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Bursting the bubble of performative allyship: How moral performance compromises inter-group learning by engendering over-confidence

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**Bursting the bubble of performative allyship:
How moral performance compromises inter-group learning by engendering over-
confidence**

(Abstract: 744 words)

Allyship, or “action [taken by advantaged group members] to improve the treatment and/or status of a disadvantaged group” (Droogendyk et al., 2016), can be a powerful tool for reducing discrimination and inequity in organizations. As a result, research has given ample attention toward how to enable and motivate dominant group members toward helping those from marginalized groups (e.g. Bezrukova et al. 2012; Galinsky et al. 2015; Rosette et al. 2013). Yet, allyship is a continual learning process. Marginalized group members and dominant group members come to the table with different experiences, concerns, assumptions, and biases. In order to work effectively toward greater equity, allies must learn from instances when their efforts miss the mark. Because of this, it is inherently valuable to understand the psychological and interpersonal process that occur when dominant group members perceive their allyship efforts as backfiring. As scholarly attention toward allyship has grown in recent years, there is still scant research on the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral processes that unfold when attempts toward allyship, genuine or not, fail to have their desired effects (Iyer & Achia, 2020; Droogendyk et al., 2020; Carton & Knowlton, 2017).

In this research, I suggest that a key obstacle to ally learning is moral performance, or a disparity between one’s outward image of morality (e.g. organizational membership, hobbies, products one buys), and one’s internal moral identity (Aquino & Reed, 2002). For those who would categorize themselves as allies, moral performance can take the form of what is known in lay terms as “performative allyship,” or when privileged group members engage in activism which ultimately preserves or enhances their social capital and standing, rather than shifting resources and status toward marginalized groups (Morris, 2020). In the most pernicious cases, those who engage in performative allyship may be completely aware that their actions will not help marginalized groups, and may even harm them. However, I suggest that in many cases, performative allyship may have less to do with social dominance and more to do with social approval – in these cases, those who engage in moral performance may come to believe that they are actually making a difference for marginalized groups (Festinger, 1957). I suggest that this is troublesome because it creates a false overconfidence in one’s effectiveness as an ally, which leads to a drop in one’s efficacy as an ally when attempts toward allyship seem to backfire. Instead of approaching such failures as learning opportunities, those who gained their efficacy through moral performance are likely to perceive the glass of their image as cracked and be less sure of how to move forward. These arguments are summarized in the theoretical model in Figure 1.

These hypotheses will be tested across two studies; Study 1 has been completed and Study 2 (an experiment) is in the planning stages. Here I describe preliminary findings from Study 1. Study 1 is a cross-sectional survey of MBA students (44% white, 79% male) who self-selected into a club focused on male allyship. The survey measured instances of allyship backfiring through an open-ended free response question that was then hand coded, moral performance (taking the difference between the symbolic and internalized subscales from Aquino & Reed, 2002), ally

self-efficacy (modified from Chen, Gully, & Eden, 2001), and prosocial motivation (Grant & Sumanth, 2009; as a potential control).

In total, 33.8% (51/151) of participants could recall a specific incident of when they tried to act as an ally and it backfired. Participants described these incidents, which included both instances of rebuff from marginalized group members and being discouraged by dominant group members. There was no direct effect of having an allyship attempt backfire on participants' self-efficacy as allies ($p = 0.57$, $b = -0.077$, $se = 0.135$). However, there was an interactive effect between moral performance and having an allyship attempt backfire on participants' allyship self-efficacy ($p = 0.027$, $b = -0.256$, $se = 0.115$). The interactive plot is shown in Figure 2. In line with predictions, this plot suggests that for those higher in moral performance, self-efficacy as an ally is higher except for those who had an allyship attempt backfire, who saw a sharp decline in efficacy. On the other hand, the opposite is true for those lower on moral performance (higher on moral identification vs. symbolism) – allyship backfiring led to a jump in self-efficacy as allies. These results include prosocial motivation as a control, as it was correlated with both IV and DV variables, though results are robust to this control.

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Figure 1: Theoretical Model

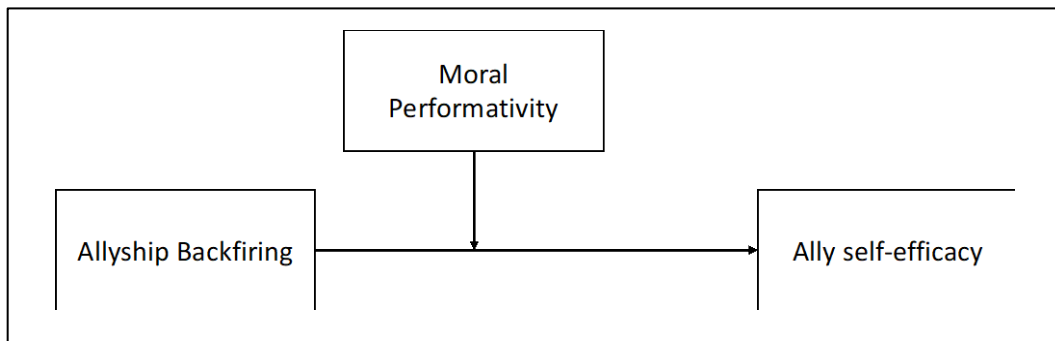


Figure 2: Interaction of Allyship Backfiring and Moral Performance on Allyship Self-efficacy

