

Northwestern

On Allyship & Standpoint Achievement

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Link to Slides & Handout



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- As a result of their knowledge, those epistemically privileged people can guide us ameliorating social reality. Consider: e.g., Collins (1986).
- Interestingly, recent scholarship has shown that it's not obvious that the relevant kind of epistemic privilege **requires** one to be oppressed – although it is more often possessed by them.
- So, could someone outside the relevant oppressed group achieve a standpoint and, thus, take on a similar (*epistemic*) role in resistance and liberation?

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But ... *why*?

- Theoretically: There is room for an argument to be made that standpoints can be achieved by people outside of the oppressed group.
- Practically: Resistance and liberation require all of us working together in a variety of ways. It may be helpful if allies can alleviate the epistemic work from the oppressed.

Agenda

Preliminaries: Epistemic Privilege for the Oppressed

Lawford-Smith & Tuckwell's Account of Allyship

A Critique of Lawford-Smith & Tuckwell

My Account of Allyship

Allies Can Achieve Standpoints Too!

Aporia?



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The classic answer to this question depends on three theses (Toole 2024). The first is:

Situated Knowledge Thesis

Non-epistemic features of a knower's environment such as "one's social identity and material conditions of one's life" shape what one is in a position to know (ibid., p. 411).

Hartsock (1983) and Rose (1983) support this claim with (broadly) historical-materialist considerations. Janack (1997) points to the simple fact that economic inequalities result in educational differences.

Preliminaries: Epistemic Privilege for the Oppressed

The second thesis used to argue for an epistemic privilege for the oppressed is:

Inversion Thesis

Oppressed people *tend* to know more about the workings of oppression as it applies to them than privileged people (Dror 2022, p. 624).

This is a simple corollary of the **Situated Knowledge Thesis** with the added premise that some people experience oppression.

Indeed, if social reality such as material conditions and institutional practices shape what people are in a position to know *and* social reality is oppressive for some, then it follows that those who experience oppression are in a better position to know about it than those who do not.

Preliminaries: Epistemic Privilege for the Oppressed

The **Inversion Thesis** does not *guarantee* an epistemic privilege to the oppressed. As Lidal Dror (2022) points out, to claim that the oppressed are guaranteed an epistemic privilege would amount to a stronger thesis which is unlikely to be true.

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Why *isn't* the stronger claim true? Consider:

Mary's Room Applied

- Consider two social scientists: a Black woman called Chloe and her white colleague, Jane.
- They both know “just about anything one would want to know about the history and present conditions of Black Americans.”
- They are both activists in several organizations that aim to improve the lives of Black Americans.

Preliminaries: Epistemic Privilege for the Oppressed

Dror rightly suggests that we can recognize that Jane “does not know important things about how it *feels* to be oppressed as a (particular) Black person” and so “concede that Chloe and Black people generally have this epistemic advantage over her” without endorsing the claim that “Jane must thereby be epistemically disadvantaged when it comes to understanding the operations of racism within the United States” (Dror 2022, p. 629).

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This shows that phenomenal knowledge of oppression is not relevant to the epistemic privilege that we expect those with standpoints to have.

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Hence, accepting the **Inversion Thesis** as stated – as not guaranteeing an epistemic privilege to the oppressed – amounts to stating the following:

Achievement Thesis

A standpoint must be achieved rather than attained through merely occupying a social location.

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A standpoint must be achieved rather than attained through merely occupying a social location.

The standard route for achievement suggested in the literature is *consciousness-raising* (e.g., Haraway 1997; Hartsock 1983; Toole 2024).

In sum, the oppressed standpoint consists in knowledge about the workings of oppression. It is not guaranteed that any given oppressed person will develop this knowledge; rather, their developing this knowledge depends on developing an awareness of the social landscape (call this *critical consciousness*).



Lawford-Smith & Tuckwell's Account of Allyship

Allyship: Lawford-Smith & Tuckwell's Account

Recently, Holly Lawford-Smith and William Tuckwell (2024) have proposed:

Allyship 1

An individual I is an ally to a marginalized group G iff:

1. I is privileged along the same axis on which G is oppressed; and
2. I takes resistant actions that are authorized by G and a product of appropriate deference to G , in order to improve the position of G .

Condition 1. is meant to capture intuitions motivated by their paradigmatic cases of allyship: for instance, Peter Norman at the '68 Summer Olympics.

Allyship: Lawford-Smith & Tuckwell's Account

Condition 2. contains three notions that require unpacking: *resistant action*, *group authorization*, and *appropriate deference*.

Luara Ferracioli and Rosa Terlazzo (2026, p. 5) hold that a *feminist* is “someone who (i) has sincere feminist beliefs and values, and (ii) is disposed for that reason to perform feminist actions, even when doing so is costly.” These are “actions that actively resist or undermine sexist norms and expectations” (ibid., p. 5).

Lawford-Smith and Tuckwell (2024, p. 7) generalize these notions to suggest that an ally is someone who “(i) sincerely believe[s] in the importance of advancing the justice-based interests of an oppressed group and (ii) *for that reason* take[s] actions that aim at furthering those interests.” Hence, those actions which further the justice-based interests of the relevant group are *resistant actions*.

Allyship: Lawford-Smith & Tuckwell's Account

The resistant actions taken by the ally must be *authorized* by the group. There are two modes of authorization:

1. An ally is *defaultly authorized by G to φ* if φ is an act of amplifying or disseminating “what has already been explained, said, demanded, etc. by [G]” (Lawford-Smith and Tuckwell 2024, p. 11).
2. An ally is *explicitly authorized by G to φ* if some member(s) of G tell her to φ .

These notions are meant to avoid permitting allyship ascription in cases where G does not approve of the ally's φ -ing.



A Critique of Lawford-Smith & Tuckwell

Allyship: Reconsidering the Zealous Ally

To motivate the claim that allies must only act when authorized, Lawford-Smith and Tuckwell offer the following example:

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Zealous Ally

Consider a would-be ally to lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) people prior to marriage equality who was aware that LGB people were campaigning for it. Nonetheless, this would-be ally had been convinced by second-wave feminist literature that marriage was a central institution in patriarchal oppression, and so vehemently opposed marriage for anyone. She thought LGB people were getting it wrong to want, and campaign for, equal marriage. Suppose this translated into her taking actions against equal marriage, for example, persuading friends and colleagues to vote 'no' when the time came.

Allyship: Reconsidering the Zealous Ally

To Lawford-Smith and Tuckwell, the would-be ally fails to be a genuine ally because she is not authorized either defaultly or, suppose further, explicitly. She is “acting according to her own judgement of the interests of LGB people” (Lawford-Smith and Tuckwell 2024, p. 12). Even if she is right about marriage and her actions are effective, she has still interfered with the autonomy of the group she hoped to help. So, Lawford-Smith and Tuckwell conclude that “an ally must make sure that at least some members of the group they act for want them to act that way” (ibid., p. 12).

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Objection: The problem is not quite that her action was inappropriate (although it was). Rather, the problem is that her (epistemic) judgment of the interests of the group was *unjustified*.

Allyship: Reconsidering the Zealous Ally

Consider a similar case:

Justified Zealous Ally

This time suppose that, before she took action, the ostensible ally made an effort to come to know the interests of the group by talking with and listening to LGB people about their interests relating to marriage equality. Suppose also that while doing this she finds that they do in fact oppose marriage for the reasons stated above. Now suppose this translated into her taking actions against equal marriage, although no LGB person told her to.

It seems that the mistake present in **Zealous Ally** has been rectified in **Justified Zealous Ally**. So, her mistake was in judging the group's interests without justification. She lacked justification because there is evidence that she should have had.



My Account of Allyship

Allyship: A Few Tweaks

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Allyship 2

An individual I is an ally to a marginalized group G iff:

1. I is privileged along the same axis on which G is oppressed;
2. I has critical consciousness with respect to the oppression of G ;
3. I has (and continues to reliably form) justified beliefs about the interests of G ; and
4. as a result of 2. and 3., I frequently takes resistant actions to improve the position of G .

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Re: 2. (critical consciousness) – It is accepted by a number of authors that awareness of one's social position is required for allyship (e.g., Almassi 2015; Blum 2011; Graham et al. 2023).

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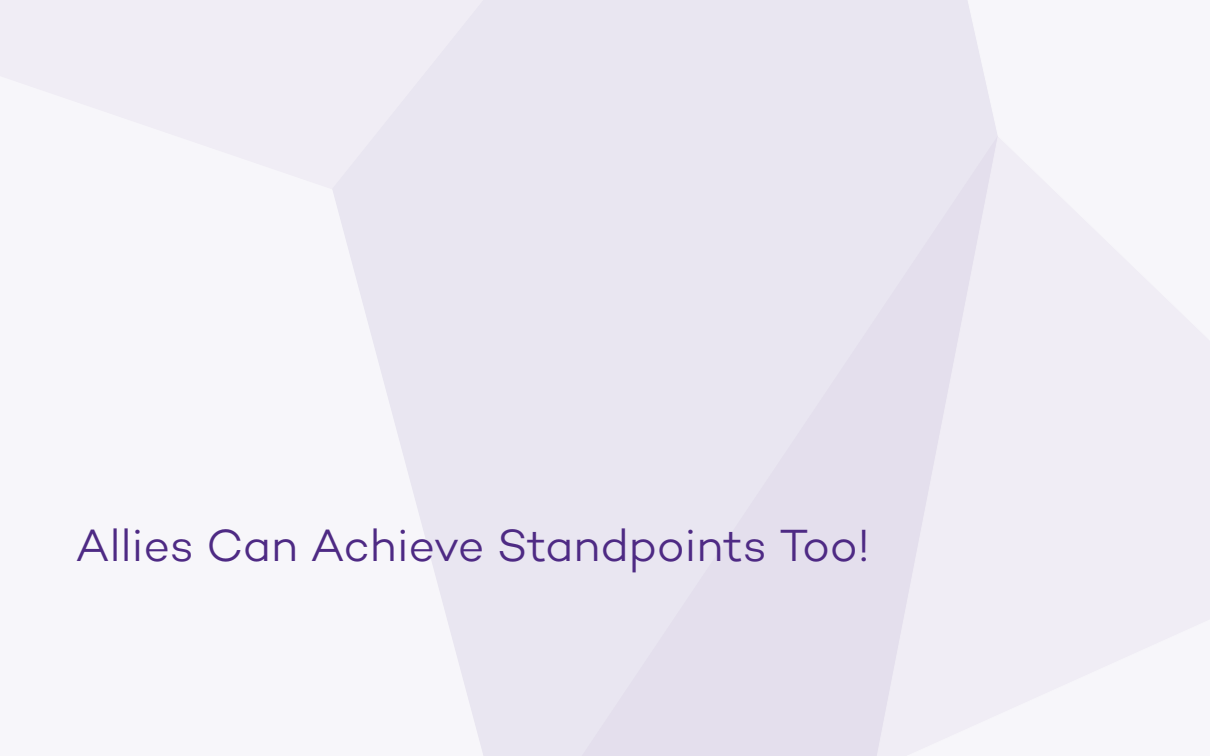
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Re: 4. (action) – With this condition I want to specify that (1) allies are necessarily people who take action, (2) they do so frequently, and (3) their actions are epistemically grounded in the right way.



Allies Can Achieve Standpoints Too!

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As I understand it, one possesses a standpoint, roughly, when they are aware of the oppressive nature of the social landscape (critically conscious), especially as it relates to some group, and have knowledge about the oppression of some particular group.

The literature largely focuses on cases in which the relevant individual *also belongs to that group*. But we can question whether group membership is necessary. Recall that we previously ruled out the possibility that phenomenal (first-person) knowledge of oppression is required to possess a standpoint. So, it is possible for a non-oppressed person to do so.

Allies Can Achieve Standpoints Too!

With this in mind, it is easy to see that allies – as defined here – can achieve standpoints so understood.

To be sure, allies are ...

- critically conscious (2.); and
- *may* talk with and learn from members of the relevant oppressed group about their experiences of oppression.

When this occurs, they possess a standpoint. (Note that this means allies are not guaranteed a standpoint either.)



Aporia?

Potential Aporia

The conclusion that people outside the oppressed group can achieve the relevant epistemic privilege may be *aporetic* to some.

After all, pursuing resistance and liberation require centering the voices (and unique epistemic contributions) of the oppressed. So, doesn't permitting non-oppressed standpoint possession undermine this goal? (I sometimes state this tension in terms of the **Identity Dilemma**)

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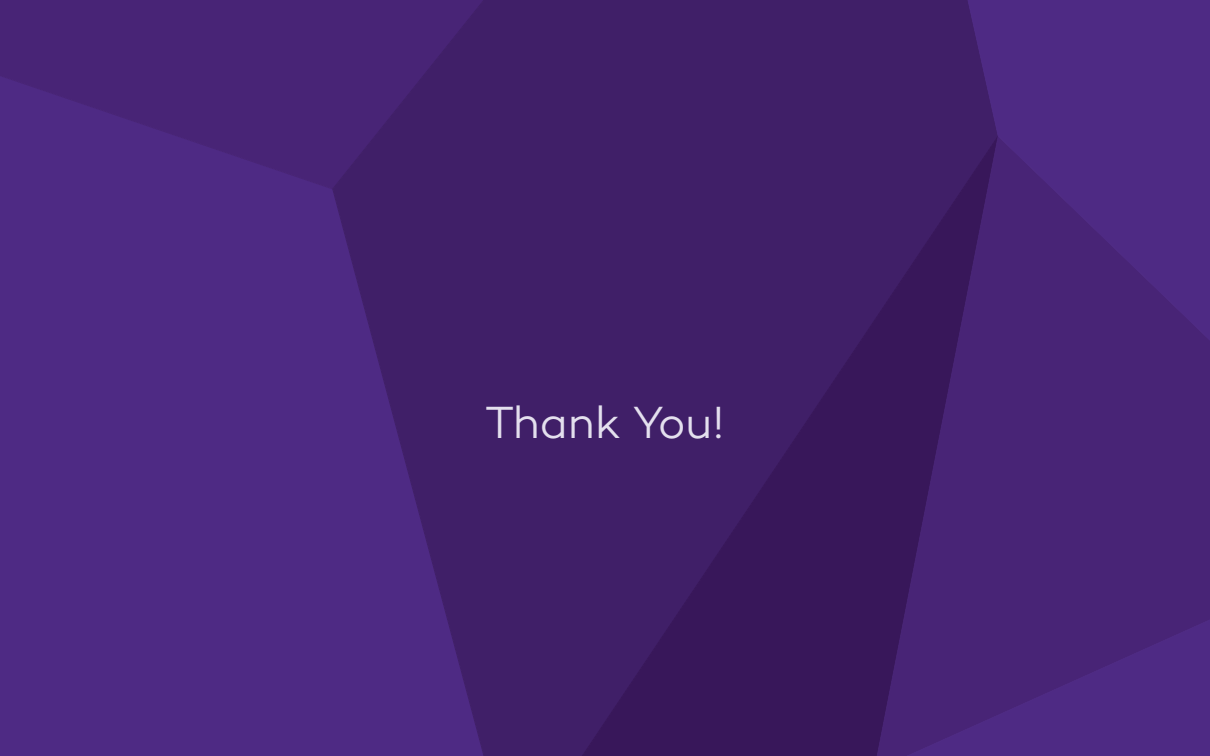
No, I don't think it does. To say that phenomenal (first-person) knowledge of oppression is not relevant to standpoint achievement and possession is **not** to say that it isn't relevant to (especially epistemic) resistance.

Conclusion

I hope to have made two interesting contributions:

1. I presented a novel account of allyship; and
2. I argued that allies (so conceived) can achieve standpoints.

New questions: If 2., then what can allies do for *epistemic resistance* and *epistemic reparations*?

The background consists of several overlapping triangles in various shades of purple and blue. The triangles are arranged in a way that creates a sense of depth and geometric complexity. The colors range from a deep, dark purple to a lighter, more vibrant blue-purple.

Thank You!

Questions?

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