach:

I try to have conversations with myself before I go into situations. Or I am aware of patterns in my physical reactions to things – triggers. At a bare minimum, I try to recognize them, and I try to counteract or slow down. "I'm feeling threatened, I'm feeling angry, I want to lash out, I want to run away." I just acknowledge that these are going on, slow it down, and breathe, so I can stay more present rather than jump to a conclusion.

In other words, other capacities such as non-judgment and self-regulation seem to be critical internal supports that scaffold virtuous perspective-taking, enabling allies to build their intellectual understanding of the plight of marginalized group members. When exposed to another's ideologies and perspectives that conflict with one's own, it might be easy to perceive these as threats to the self, and therefore, dismiss these experiences or feel offended by and thus, withdraw from or attack the individuals. Dismissal, withdrawal, and aggression are all barriers to intellectual understanding. Perspective-taking, anchored in non-judgment and self-regulation, helps counter these barriers by affirming the value of others and giving others the benefit of the doubt from the outset. Thus, they prevent one from perceiving difference as threatening, and make learning and understanding possible.

### Wisdom

Wisdom, an intellectual virtue that represents working optimally through challenging situations, is a product of consistent reflection and integration of perspectives (Grossmann, 2017).<sup>5</sup> Exemplars exerted consistent intentional effort into thinking through the complexities of bias and prejudice, reflecting on themselves and their dominant groups, observing and acquiring understanding of marginalized groups' situations, and ultimately, integrating their understanding to identify useful and practical ways in which situations could improve. The integration of such efforts was reflected in rich

<sup>5</sup> Grossmann (2017)'s definition of wisdom, as the reasoning that helps one optimally work through challenging situations, shares considerable overlap with *phronēsis* (practical wisdom or prudence). However, this definition also gives focus to the sort of knowledge integration that we wish to highlight in exemplars' intellectual development. Both arguably reflect *phronēsis*, but we separate them into 'wisdom' and 'prudence' in stages 2 and 3, respectively.

insights and wisdom. For instance, a diversity consultant shared:

In my [doctoral] dissertation, I've studied how White men learn diversity. One of the biggest things is that we learn it from women and People of Color. In companies where the executives are 80% White men, you're taking the minority group there and making them the educators. If you're having mixed race/gender/diversity sessions, you have to come back every week to tell your story to this new group of White guys. How do we take the White men and engage them in a way where they start to learn from each other, intervene on each other's dynamics, and use our learning journeys to help each other, in order to remove the burden from women and People of Color to have to be the sole educators? Those are some of the ways I see things shifting. (MW)

Whereas for some exemplars guidance was afforded through formal channels such as educational experiences, others invited open and honest conversations with dominant and marginalized group members. Reflecting on their own and others' experiences helped exemplars arrive at important 'aha' moments and turning points in their own journey. Wisdom and insights, thus gleaned, became important anchors of their intellectual understanding.

One thing that really, finally kind of crystallized everything for me was ... [when] we were talking about the relationship between the Black community and law enforcement, and a Black guy says, "Well, you know, when we get pulled over [by a police officer while driving a vehicle] we're terrified, and there's all these things that we're always taught about what to do." One of the White guys in the room said what I was thinking, "Well, I'm scared when I get pulled over, too. My heart gets beating, and I start worrying. You know it's terrifying for me." Another Black guy in the room said, "Okay, well what are you terrified about? When you get pulled over what's the worst thing that's going to happen to you?" And all of us White men in the room had to say, "Well, I guess, if it's really bad we could get thrown in jail, but mostly we're scared we're going to get a ticket and it'll cost money, and change our insurance premiums." And they're like, "Well, what Black people are scared of is *dying*." And that finally hit me as, "Okay, this is the difference." (JK)

The process of gaining wisdom involved considerable back and forth between reflection on their own experiences and contrasting them with those of others. Insights distilled from this process were transformative, and gave

stickiness to allies' newly developed intellectual understanding such that learnings were integrated with their values system.

### Stage 3: Initiative — Supporting and Regulating Allyship Action

Becoming energized to be an ally and carefully thinking through issues surrounding allyship were parts of the *intrapersonal process* of allies' development. However, for well-developed strong intentions to be useful and impactful for others, these had to be converted into effective *interpersonal action*. Here, we draw particular attention to the virtue of prudence (*phronēsis* or practical wisdom), which was described at the outset as intrinsic to all virtues, yet is particularly visible in the realm of public action epitomized in Stage 3.

#### Prudence

Prudence (*phronēsis* or practical wisdom) refers to the reasoning that enables one to live a virtuous life (Snow et al., 2021). Among other roles, prudence provides action guidance as to what specifically needs to be done, enabling a response that is appropriate for the situation (Kristjánsson, 2021; Snow et al., 2021). Prudence is inherently action-oriented, sensitive to the particulars of the situation, and oriented toward bringing about the good (Grint, 2007), enabling individuals to make appropriate decisions that both minimize harm and maximize benefit (Riggio et al., 2010).

Exemplars noted that the contexts in which they operated often necessitated prudence in the manner in which they approached allyship behaviors. They sought allyship strategies that fostered psychological safety, authentic expression, learning, and growth, and ultimately improved relationships among employees. The objective was to set up marginalized group members, dominant group members, as well as the organization for success. When allyship strategies were not given enough thought, efforts could backfire, as PH, Chief Executive Officer of a large construction company, and executive sponsor of its women's network, learned:

There was a woman on the West Coast. ... We had an issue happen around safety. She was a National Director for environmental health and safety. She was fairly new to the company... I always want to support somebody so *they* shine, not me. I said [to the executive team], "I'm going to put Jane on the calendar. You don't understand what this safety issue is all about. She's going to join the call and she's going to explain it to you and help you."



It was a terrible call. It wasn't set up right. They weren't prepared for it. She fumbled a little bit with it. At the end of the day, it had exactly the wrong impact and actually moved her to a place where she didn't want to take risks anymore... She failed and I looked stupid by doing it.

Now that I understand, [I think about] how can we put a message around it that shows there's value. Then, I start to pre-sell [the issue]. So when [she] comes in the room, [she's] not hitting them cold. Let *me* take the risk in front of the group. Then, bring her in when she has a platform to be successful.

PH looked at the particulars of the situation – the all-male executive team's lack of receptivity and how it could undermine the performance of even a highly qualified female 'outsider' – to determine how to set her up for success. Thus, when faced with major challenges, rather than giving up or withdrawing, exemplars exercised prudence to arrive at creative strategies to overcome the challenges and maximize the odds of success for all.

An added complexity was that while the first two stages of allyship development often involved long-term processes which offered allies the luxury of time for reflection, the initiative to enact allyship in Stage 3 frequently involved impromptu responses to events as they occurred. This required fast and fluid deliberations that were made possible by the fine-tuned functioning of prudence to guide action in constructive directions on-the-spot. Even when allies became involved in long-term initiatives that allowed some opportunity for reflection and planning, interpersonal interactions often necessitated immediate responses (e.g., intervening when witness to a racist joke), and inaction just as much as action ended up communicating one's position. Another element of complexity was that for allyship action to be truly effective, the task for allies was not only to be *proactive* in supporting inclusiveness but also to practice prudence by being *responsive* to the context in which they operated. As PG, a social justice advocate and educator reflected:

I have to do my [inner] work so that I don't walk into those spaces and spill my White privilege or cis-male entitlement all over everything. So being willing to do that work where I am proactive... but also willing to be responsive based on what I'm told by marginalized communities on how I can best serve their liberation.

Sometimes, such responsiveness required allies to consciously decide to take a step back, after considering their identity and the context. VV learned to take cues from the situation:

I would call things out, and ... most folks I worked with were Black-identified and they didn't want to be

seen as the angry Black person. So they just told me to shut up. ... [In the past] I was caught up in "I need to be an ally, and I need to show that I am an ally." But over the past 5 years, I have learned how to take my cues from other folks and if [they] didn't want it, then I don't have to call it out. I can deal with it on my own. The Black Lives Matter marches and die-ins and sit-ins were really beautiful examples of how sometimes White folks need to just shut up and support and not take center stage... It's not about me at the end of the day.

In other words, prudence was invaluable in helping allies translate their virtuous motivations into concrete behaviors that were attuned to the needs of marginalized groups involved in the situation. Notably, prudence often developed through trial-and-error, reflecting some scholars' beliefs that *phronēsis* develops through experiences in the messy, complex settings of everyday life (Grint, 2007).

### Moral Courage

Allyship action that involved confrontation often carried social risk and sometimes even business and physical risk. To take a stand, exemplary allies had to tap into their moral courage, that is, to consciously behave in ways that promote the best interests of others, despite personal risk (Sekerka & Bagozzi, 2007). Exemplars displayed extraordinary moral courage. WJ shared about participating in a gender equity employee resource group:

Some people say that it might be dangerous to step into this group because it might hurt their career. For me, that was not even a consideration. We had those discussions, but personally, if that is the case, then that is not an organization I want to work for. So, what is the risk? I don't really see it as a risk. ... But if it is a risk, I'm willing to take it.

The need for morally courageous allies is particularly important in contexts where they are the only ones who can bring about change. Exemplars embraced the role of being the lone voice for inclusion:

I was working in a previous role where I was in an all-male workplace with the exception of the administrative staff. And I remember looking around and thinking there are no women in this situation. No one here seems to be like, "Oh, we should probably be more diverse in our hiring." I'm probably the most socially progressive viewpoint represented in this group. If I'm not the one who's going to start change, no one else will. There's no first woman who's going to - rightly or wrongly - take on the onus of pioneering for everyone



else. It's going to have to be a man who opens the door. And that sense of not having the luxury of throwing the obligation on some member of an oppressed group to right this situation made me really look at it in the face. (LS)

Another context that called for moral courage was in interactions that involved direct confrontation. Exemplars experienced discomfort, but they pushed through it and acted, despite it. Sometimes, allies did not have time to contemplate the moment because allyship called for advocacy right away. At such times they had to draw on their courage.

During move-in day at the college residence hall I previously worked at, a White student was upset. At this institution, there are affinity groups who go around and give welcome packages to students who self-identify [as People of Color]. Then, they invite them to their meetings. A White student was upset because she didn't get a gift when she moved in.

I started seeing red and I thought this is my moment; it's a make or break, and I have to do this... The gist of it was I explained how this institution was set up for *her*. It is amazing that these groups have the opportunity to welcome people who identified like them as a safe place for them. They're walking into an institution that was not made for them. It is a predominantly White space and they need to know who [their] people are and who [they] can go to. She never wanted to engage again because I confronted her with the reality that this world was made for her; it wasn't made for them. That was the moment where I decided I don't care how it's being received. It's my duty to educate, regardless of who's around... Being direct in that moment when that student was saying something that was really harmful to others - there was no way to not address it in the moment. (VV)

## Honesty

Whereas moral courage stimulated exemplars to engage in allyship action, honesty — like prudence — helped them reflect on *how* to engage in such action. Miller (2021) defines honesty as not intentionally distorting facts that one (subjectively) takes to be true. Honesty can be directed at the self or others, and works against vices such as lying, cheating, stealing, promise-breaking, hypocrisy, self-deception, and misleading.

Honesty helped exemplars behave in ways that were consistent with their personal principles, which meant “even when it is hard, [being] true to self and true to others” (VV). Honesty informed their choice of direction, choice of allyship behaviors, and timing of allyship action. BB shared his

decision-making process on specific allyship actions, showing honesty with himself through introspection:

Let me talk about [what] goes on in my mind [when I think about engaging in an allyship behavior]. To what degree does that person want to be looked out for? To what degree, do they want me to come in to the rescue? Then, I follow this question with, to what degree do I want to do this because it is what I believe and is the environment and culture I want to set in this group or team? Those are often not in sync. I've had plenty of strong women colleagues who have said that they would rather do it by themselves and don't need to be protected by men. So, if the signal is that they don't want to be protected but I need to do this because I feel uncomfortable, then the question is *how*. Do I say something different in front of the group? Do I say it in front of one individual and not the other? What tone should I use? ... Every situation is different, but I have to think about these things before I act.

Habitual honesty was also critical to authentic communication. As PH shared:

I think people genuinely see that I don't have some other intent other than to be direct and I'm not trying to do something for my own means. I'm genuinely there to have a conversation and have some result come up that's good and generous. I think people see it as being honest and direct.

Thus, acting with honesty helped exemplars cultivate trusting relationships with marginalized groups and to be viewed as credible colleagues and leaders by potential allies.

As exemplars regularly practiced prudence, moral courage, and honesty, they became more proficient at these virtues; behaving as allies in new situations became easier, and allyship became habitual and integral to their identity. Exemplars noted that frequent practice also helped them gain a reputation of being an ally among their colleagues, which led to them being trusted and sought for consultation on issues relating to equity and inclusion across the organization (HJR, MM2, JK).

## Stage 4: Commitment — Supporting Long-Term Dedication

One set of virtues was particularly related to the process of enabling long-term commitment. In practice, allyship can be difficult: It involves speaking truth to power, confronting overt discriminatory behaviors and microaggressions, and sometimes facing resistance not only from dominant

group members but also marginalized group members who might want to avoid making their marginalized identity/ies salient during the confrontation. Organizational systems may be deeply entrenched in set ways and slow to change. As such, over time, allyship can feel exhausting. Perseverance and patience enable allies to stay committed to allyship in the long-term. Importantly, these virtues make allyship *sustainable*; approaching allyship not as a sprint, but rather a marathon, is essential to being an exemplar.

### Perseverance

Perseverance refers to the disposition to continue actions toward one's goals, despite obstacles (Battaly, 2017). Exemplars demonstrated perseverance regardless of the level of support in their organization or external environment, despite challenges and resistance. Even when their attempts failed or backfired, they did not give up the cause. They sought feedback, learned new lessons, and held themselves responsible for continuing to enact allyship. As KH observed, "I mentioned perseverance before. I think it's perhaps one of the most important things I've learned about equity. It's that we'll often just let ourselves be stopped." They dedicated considerable time and effort to their allyship work. A striking similarity among exemplars was their passion for allyship that emotionally fueled their perseverance over the long-term. On occasion, they felt they couldn't get their mind off the cause (PG), but more often their passion served as an emotional anchor that repeatedly brought them back to what really mattered. As JM shared, "Well, [passion and endurance] keep me from becoming paralyzed when situations are frustrating and help me center who I'm trying to work with or for, instead of focusing on myself as an ally."

### Patience

Patience refers to "the propensity of a person to wait calmly in the face of frustration, adversity, or suffering" (Schnitker, 2012, p. 263). Exemplars exhibited patience on multiple fronts—with dominant group members who behaved poorly, the change process within individuals, the change process of organizations, and even patience with themselves.

You can't lose your patience because people are resistant to change... It takes time to move them from that unconscious bias to actually knowing what they're seeing and doing. I think most people want to go in that direction, but they just don't know how to get there; so you have to be patient with the bumps in the road... You'll see things that will make you angry and upset, and you have to take a step back and say, "Okay, this isn't the end, and let's keep moving forward while making some positive changes." (PL)

Whereas perseverance helped exemplars stay the course despite challenges, patience helped exemplars pace themselves, stay even-keeled, engage in self-care, and avoid activist burnout (CL). Ultimately, the balance of perseverance and patience enabled allies to continue learning and enacting allyship, and thereby, become more exemplary over time.

### General Moral Motivation

Beyond the individual virtues discussed above, a more fundamental finding was that allyship was fueled by exemplars' general moral motivation—their sense that allyship simply felt like the right thing to do, or believed it constituted being a good person—which encompassed all four stages and provided reasons for the enactment of individual virtues. This reflects the concept of virtue-general motivation, which is not specific to any one particular virtue but applies to character as a whole, supporting the enactment of multiple virtues (Wright et al., 2020). It often manifested in generalized language of morality or spirituality that reflected an overarching commitment to striving for a good cause and being of good character. This sort of overarching commitment seemed to fuel dedication to several virtues relevant to allyship.

Some exemplars constructed allyship as an expression of religious principles (e.g., the Christian edict of "love thy neighbor," JK). MS shared how being moral was inspired by spiritual exemplars:

Jesus, as I understand him within the context of his day and age, was a profoundly inclusive moral philosopher. He did not abide by rules or social structures or cultures that marginalized anybody. In fact, pretty much everything he did was an attempt to reach out and include the poor, the oppressed, the downtrodden, and those who were despised and outcast by the culture that he grew up in.

Relatedly, for some, allyship was considered fundamental to their own spiritual well-being. PG's personal process illustrates this:

I have been socialized in this spiritual illness by participating in lots of ways that people are oppressed and marginalized, and [allyship] is the way to win my own soul back... This is what I'm trading for my own spiritual well-being. ... It leads to much more authentic relationships with people and with myself. It leads to much more spiritual settledness.

Not only did exemplars wish to do the moral or right thing, they also felt compelled *not* to be complicit or passive. As PG continues, "It's not [just] driven purely by doing the right thing. It's driven largely by not being able to live with myself

if I'm not doing the right thing." Their general regard for moral action precipitated the following sentiment:

At a certain threshold, it's like if your friend's house is burning down, you're not going to say, "Well, I kind of wanted to watch a TV show." No, this is really important, and it involves other humans. This isn't right. (PF)

Thus, their spiritual principles and personal moral code of conduct were key influences for their dedication to allyship.

Another related pattern was that of self-transcendence, broadly conceptualized as other-orientedness, wherein one focuses less on oneself and directs attention to others' welfare (Kao et al., 2017). They expressed a desire to act as allies because it served a larger purpose; they sought to make an impact (ND), be generative (PH), or "give back to the community" (GR), and this was aligned with their moral code. Exemplars described selflessness (i.e., a self-transcendent approach) as the appropriate attitude toward allyship; "not for attention or praise" (MM1), not expecting anything in return (GR). This gets at the heart of virtuous motivation (i.e., enacting allyship for the right reasons), and was the cornerstone of authenticity in their allyship behaviors.

### Interconnections Among the Stages and Potential Moderators

Based on exemplars' reflections of their life periods and transition points in their life/career stories, certain virtues were particularly powerful in fueling allyship development in each of the four stages detailed above and were contextualized by general moral motivation (see Fig. 2). This culminating model consolidates the major findings of the current study. The components of the 4-stage framework appeared to form a sequence,<sup>6</sup> at least in the accounts provided by the exemplars.

Arguably, one of the most important barriers to allyship is the lack of acknowledgment of unearned relative advantage enjoyed by dominant groups and the inequities suffered by marginalized groups. To the extent that individuals do not perceive systemic differences between groups as oppressive

and problematic, they do not recognize the need to correct it through allyship. Thus, the first stage involves compassion and fairness (and likely the action of *phronēsis* to perceive the relevance of these virtues in relation to marginalized groups' experiences). These virtues enabled individuals to more deeply acknowledge group differences and the need to be part of the solution rather than the problem. By fueling this first stage of allyship development, these virtues fostered psychological investment in allyship.

The data also revealed a potential complicating factor with Stage 1, namely, recognizing privilege and the role of one's group in the oppression of another's can spur guilt and shame. Exemplars needed to constructively manage these emotions lest they lead to withdrawal or impede the transition to the second stage.

Individuals who do not withdraw seek to make sense of group differences, and better understand the histories, causes, structures, and mechanisms that perpetuate inequities. The data show that allies availed themselves of various resources to think through and gain knowledge relevant to allyship. Some sought formal training opportunities, whereas others learned informally through videos, books, and interactions with colleagues and mentors from marginalized groups. As they gathered information, they encountered ideas that challenged existing ideologies, questioned past approaches, and revealed their unconscious biases. Such information can be experienced as threatening to the self, highlighting the relevance of intellectual humility in accepting the limitations of one's knowledge, perspective-taking to view situations from marginalized groups' perspectives, and wisdom in integrating new information with one's existing knowledge in the pursuit of truth.

In addition, allies with prior skills in conflict management, mediation, and facilitation augmented the virtues with these relational competencies to support knowledge acquisition. Broadly, exemplars noted that emotional intelligence was not only useful in building understanding but also in crafting ways to apply their knowledge through allyship action, potentially strengthening the transition to the third stage.

In Stage 3, interest and knowledge are converted into action and individuals *become* and are *perceived* by others as allies. Action differentiates those who express interest as a matter of idle curiosity from real allies. By enacting allyship behaviors with increasing regularity, allies grew in confidence, and the virtues became increasingly habituated and required less effort to enact. For virtuous motivations to reach publicly visible behavior (Warren & Bordoloi, in press), allies sometimes had to be courageous to speak up when it was called for. For allyship to serve everybody's best interests, allies approached complex situations with honesty and most of all with prudence (i.e., *phronēsis*) to fluidly recognize the virtue-relevant stimuli in the situation

<sup>6</sup> We wish to introduce the important caveat that developmental stage theories (e.g., of Kohlberg, Piaget, Erikson) have been soundly critiqued (e.g., Brainerd, 1978), with evidence showing that people often revisit/remediate earlier stages, show 'out-of-order' progress, and the stages may have porous boundaries pointing to incremental continuous development of various competencies (e.g., thinking through one's allyship likely starts in an unsophisticated way in Stage 1 and continues to develop through Stage 4) rather than large qualitative transitions from one stage to the next. Accordingly, we offer the 4-stage model as a heuristic for how exemplary allyship may broadly unfold, and we avoid any hard claims about the order, universality, or discreteness of the stages.

and identify healthy allyship behaviors that would protect all stakeholders from harm.

An interesting observation by exemplars was that over time, some of their fellow allies became entrenched in their ways, overconfident in their knowledge and habituated action patterns, and as a result, stagnated as allies. Exemplars cautioned that such allies sometimes unwittingly did more harm than good. Remaining *humble* and engaging in reflective practice, such as by seeking feedback from reflection partners and mentors, prevented stagnation. This process formed an intellectual humility feedback loop that facilitated continual iterations through Stage 2, enabling allies to remain open to further learning, adapt to the rapidly changing dynamics of the social justice space (see Owens et al., 2012), and continually refine their Stage 3 actions. This recurrent loop might capture a critical difference between good and exemplary allies.

Working in diversity, equity, and inclusion is fraught with challenges. The accumulation of obstacles over time seemed to serve as a catalyst for allies to transition into Stage 4. It was easy to burn out, feel overwhelmed, and become discouraged when organizations or cultures were slow to change (DS, PG, RB). Perseverance and patience enabled allies to stay the course in the long run, helping allies remain committed to allyship.

## Discussion

Organizations are increasingly calling on dominant group members (e.g., White, heterosexual, cisgender men) to commit to allyship toward marginalized group members (e.g., People of Color, LGBTQ+ identified, cisgender women). However, their motivation to behave as allies may wax and wane, particularly if it is tied to external rewards and punishments (e.g., business interests, policies). This study considered the role of virtues anchored in moral motivation in supporting allyship and its development. We sought to identify *which* virtues are relevant for allyship, and to understand *how* the virtues function in supporting allyship at different points in allies' journeys. The empirical evidence from in-depth life/career story interviews of allies nominated by peers as exemplary not only sheds light on these questions but also highlights through their examples how leaders and employees can draw on their virtues to be powerfully and sustainably committed to allyship. Further, the findings suggest that individuals, fueled by multiple virtues tied to moral motivation, can become exceptional allies over time, laying the foundation for future theory and research on a virtues-based approach to allyship development.

## Theoretical Contributions and Practical Implications

This paper contributes to the research on equity and inclusion in two major ways. First, it augments work on the 'business case for diversity' (Hoobler et al., 2018) and top-down policies by instead considering internal motivations for pursuing equity and inclusion. Rather than assuming that the only ways to motivate dominant group individuals to be involved in equity and inclusion are through external reward and punishment, this study explored the role of virtues fueled by internal moral motivations. This makes sense particularly in a context where more individuals are expressing interest in being allies (e.g., #BlackLivesMatter, Clark, 2019; #MeToo movement, Veer et al., 2020) and are sharply critiqued when their actions are perceived as performative (e.g., Morris, 2020). Second, it extends the research on equity and inclusion by bringing into focus an underutilized asset and understudied facet in workplace equity and inclusion scholarship—dominant group members' own virtues. By exploring internal motivations connected with existing virtues of allies, this study circumvents the drawbacks associated with the business case and top-down policies (e.g., lack of stickiness, backlash; Kalinoski et al., 2013; Kidder et al., 2004). This study does not dismiss the challenges of allyship, but instead shows how tapping into one's virtues can help allies remain powerfully and sustainably committed despite them, offering a relatable remedy to the challenge of unstable and ephemeral allyship motivation among those who do express some interest yet lack training and support. Furthermore, by examining stories of typical individuals who have developed into exceptionally committed allies, our findings suggest that other flawed individuals who have positive intentions, existing virtues, and an earnest desire and dedication to expand the application of certain virtues to meaningfully support marginalized groups, can become powerful forces for good.

This study contributes to the positive social science and positive organizational scholarship literatures, which consider individuals' virtues in the organizational context (Bright et al., 2014; Gotsis & Grimani, 2015), by leveraging dominant group members' existing internal strengths (i.e., virtues) to animate their commitment to equity and inclusion. In the past, discussion of diversity, equity, and inclusion has remained sparse in positive organizational scholarship (Davidson et al., 2016; Roberts, 2006). By tapping into virtues for the purpose of allyship, this study strengthens the conceptual bridge between positive organizational scholarship and diversity, equity, and inclusion research (Cha & Roberts, 2019; Newstead et al., 2018).

Further, this paper contributes in three specific ways to the scholarship on virtues. First, within the positive organizational literature, there has been greater focus on virtuous behaviors to the neglect of virtuous motivation (Meyer,



2018). Meyer (2018) argues that if virtuousness is measured through behavior alone it is difficult to distinguish between authentic versus performative behaviors. Thus, this study sheds light on how the examination of virtuous motivation along with virtuous behavior can help deepen the theoretical and empirical research on individuals' virtuousness within organizations. Second, Meyer (2018) argues that the most important outcomes that virtuousness within organizations should be geared toward are optimal ethical behavior and human well-being. These outcomes have been studied in a variety of challenging contexts, such as downsizing, albeit at the organizational level (Bright et al., 2006). This paper brings attention to another important context—allyship—in which virtuousness is both a manifestation of optimal ethical behavior of dominant group members and a support for the well-being of marginalized group members. Third, this study has implications for scholars studying specific virtues. Past literature on allyship recognizes compassion and fairness (Broido, 2000; Stotzer, 2009) as critical qualities that allies do or should possess. The current study extends the literature by offering a panoramic view of the virtues linked to allyship, thereby shining the spotlight on several under-represented virtues useful and relevant to allyship. In addition, this study showcases the functional relevance of these virtues by outlining the unique roles that specific virtues play (e.g., energizing interest, thinking through, initiating action, long-term commitment). As such, it develops a conceptual bridge for scholars studying a variety of virtues (e.g., intellectual humility, moral courage, prudence, perseverance in addition to compassion and fairness) to consider allyship as a relevant context for application and moral development in this moment in history, offering a ripe space for virtue ethics to have a meaningful impact.

Although the ETHIC model of allyship and the range of virtues may seem like a tall order, allies need not excel in all of the virtues to be an exemplary ally. In fact, none of the exemplars expressed all of the virtues in the model. For instance, in the first stage, some exemplars leaned toward compassion, others toward fairness. Naturalistically, some virtues may develop through repeated practice along the journey, whereas others may be left behind, as the ideographic data suggest. There is likely heterogeneity across individuals in which virtues develop and which get left behind, reflecting not only individuals' different proclivities but also differences in which virtues were adaptive in an ally's particular context. For instance, intellectual humility may not need to be as high as courage for a young grocery store worker in a high crime neighborhood. Often, exemplars' leanings fit well with their personality, organizational context, and other characteristics.

Our results have practical implications for cultivating allies through trainings that use our 4-stage model as a roadmap. The model not only conveys the rich, long-term

journey of becoming a highly skilled ally, but also gives focus to specific virtues that are relatable and functional in achieving the goals of each stage (energize, think through, etc.)—virtues that may already be endorsed and possessed to some degree by would-be allies. Since individuals need not excel in all of the virtues, an autonomy-supportive approach for allyship development might be to invite interested individuals to identify and practice at least one virtue per stage, and provide them with scaffolded experiences to practice their selected virtues through allyship toward marginalized groups, initially within the training environment but more importantly in their everyday work contexts. Applying the virtues specifically in the domain of allyship toward marginalized groups is crucial; decontextualized virtues training without a focus on marginalized groups may leave too much to chance, allowing would-be allies to miss the point and continue directing their moral motivations in habituated ways (e.g., toward ingroups). Personality research documents that behaviors tend to be narrowly tied to the sorts of situations in which they were initially learned (Mischel, 2004), underscoring the importance of practicing the virtues in relation to marginalized groups within one's naturalistic work ecology.

## Limitations

The study should be viewed in light of its limitations, which also point to avenues for future research. One potential concern stemming from self-report is that informants may tell versions of their stories that present themselves in a favorable light (Alvesson, 2003). Yet, informants shared several stories that they considered as low points in their journeys, and episodes in which they were not proud of the way they behaved. They spoke of feeling shame and guilt and learning difficult lessons. Thus, it appears that there was much candor in the interviews, even if it did not always present the informants in the best light.

A second limitation is the heterogeneity of the sample. The diversity of the sample is a strength – it captures journeys of relatable leaders across a variety of industries, from diverse family backgrounds, situated in socially conservative as well as socially progressive environments, and represents a wide age range. However, this diversity does not allow in-depth examination of allyship as it might occur in a particular setting. Industry settings may play key roles in determining which virtues are most relevant and which allyship approaches are most adaptive. In addition, there might be generational differences in attitudes and practices related to allyship, and these directions should be explored more fully in future research.



## Conclusion

This paper explored a virtue-based approach to allyship development in the workplace. While allyship has been on the rise, particularly on undergraduate college campuses and social media, there is a strong need for its practice to be grounded in empirical scholarship and extended to the employment context. Recently, there has been growing attention to the role of dominant group individuals in fostering inclusiveness (e.g., [www.ForteFoundation.org](http://www.ForteFoundation.org), UN Women HeforShe Initiative, Catalyst-<http://onthemarc.org>). However, these commendable efforts are outpacing the research on allyship in organizations.

While there is consensus on the need for dominant groups to be active contributors to creating egalitarian systems, there is a dearth of evidence-based practices and strategies at the individual and interpersonal levels (Sangster, Executive Director of Forte Foundation, personal communication, 2017). The current research delivers implications for theory, research, and practice by learning from exemplars of allyship. Exploring the journeys of exemplary yet relatable allies has illuminated a preliminary yet promising virtue-based pathway by which individuals can become better allies in the workplace. We hope this paper provides well-intentioned individuals a vision of the steps toward becoming a strong ally.

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