DISABILITY ALLIANCES AND ALLIES

Opportunities and Challenges

Edited by Allison C. Carey, Joan M. Ostrove and Tara Fannon

DISABILITY ALLIANCES AND ALLIES

RESEARCH IN SOCIAL SCIENCE AND DISABILITY

Series Editors: Sharon N. Barnartt and Barbara M. Altman

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DISABILITY ALLIANCES AND ALLIES: OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

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INTRODUCTION: EXPLORING THE OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES OF ALLIANCES AND ALLYSHIP IN THE LIVES OF PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

Allison C. Carey, Tara Fannon and Joan M. Ostrove

INTRODUCTION

In 2019, when we (Allison, Joan, and Tara) issued the call for papers for this volume, we aimed to draw attention to the opportunities and challenges of alliances within, among, and beyond disability communities. We set out to encourage challenging conversations, focusing on issues such as power, shared and conflicting interests, and voice. As we moved toward finalizing the volume, the political landscape changed dramatically. The spread of the novel coronavirus and the protests following the killing of George Floyd by a police officer shone a spotlight on the devastating consequences of social oppression and thrust the meaning and practice of allyship into the foreground of national dialogue.

As the contributing authors revised their accepted chapters in March of 2020, the novel coronavirus was rapidly spreading across the United States, and stay-at-home orders were put in place to slow transmission and try to prevent the health care system from being overwhelmed. Most people experienced social upheaval, but precarity and social marginalization heightened the threats faced by people with disabilities. Social distancing upended established relationships of support upon which people with disabilities relied, and disruptions to supply chains and economic hardship undercut access to vital resources. Disability communities drew on their vast repertoire of strategies and marshaled mutual aid efforts – grounded in the principles of disability justice and modeled on the long-standing alliance-building strategies – to provide one another with needed support to live full lives (Bak, 2020; Sins invalid, 2020). In the absence of adequate

support from the state and local communities, though, too many were left without the care and resources they needed. Disabled people, especially Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) and people in poor communities, as so often happens disproportionately bore the brunt of devastation (Lederer, 2020; Prior, 2020) and double-downed on efforts to provide support and resource to one another. As the United States learned the value of the social model of disability, it simultaneously Exceptionalized and disregarded the needs of disabled people in increasingly blatant economic calculations designed to reignite capitalist engines (Kukla, 2020; Ladau, 2020; Ne'eman, 2020).

Final submissions for the volume came due at the end of May 2020, just days after the horrifying murder of George Floyd at the hands (or more precisely the knee) of the Minneapolis Police Department. The massive uprisings that ensued, led by community members and activists demanding #justiceforGeorgeFloyd and reminding the world – once again – that #BlackLivesMatter, forced another important reckoning about what it means to be an ally in the fight for racial justice, the dismantling of white supremacy, and the end of anti-Blackness (Stewart, 2020). Coalitions emerged among many different groups to organize mutual aid, to promote efforts to defund the police, invest in public services, and demand a broad array of changes. Recognizing the intersection of race, disability, gender, and class provided new opportunities for collective mobilization and "radical inclusivity," while others used Floyd's health and disability status to skirt responsibility for police brutality (see #DisabilitySolidarity, #DisabilityJustice, #BlackBrilliance; Ankel & Mahbubani, 2020).

Through the tumultuous spring, the meaning of and practical strategies for alliance became a key part of national and international dialogues. Activists instructed allies to check their privilege, build their knowledge, teach anti-oppression strategies to their children, create change in their local communities, and support (not usurp) BIPOC and disabled leaders. Highlighting power imbalances, activists called for "accomplices" who would use and sacrifice their privilege – such as risking police violence and the loss of employment – in the fight for social justice. Silence and complicity were identified as acts of violence themselves (Wyatt, 2020).

National and international conversations have certainly changed in the past year. The chapters in this volume unfortunately do not attend to the novel coronavirus or the Black Lives Matter movement. Fortunately, they do provide an academic foundation for our work in understanding and forging alliances to create change. They present varied conceptualizations of alliance, explore the factors that encourage and discourage alliance building, demonstrate both the consequences of alliance and the absence of alliance, and consider the processes and characteristics of effective alliances often across significant differences and inequalities. It is clearer than ever that we must work together toward social transformation, but the road to alliance is not smooth; it is forged through hard work, sacrifice, humility, and acts of connection and reconnection. We hope this volume offers a substantive contribution toward imagining and achieving new paths to collective activism and resisting acts in the name of alliance that actually serve to maintain inequality.

To frame the contributions of this collection, below we offer a discussion of several key issues related to alliance and disability. We then briefly introduce the chapters and their contributions to the field.

KEY ISSUES IN THE SOCIAL SCIENCES OF ALLIANCES, ALLIES, AND DISABILITY

Alliance at its simplest is a strategy by which individual or organizational entities join in partnership with others to achieve mutual benefit or common purpose. Our world is relational – identities are enacted through interaction; resources flow unequally and inequitably across groups; rights represent claims by which we demand others respect our freedoms and needs; and social change occurs as we influence the beliefs and social structures that shape behavior. Despite the American emphasis on individualism, our lives intertwine with and depend on a vast array of other people. As such, alliance is one of the central strategies by which we navigate social life, forming partnerships as we seek to meet our needs, achieve our interests, and shape our world.

Within social sciences, the concept of alliance has received scant attention. When it is studied, it tends to be addressed in two particular ways. At the macro level, alliances are seen as one of the variables affecting social movements and change. As such, scholars examine the factors that shape political alliances and the consequences of these alliances or lack thereof (e.g., Barnartt & Scotch, 2001; Carey, Block, & Scotch, 2019, 2020; Schweik, 2011; Taylor, 2009; Van Dyke & McCammon, 2010). On a more micro level, the concept of allyship evokes the often explicit act of relationship building, at times among people of similar social status and at times across majority–minority or superordinate–subordinate lines. In the psychological research literature, allies are typically described as members of dominant groups who are committed to and work on behalf of the liberation of a nondominant group (e.g., Brown, 2015; Case, 2012; Droogendyk, Wright, Lubensky, & Louis, 2016; Fingerhut, 2011; Selvanathan, Techakesari, Tropp, & Barlow, 2017). In both circumstances, alliances are political; they involve the conferring, sharing, or mutual challenging of power. Other types of relationships, such as friendships, family, or "helping" relationships, likely involve power and shared interests, but in alliances issues of power, process, and the pursuit of shared interests come to the fore.

Alliance Building among the Powerful

Alliance building is a key strategy of the powerful in the pursuit of power, and this often is experienced as a coercive external constraint by people with disabilities. This can be seen in several arenas in society. In the classic sociological work *The Power Elite,* C. Wright Mills (1956) demonstrated that politicians, military leaders, and capitalists do not act as independent actors or even within independent sectors; instead, they coordinate their actions, share resources, and consolidate power within the "military industrial complex." Alliances across

sectors benefit actors in these sectors and reinforce the power of elites, and thus they enable widespread economic exploitation, oppression, and even warfare to benefit themselves. Everyday citizens can hardly prevail over this political goliath, and instead experience disablement, poverty, exploitation, and alienation as the rich get richer (Charlton, 2000).

Another structural alliance that reinforces power for elites while devastating poor, marginalized communities, including people with disabilities, is the prison industrial complex. This represents "a complex web interweaving private business and government interests in the growing industry of incarceration and prison development" (Chapman, Carey, & Ben-Moshe, 2014, p. 13); economic and political elites ally with agents of incarceration to warehouse and disempower segments of the population deemed dangerous or unproductive, particularly men of color, while profiting directly and indirectly from their incarceration (Ware, Ruzsa, & Dias, 2014). The prison industrial complex infiltrates the school systems that label children as disabled and delinquent and channel them into the "prison pipeline," while it also produces disability through the abusive conditions of prison life (Erevelles, 2014; Ware et al., 2014).

Via the "criminal justice–social service alliance," marginalized communities are surveilled and policed under the guise of benevolent assistance (Dewey & St Germain, 2016; Hewlett & West, 1998; Ladd-Taylor, 2017). Social services coerce people with disabilities into institutional settings, encourage sterilization and birth control, and impose social control mechanisms in exchange for providing the resources needed for survival. While portraying themselves as allies of the poor, social workers may instead serve the interests of elites who seek to discourage deviance and dependence (Chapman & Withers, 2019; Ladd-Taylor, 2017).

In each of these structural alliances, we see cooperation across macro social systems and the official actors within them that facilitates a political agenda, threatens the well-being of the most vulnerable, and leaves little opportunity for resistance. Disability is central to this system of stratification. Economic exploitation and war produce disability; medical systems and social services individualize and pathologize the experience of disability while overlooking oppression; and incarceral settings (including medical institutions) disempower people with disabilities (Charlton, 2000; Erevelles, 2014). People with disabilities as a group rarely exercise significant control over these structures and therefore experience them primarily as coercive external forces rather than as effective avenues to attain their own interests.

Alliance Building as an Act of Social Resistance

Alliance, however, is not solely a tool of the elite; it is an essential component of social resistance. As such, alliance building – both internal and external – has been a valuable strategy within disability activism. According to the theory of resource mobilization (McCarthy & Zald, 1977; Morris, 1984; Zald & McCarthy, 1997), social movements are likely to be successful to the extent that they can mobilize people and their resources (e.g., money, political influence, symbolic

authority, physical presence at protests, knowledge). Therefore, alliance building is critical to success.

While there are many dimensions by which to consider alliances, here we will distinguish between internal and external alliances (Barnartt, this volume). Internal alliance building involves the work of uniting those most directly affected to engage in activism. Social networks – radically reconfigured and expanded in an era of social media – often provide the pathways by which individuals gain exposure to and encouragement to participate in activism. Participation fosters an "oppositional consciousness" (Groch, 1994), the framing of an individuals' experiences as a collective phenomenon rooted in shared oppression and best addressed through social change. Barnartt and Scotch (2001. p. 17) wrote, "One of the most important tasks that social movements actively engage in is the production of meaning for participants, antagonists, and observers." For people with disabilities, the consciousness achieved via engaging with social movements likely upends prior views of disability and self-identity (Darling, 2013). The 504 sit-ins, for example, cultivated a collective identity rooted in the shared experience of ableism and a sense of political efficacy among participants, many of whom had only experienced social isolation and dependency (Fleischer & Zames, 2011; Pelka, 2012).

Through alliances, people with disabilities sought to remake the political landscape. In the early and mid-twentieth century, distinct disability communities formed organizations, such as the League of the Physically Handicapped and the National Association of the Deaf (Fleischer & Zames, 2011; Nielsen, 2012). Over time, cross-disability organizations and alliances grew more widespread. Often, activists worked with distinct populations on distinct issues, creating in effect multiple disability movements; yet, they also allied when mutually agreeable, creating the potential for mass collaborative action (Barnartt & Scotch, 2001; Charlton, 2000; Pelka, 2012). Through this decentralized structure, disability activists forged a major civil rights movement, nurtured politicized identities, and fostered disability pride.

External alliances also play a crucial role in social movements. External alliances broaden the reach of a movement's message, tap into key roles and institutions necessary to enact social change, and expand the pool of resources (Van Dyke & McCammon, 2010). Since broad social change must be institutionalized and enacted across diverse settings and groups, alliance building across groups is essential. To address employment discrimination, for example, disability activists must work with politicians, employers, social security experts, social service officials, other civil rights groups, and others.

Among external allies, some are more closely aligned with the interests of disability activists than others. Parents, for example, are often keenly aware of the disadvantages experienced by their disabled children, experience secondary discrimination themselves, and may participate in the front lines of disability activism (e.g., Blum, 2015; Carey, Block, & Scotch, 2020; Charmak, 2008; Panitch, 2008; Rosqvist, Brownlow & O'Dell, 2015). Civil rights organizations at times offer support to affirm the value of civil rights, resist oppression, and build connections across marginalized populations such as between BIPOC and the

disability community (Frederick & Shifrer, 2018; OToole, 2015; Schweik, 2011), although at other times they disregard the centrality of disability to their work. Some organizations led primarily by nondisabled people explicitly ally with the disability community, although their commitment to widespread, systemic changes varies widely (Maconi, this volume).

Disability politics may also inspire "strange bedfellows" – alliance between unexpected groups who share a specific interest but otherwise embrace divergent or even contrary goals. Giric (2016) offers the example of the alliance between the Christian Right and disability activists. The values of the Christian Right, such as limited social spending and freedom from government intervention and mandates regarding civil rights, clash with the goals of many disability activists. The Christian Right and disability activists, though, have allied to ensure protections to newborns with disabilities (Giric, 2016; Staggenborg, 2010).

The Social Factors that Encourage or Hinder Alliances

Various factors hinder or encourage alliances, and people with disabilities experience particular challenges to alliance building. Macro systems such as government and economy shape the feasibility of activism and alliance building. Activism and alliances tend to thrive in democratic systems with vibrant civil societies and where people's basic needs are met, whereas state repression, civil unrest, and poverty undermine such activities. Even in democratic societies, though, barriers to disability activism abound (Scotch, 1988). Most people become engaged in activism via their social networks, but poverty, limited education, and social isolation mean that people with disabilities enjoy less access to and control over valuable social institutions like government and policy-making, research institutes, and media outlets. People with disabilities may rely on family members and/or paid staff for transportation and support, but this assistance may be more or less available; family and staff may even see activism as a threat and actively discourage it (Friedman & Beckwith, 2014). Inaccessibility in transportation, communication, information, and physical structures hinders participation in activism. Furthermore, the disproportionate poverty of people with disabilities limits their ability to engage in particular strategies of activism, impeding access to dues-based organizations, protests that require travel, and activities that require time, resources, and childcare.

In addition to logistical issues, identification and framing shape decisions of how and with whom to ally. Many people with physical and mental limitations do not identify as "disabled." Their disinclination to identify might be relatively unconscious or might involve an explicit "dis-identification" – a rejection of the label of "disabled" (Darling, 2013; Egner, 2018; Nario-Redmond, 2020). They may focus instead on their abilities, assign spiritual or other explanations for their experiences, or prioritize other identity affiliations. People who become disabled later in life, for example, are less likely to identify as "disabled" or to engage in activism as disabled people, thwarting alliance despite shared concerns (Darling, 2013; Kahana & Kahana, 2017; Meyers, this volume). For African-Americans, the long history of medical discrimination and the use of psychiatric diagnosis as a

means of pathologizing resistance to oppression fostered community suspicion of stigmatizing diagnoses and focused energies on race-based inequities (Metzl, 2010).

Activists with similar needs may disagree on the framing of the problem, policies, and solutions. For example, neoliberalism fractures potential partners as they fight over scarce resources. In this competitive environment, some activists fight for resources by playing into neoliberal demands for productivity, while others resist the commodification of human worth (Fritsch, 2013; Russell, 1998; Dimitrova, this volume).

When we consider the factors that make organizational alliance more likely, several factors stand out. Shared interests and framing, known as ideological alignment, encourages agreement regarding the perceived problems and solutions and thereby facilitates cooperation (Carey et al., 2019; Gerhards & Rucht, 1992; McCammon & Van Dyke, 2010; Snow & Benford, 1992; Snow, Rochford, Worden, & Benford, 1986; Staggenborg, 2010). Shared interests and framing may not be sufficient, however; a sense of shared threats and/or perceived political opportunities may be necessary to motivate groups to work together (McAdam, 1996; Van Dyke & McCammon, 2010). For example, threats in 2017 to the Affordable Care Act brought many formerly disparate groups to Washington DC to protest together, while bipartisan support among politicians for the ABLE Act encouraged various organizations to work together. Shared membership may also serve to bridge organizational divides, such as people who belong to both disability and LGBT + groups who act as "bridge-builders," helping each group understand their shared interests and concerns (Fernández, Bosch, & Samarach, 2017). New technologies have upended traditional movement strategies; now a tweet or online call to action can "go viral" and influence people far outside traditional organizational bounds.

Power Imbalances within and across Alliances

Within alliances, tensions are common as disparate parties negotiate interests, tactics, and power. People and groups bring different levels of power and privilege into activism, and inequality among partners threaten a sense of solidarity. Racial privilege is one such type of inequality. Among activists with disabilities, white, educated, physically disabled people have often positioned themselves in the forefront of the movement, failed to encourage leadership by BIPOC, and disregarded the intersectional nature of oppression (Berne, 2015; Erkulwater, 2018; Moore, Lewis, & Brown, 2016). American disability organizations dominated by white activists, for instance, thereby discouraging cross-race alliance. Describing the Center for Independent Living at Berkeley in the 1970s, Corbett OToole (2015) explains that white activists focused on achieving rights and accessibility, which they thought helped everyone, but they ignored the range of access needs across diverse populations. She writes,

> While the local independent living center fought hard for access to the library, they rarely fought for access to a battered women's shelter or for interpreters for the Gay Pride Parade and English-as-a-second-language classes. Many disabled people of color and disabled queers were left on their own to fight for their access rights (2015, p. 101).

People with other types of disabilities, including intellectual and mental disabilities, also felt excluded by the power of activists with physical disabilities and their focus on physical access (Pelka, 2012).

Others criticized disabled leaders for buying into a neoliberal agenda to secure rights and employment for those most easily integratable while minimizing, or even ignoring, the pressing needs of people who could not work, have complex medical needs, need extensive supports, and/or belong to communities impacted by multiple vectors of oppression (Berne, 2015; Fritsch, 2013; Mingus, 2014). By supporting the idea that disability rights would minimize dependency, activists secured rights legislation but subverted claims to a widespread redistribution of resources and ignored the intersecting factors hindering basic survival (Huang, this volume; Russell, 1998).

Alliances with external parties are similarly fraught with competing interests and complex power dynamics. For example, people with disabilities and care providers share many interests related to the provision of high quality care, yet their alliance falters at times when the goal of higher wages or better working conditions for care providers jeopardizes the hours of care for people with disabilities (Chang, 2017; Katz, this volume). Civil rights organizations at times express concern that the expansion of civil rights laws undercuts their own hard-won victories (Scotch, 1984).

When interests compete, issues of power come to the fore. External allies who enter the relationship with greater power may have greater power to shape the goals, message, and tactics of the movement, in effect undercutting the goal of self-determination (Russell & Bohan, 2016). The role of parents as allies highlights the advantages and disadvantages of external allies. Parents often see themselves as not only allies but as leaders in disability activism (Jones, 2010). They bring considerable resources and symbolic authority to the fight, but they also may subvert self-determination and empowerment of people with disabilities (Carey et al., 2019, 2020; Landsman, 2009; McGuire, 2016; Rottier & Gernsbacher, this volume). Academics and researchers also frequently seek to ally with marginalized communities, yet the power and interests of academics threaten to overwhelm these partnerships (see Pombier, this volume).

Because allies may hold privilege and act in deeply ableist ways, disability organizations struggle to balance the needs of their disabled members with the desire to welcome potential allies (Gillespie-Lynch et al., this volume). Allyship simultaneously may confer resources but also threaten the goals of the movement and even the well-being of disabled activists (Piepzna-Samarashinha, 2018; Moore et al., 2016).

The Work of Allyship

While alliances may be formed around any issue and are used for a variety of purposes, activists often desire allies who are trustworthy and act as "co-conspirators" or "accomplices" in the fight for social change. Acting in ways that are both interpersonally affirming and politically and socially informed (Brown & Ostrove, 2013), allies from dominant groups should be willing not only to critically