

Dismantling Bias Conference Series

"Am I an ally or is that a lie?" Performativity concerns, authenticity, and allyship

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“Am I an ally or is that a lie?” Performativity concerns, authenticity, and allyship

After the protests following the killing of George Floyd in summer 2020, there was widespread eagerness to engage in *allyship behaviors* - or actions that people take that called for improvements in the treatment of a marginalized group (e.g., Black Americans; Radke et al., 2020). Yet, some members of these marginalized groups expressed concern that these sudden shifts were indicative of “performative allyship” – or empty promises that weren’t rooted in genuine concern for members of disadvantaged groups, but rather enacted to mitigate reputational concerns or strategically enhance one’s own image (“Beware Performative Allyship,” 2021; Leary et al., 2021). Despite the concerns about allies engaging in performative allyship public discourse, scholarly research has yet to systematically examine how performativity threats and (in)authenticity concerns may influence allies’ own behaviors. The present work seeks to more systematically explore the phenomenon of performative allyship, and the role that authenticity (both felt and perceived) plays in encouraging future allyship behavior.

First, we sought to examine the role of felt versus perceived authenticity while engaging in allyship. In Study 1, we recruited non-Black supporters (N=100) of The Movement for Black Lives (“BLM”) in June 2020, shortly following the murder of George Floyd. We believed this timeframe presented a unique opportunity to explore how concerns about authenticity would influence behavior given the subsequent influx of individuals engaging in public displays of allyship for the first time (Pew Research Center, 2020). Participants reported which allyship behaviors they had engaged in (e.g., attending a protest, reading anti-racist materials). For each behavior, participants rated how authentic a) the behavior felt for them and b) would be perceived by others. For behaviors that they had not done, participants gave these same ratings hypothetically. Whereas discourse regarding performativity concerns suggests *perceived* authenticity may drive behavior, we found no differences on perceived authenticity between those who engaged in behaviors versus not. Rather, the biggest difference between

people who had done the behavior versus those who were imagining enacting it was their reports of *felt* authenticity. That is, people who engaged in a particular allyship behavior felt more authentic than people who didn't do the behavior imagined they would feel doing it. This suggests that feeling personally authentic, rather than concerns about being perceived as authentic by others, may be the more important driver of allyship behaviors.

In Studies 2a and b, we sought to establish a causal relationship between felt authenticity and allyship. Study 2a (N=465) was run in March 2021 after reports of anti-Asian hate crime and examined allyship toward Asian Americans. Study 2b (N=940) was pre-registered and run in April 2021 shortly following the trial of the officer who murdered George Floyd and examined allyship toward Black Americans. To experimentally manipulate felt authenticity, participants wrote about how engaging in allyship behaviors would make them feel either authentic or inauthentic. In both studies, the experimental condition increased feelings of authenticity and intentions to engage in collective action (p 's<.05). In addition, we find a significant indirect effect between condition on collective action intentions through felt authenticity.

Finally, in Study 3, we explored how a well-documented threat to allies' feelings of authenticity – concerns about being seen as performative – impacted perceptions of their own motives and subsequent authenticity. We predicted that making the threat of performative allyship salient would lead people to feel less certain about their own motives for allyship, which in turn would lead people to feel less authentic as an ally. We had all participants rank four different allyship behaviors (e.g., reaching out to Black friends) for their perceived importance, and manipulated performativity threat by having those in the Performativity condition (compared to Control) read that whatever behavior they chose as most important could be considered performative allyship. We found that participants in the performativity condition were subsequently less certain about their motives for allyship. We also found a significant

indirect effect of condition on authenticity through certainty of motives. Finally, as with previous studies, authenticity was associated with greater likelihood of engaging in allyship.

The budding literature on allyship has focused on what motivates allies, with the underlying assumption that allies who are motivated for less-than-completely altruistic reasons do more harm than good (Radke et al., 2020). Yet, little is known about how allies themselves think about their motives, and how these beliefs impact ally behavior. We find that feeling authentic can increase allyship, but concerns about performativity may dampen felt authenticity, and thereby halt future allyship action.