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The Normative Demand for Deference in Political Solidarity

Abstract: Allies of those experiencing injustice or oppression face a dilemma: to be neutral in the face of calls to solidarity risks siding with oppressors, yet to speak or act on behalf of others risks compounding the injustice. We identify what we call ‘a normative demand for deference’ (NDD) to those with lived experience as a response to this dilemma. Yet, while the NDD is prevalent, albeit sometimes implicitly so, in contemporary solidarity theory and activist practice, it remains under-theorised. In this article, we analyse the potential benefits of adhering to the NDD, highlighting both a commonly accepted epistemic benefit, and a neglected but important good in bearing witness. Yet adhering to the NDD also raises real challenges. While the literature focuses on a gold standard model of direct engagement, we defend a valuable role for a second-order form of engagement through reading, films, and similar media, which, we argue, is particularly salient for global and transnational solidarity, an important element of contemporary global politics.

Keywords: solidarity; deference; allyship; bearing witness; lived experience

Introduction:

Calls to solidarity seem to be everywhere at the moment; whether regarding the injustice of structural racism, sexism, trans* oppression, climate justice, global poverty, local poverty, gender inequality, vaccine hoarding, the war in Yemen, the war in Ukraine, the political situation in Hong Kong, or many things besides, to be neutral, we are told, is to side with oppressors, so we must pick a side, take a stand, even if the fight is not directly our fight.

Concurrent with this upsurge in calls to solidarity in public discourse, there is growing demand that both activism and normative theorising responding to contemporary injustices be appropriately ‘responsible’, ‘accountable’, led by or co-produced with those who have lived experience of the oppression

(see, inter alia, Ackerley et al., 2021; Mihai, 2020; Van Der Anker, 2008). The familiar slogan, ‘nothing about us without us’, originating in disabled people-led organisations, has become a guiding principle of social justice movements, but some contemporary activism and theorising about solidarity implicitly or explicitly make more stringent demands in relation to the authoritative role of those with lived experience of oppression or injustice, and the subordinate role of allies, in solidarity movements.

We suggest this be thought of as a *normative demand for deference to lived experience* in the practice of solidarity (hereafter NDD). In short, the normative assumption at work in this demand is that oppression is compounded when would-be allies who have the privilege of not experiencing any given oppression seek to speak or lead or act on behalf of those with lived experience of oppression. In some activist practice and academic theorising on solidarity, it seems that expressions of solidarity are only ‘authentic’ (Scholz, 2008) when the NDD is satisfied.

And yet, *why* is deference an appropriate, perhaps a constitutive, element of the practice of solidarity? This question is important given the prevalence and salience of calls to solidarity in a world of both global and local profound injustices. Despite a recent blossoming in academic theorising on solidarity, the role of deference remains under-theorised;¹ some variant of the NDD is often implicitly or explicitly deployed, without detailed critical examination.

In this article, we begin by drawing out why deference matters for political solidarity. We then explore in more detail the core dilemma of solidarity sketched above, namely, that to be neutral in the face of oppression is not a morally defensible option, yet to seek to speak or act on injustices from which we are ourselves insulated risks compounding the injustice. We argue that theorists and activists increasingly favour something like the NDD as they attempt to grapple with this dilemma. We then examine what goods are promoted by accepting the NDD. While theorists of solidarity have generally focused on epistemic goods, we find that there is a second important and neglected good in *bearing witness* to lived experience of oppression, which may help to deliver a degree of recognition respect within the thinly shared moral community that solidarity builds.

In the final section of the article, we discuss how the NDD can be adhered to in practice, and what roles theorists may play. Here, we find that while the literature has tended to focus on what we call a gold standard model of direct

1 A notable exception is found in Avery Kolers’ (2016) ‘moral’ theory of solidarity – we say more about this below.

engagement, we find that there is a valuable role for a second-order form of engagement through reading, films, and similar media, and for theorists and activists with the resources to do so to amplify the uptake of such media. Doing so may promote both of the core solidarity-relevant goods that adherence to the NDD has the potential to deliver, namely epistemic resources and bearing witness. Seen as a practice of solidarity, these activities might be dismissed as lazy or trivial. On the contrary, we suggest that this second-order form of engagement may be particularly salient for global and transnational solidarity, and may be essential for preparing the way to a deeper solidarity oriented towards a more just world.

Solidarity, Activism and Difference

Within the literature solidarity is defined in various ways: as the bond that underpins social cooperation and social welfare, particularly as rooted in the Roman Law concept of a common debt; as the shared identity that binds a community, particularly a nation; as an affective relation capable of motivating joint-action; as shared practices underpinning a commitment to accept costs to help others; as something more universal like human solidarity, rooted sometimes in Catholic thought, or as a ground for human rights sometimes related to the Revolutionary French notion of fraternité; as fellow-feeling, sometimes grounded in shared identity or shared experience of oppression; as fate-sharing; or as the motivational glue of a goal-directed social movement (see, *inter alia*, Bayertz, 1999; Brunkhorst, 2005; Gilabert, 2019; Prainsack and Buyx, 2012; Scholz, 2008 and 2014; Sangiovanni, 2015; Shelby, 2002 and 2008; Taylor, 2015; Wilde, 2007; Woods, 2012; Zhao, 2019).

In the present discussion we do not enter into the project of defining solidarity in all its forms. Rather, we are concerned with solidarity expressed and enacted by allies, who do not themselves experience a given injustice, towards those who are directly affected by the injustice. This is commonly identified in the literature as political solidarity (e.g., in Scholz, 2008), but we do not tie ourselves here to a particular specification of what political solidarity can or should entail.² Examples of the kinds of acts that allies might engage in as expressions of political solidarity may include campaigning, boycotting, providing practical support or friendship, or taking some form of direct action, in opposition to an injustice.

In paradigmatic examples of solidarity, such as trade union movements,³ co-presence

² We also refrain from distinguishing between allyship and solidarity, since, in everyday discourse, acts and expressions of commitment that might be called allyship are also often called solidarity.

³ Though we will discuss below an example of divergences of experience that can lead to tensions within a trade union.

and directly shared experience is a constitutive feature of the movement, and so the relation amongst fellow solidarists has an immediacy to it which facilitates understanding and bolsters unity. But we also encounter demands for solidarity relating to global or transnational injustices, e.g., the situation faced by Afghan refugees seeking asylum in Europe since the return of the Taliban, or LGBT+ people in countries where non-normative sexualities and gender identities are criminalised. In these circumstances, i.e., where there is an ingroup with a shared experience of oppression, and an outgroup of potential allies, expressions of solidarity on the part of more privileged actors may be viewed with a degree of cynicism. Solidarity across deep and profound difference, or physical distance, may be necessary to address enduring social injustices, but it is hardly straightforward. Firstly, there are scholars who have questioned the motivational and conceptual feasibility of claims of ‘global’ or ‘cosmopolitan’ solidarity, that is to stand in solidarity with others by virtue of our shared humanity (Lenard, 2012; Rorty, 1998;). Secondly, there are those who have questioned narrower (but nonetheless broad) commonalities as the basis of solidarity. Most notably, thinkers within the postcolonial feminist tradition have cast doubt on liberal feminist claims that gender constitutes a sufficient shared experience for affluent white western feminists to assume shared experience with, and speak on behalf of, those facing gender oppression elsewhere (Khader, 2019; Lorde, 1983; Mohanty, 1988; Narayan, 2004).

These critics raise valuable points, cautioning against generalising from the experiences and security of the (relatively) powerful to assume commonality, and in doing so erasing or crowding out the experiences, and the voices, of the less powerful and less easily heard. Nonetheless, rejecting the possibility of genuine solidarity with groups and individuals whose lives are very different from our own comes at a significant cost. If, as is widely accepted, affect is central to moral motivation,⁴ then it is hard to see how the more privileged/affluent/powerful will be motivated to act to address injustices facing individuals and groups different from themselves (ourselves) in the absence of a solidaristic relationship. This is of particular concern, as, without disavowing nor undervaluing the significant agency of activist movements rooted within the experience of oppression, the powerful seem to be well-placed to act effectively to

4 We take solidarity to be an affective relationship and affirm that affect is (plausibly) central to moral motivation. This is a claim that is widely supported in the empirical literature on moral motivation (Green et al., 2001; Izard and Ackerman, 2000; Prinz and Nichols, 2010). As a wide-ranging meta-study on the topic notes, a weight of evidence suggests that ‘not only are emotions engaged during moral cognition, but that emotions [...] are in fact critical for human morality’ (Koenigs et al, 2007: 910).

address injustice (due to their power).⁵

Thus, we confront the pressing practical problem of how to engender solidaristic relationships between those in positions of relative power and those, with significantly different lived experiences, facing injustice elsewhere. Feminist scholars, and theorists of solidarity (some of whom are feminists, of course), have promoted deference to the oppressed as an important corrective to the tendency of the privileged to erase and to fail to understand the experience of oppression, and, alongside this, to deny and diminish the agency of those in disempowered positions (see, *inter alia*, Gould, 2007; Kolers, 2016; Lugoes, 1987; Medina, 2013; Narayan, 2004; Scholz, 2008). The call to treat those with lived experience with appropriate deference in relation to relevant moral knowledge informing appropriate responses to calls to solidarity is also to be found, explicitly and implicitly, within activist circles and discussions.

Deference therefore looks to be crucial to the practice of solidarity. The NDD arises because those in positions of privilege ought not to be neutral in the face of injustice, but at the same time ought not to presume to know, perhaps cannot fully know, what injustice entails. In the next section, we explore in more detail what deference means and what challenges for a theory of solidarity follow from the NDD.

The Dilemma of Solidarity and the NDD

Deference, in some form or other, to those with lived experience of oppression, is invoked by theorists and activists alike as having value in the practice of solidarity, indeed, for some theorists, as being a constitutive feature of solidarity. Avery Kolers holds

‘solidarity crucially implies that the individual agent practices a kind of deference; he stands ready to put aside some range of his own judgments about aims, methods, facts, or values, in favour of someone else’s or a group’s’ (Kolers, 2016: 39).

Deference in general may be defined as accepting the authority of a given speaker’s testimony or guidance and accepting normative demands arising from that as *prima facie* action-guiding. The role that deference plays in solidarity may be distinguished from epistemic humility: deference is not a general attitude of caution about the scope of one’s knowledge and capacity to critically understand phenomena or experiences. Rather, it is recognition of the distinct limitations

5 Although, as Rorty notes, the suggestion that we may ‘have to wait for the strong to turn their piggy little eyes to the suffering of the weak, slowly opening up their dried-up little hearts’ (1998: 182) is one we typically and rightfully resent.

of one's knowledge or authority to legitimately speak and act within the domain of oppression or injustice where one does not have lived experience. The virtues of empathy, openness and listening have all been discussed in feminist literature, and in liberal scholarship on democratic deliberation, as correctives to this challenge (Friedman, 2004; Macedo 2000; Stauffer, 2015; Woods, 2020; Young, 1997). Note that the overwhelming majority of this literature focuses on building understanding within societies and communities. With few exceptions (e.g., Code, 1998; Khader, 2019; Woods, 2020), less attention is paid to these challenges at transnational and global levels. We will say more below about how something that pulls back from a gold standard of NDD-directed engagement might be particularly relevant to solidarity across greater differences and distances.

For the moment, while we must take care not to overstate the difficulties of learning about and understanding that which is new and different (cf. Narayan, 2004); we note that the NDD is underpinned by the conviction that there are limits to the understanding that can be achieved by openness and democratic listening. In some iterations, the NDD seems also to imply that on some matters the situation and standpoint of a person may confer a right to speak, and perhaps deny that right to others. The inaccessibility of lived experience to would-be allies is taken to have implications for the legitimacy of their judgments.

Consider, by way of example, an industrial dispute in a university: Younger academics on insecure contracts may plausibly claim that their lived experience of working in academia is radically different from that of professors of the baby boomer generation now retiring. Professors with decades of job security cannot imagine the stress – both financial and psychological – of the years of precarity that are commonly experienced by today's early career scholars. They may ask that their older colleagues express solidarity by supporting a strike. Given that their lived experience really is different, the NDD implies both that the professor ought to treat with caution her feeling that the university is not such a bad place to work, and should, in solidarity with the early career scholars, refrain from voicing such views and be guided by their request not to cross a picket line. Similarly, some advocates of women's reproductive rights may say that men simply do not have the same moral right as women do to decide on what rights or restrictions are justified in relation to abortion. On this view, men ought to defer to women, secure professors ought to defer to precarious early career scholars: That is what solidarity requires.

In many cases, paying deference to the practical or factual expertise of another and taking them as action-guiding is neither controversial nor remarkable. But

the NDD crucially involves not just factual but moral judgment. Kolers (2016) strikingly argues that individual conscience is such a poor guide to appropriate moral judgments that when faced with oppression one must defer to what the oppressed ask of solidaristic allies. Yet, in relation to moral knowledge – i.e., judgments about right and wrong – moral theorists have worried that abdicating one's moral decision-making to others is itself a moral failing, and that even if one were to accept the right moral judgment, acting on that judgment would amount to doing so for the wrong reasons (e.g., Knutzen, 2021). Consider again industrial action in the academy: If I generally believe that I ought to uphold norms of justice, and you (regardless of how you are situated) advise me that justice to students requires me to break the strike, it would seem to be a failure on my part not to evaluate for myself the morality of your advice. Moreover, as Stephen Macedo points out, being marginalised or oppressed is not automatically a guarantee of credibility or sincerity (2000).

Yet, feminist theorists cast serious doubt on the ability of outsiders to make accurate moral judgments about systemic, structural oppression that they have not themselves experienced (Code, 1995; Narayan, 2004; Young, 1997) and feminist theorists of solidarity have stressed the epistemic importance of deference (Dean, 1996; Gould, 2007). As Marilyn Friedman puts it, given all the layers of distance and difference within a society, 'one can never truly adopt the other person's perspective' (2004: 220). Consider white people in a white-majority society deeply engrained with legacies of colonialism and structural racism. Is it credible to claim that a white person can fully understand racist oppression? The white person may study racism, read about it, listen to accounts of how friends, colleagues or family members have been affected by it, but that is not the same as living it.

There is, of course, a long history in feminist theorising about the dilemma of 'speaking for others' (Alcoff, 1991): It seems morally incumbent on those who are in a privileged position that they use that privilege to raise concerns on behalf of those experiencing oppression and less able to voice concerns or to have their voices heard. Recall, as above, that the NDD arises within a wider call to solidarity across a huge range of contemporary social and political issues, and concomitantly a rejection of neutrality or disengagement as a morally valid option.

Yet, engagement also carries moral risks. To presume to speak (for others) on social injustice is itself an exercise of power, and the privileging of some voices over others within activist movements, including but not limited to the feminist movement, has yielded and compounded further oppressions. Feminists have

also reflected on the challenges and the burdens of translating experiences of oppression to audiences who do not share those experiences. Whilst some scholars have noted the epistemological advantages to experiencing oppression and injustice, insofar as it may yield insights that are important but overlooked by the majority, one must not underestimate the practical and psychological costs, and the significant challenges of communicating that knowledge (Fricker, 2007; Medina, 2013; Mohanty, 1998; Narayan, 2004).

So, the would-be ally who faces calls to act in solidarity must face this dilemma: On the one hand, to suspend one's own normative judgment seems to be a moral mistake, yet there may be situations where the relevant moral knowledge is unavailable to people who are outsiders to the experience of oppression. The normative demand for deference to lived experience may offer an answer by positing deference as a morally appropriate (indeed, required) approach.

The NDD and Two Core Solidarity Goods

Why should would-be allies defer to those with relevant lived experience? At first glance, the answer is blindingly obvious: deference of this sort serves the interest in pursuing solidarity. Allies external to an experience of oppression or injustice are unlikely to build trust with those who have lived experience if they (the allies) disregard the testimony and the demands of the very people with whom they claim to stand in solidarity. Moreover, to fail to defer to lived experience would be disrespectful of those affected by injustice and thus risk compounding the oppression rather than opposing it, as solidarity seems to entail. But it is worth unpacking this more.

Sally Scholz addresses the question of whether non-oppressed people can 'authentically participate' in solidarity:

'some have claimed that political solidarity requires an insider's awareness of the problems to be addressed by social activism. An insider's awareness comes from actually experiencing firsthand the oppression or injustice. [...] I also agree that there is something important about the knowledge claims of the oppressed that ought to be taken into account in the identity and decision-making of the solidary group [...] the specialised knowledge claims of the oppressed affect each individual's moral commitment, or, conversely, the commitment requires an active acknowledgement of the experience of the oppressed' (Scholz, 2008: 167).

Deference to the knowledge of the experience of oppression is thus a corrective to the epistemic limitations of the privileged, given that in many circumstances being privileged serves to insulate the privileged from oppression, and is

also corrective of the exclusionary tendencies of power that are knowingly or unwittingly simultaneous with that insulation.

Scholz does not use the term deference (Gould, 2007; and Kolers, 2016, do), but it is implicit in her account, insofar as the insider's knowledge must be acknowledged by those in positions of power or privilege in order for the latter to participate *authentically*. Other theorists have framed this in terms of 'apprenticeship' to the disadvantaged (Spelman, 2002), demonstrating trustworthiness (Taylor, 2015), or in Lugones' influential account of 'world-travelling' one similarly encounters the idea of imaginatively engaging with the experience of the oppressed in order to understand (Lugones, 1987, 2003; Mihai, 2020). As above, the common theme in all of this is a claim about the *epistemic authority* of those with direct lived experience of oppression.

Notice, however, that two separate but inter-related themes are in play here. One describes an appropriate attitude to *moral knowledge* in relation to injustice (deference is appropriate because lived experience confers epistemic resources unavailable to the would-be ally, thereby better illuminating effective remedies or redress). But this is not simply about the utility or overall social benefit to be obtained by yielding to this enhanced moral knowledge. There is also an element of moral repair⁶ in adopting the appropriate (deferring) attitude or response to *persons* affected by injustice. To not accept as authoritative the testimony of those with lived experience is to disrespect the person as a *knower*, i.e., even if efficacious moral knowledge could be obtained from other sources, I owe it to the person who has experienced injustice to attend to their testimony of it in preference to that from others who have not; the goal of this attention is therefore not explicable simply in terms of the moral knowledge that it yields for me as an ally. Indeed, we might think of this attention, this listening, as a tool that can counteract what Jill Stauffer (2015) describes as the 'ethical loneliness' of one's trauma following profound injustice not being heard or recognised by others. As Stauffer points out, trauma breaks our faith in the world as a safe place; for that to be rebuilt, we need others to affirm our experience and to be willing to hear us. Thus, we argue, to defer to the person's lived experience shows recognition respect of their standing as a member of the moral community, standing which has been undermined by the injustice or oppression.

6 We take this phrasing from Margaret Urban Walker (2006).

Where a person or a community has been subjected to oppression, we would seem to owe a duty to bear witness to this experience; to listen to and acknowledge testimony is to validate the dignity of the person who experiences oppression.⁷ Seeking to understand oppression without reference to the epistemic resources offered by those who have experienced it seems *prima facie* to be unlikely to yield adequate comprehension, and thus risks generating mistakes in relation to the most appropriate solidaristic responses, as well as sustaining and perpetuating epistemic injustices (Fricker, 2007; Medina, 2013). But the reasons for attending to this epistemic authority are not only instrumental; they are also expressive of an attitude of moral recognition (of belonging within a shared moral community, one might say).

For example, while many cisgendered LGB or queer people may feel deeply sympathetic to trans* people's fight against oppression, and may know a great deal personally about the injustice of encountering prejudice and hostility, there are plausibly elements of trans* people's experiences of oppression that they are unlikely to share directly nor to fully understand. Indeed, LGB or queer people may feel particularly obliged to bear witness to, and to validate, the oppression experienced by trans* people, because of their shared understanding of the injustice of prejudice and because of a sense of kinship and community, at the same time as acknowledging the limits of that shared understanding due to the specificity of trans* experience (which is not to say, of course, that all trans* experience is the same – it is not).

Amongst those to most systematically analyse the role of deference in solidarity practice is Avery Kolers. Although he draws extensively on historical cases to inform his theory of solidarity, Kolers (2016) rejects deference as having principally an epistemic value, since, as he rightly points out, on this model, experience of oppression is a form of expertise, and there are well rehearsed concerns about the role and status of experts within liberal democracies. Not the least of these is the question of how the lay person (or putative ally) should respond when 'experts' disagree, as they frequently do, and as will people with lived experience of sexism, racism, disability, homophobia, transphobia, enduring poverty, forced migration, and many other injustices.⁸ For Kolers,

7 Understood in these terms, we may suggest that bearing witness is a way of expressing solidarity with those who have been killed by oppressors. We do not have space to develop this argument here.

8 Moreover, those experiencing injustice may themselves interpret their experiences through problematic frameworks, e.g., when victims of intimate partner violence accept blame for 'provoking' a violent partner (Fricker, 2007; Stauffer, 2015).

then, the place of deference is more circumscribed; he argues that we should practice deference to those with experience of oppression and who are leading a solidarity movement only in terms of the actions required of us, almost regardless of our own judgments about the morality or effectiveness of the actions that they pursue. Our selection of which causes or activists to practice deference towards is to be guided by ‘the epistemology of inequity’ (Kolers, 2016: 112-116), which, essentially, amounts to affirmation of the equal dignity of those who are most oppressed in any given context.⁹

Kolers is aware of the danger that his approach yields an imperative towards some kind of ‘oppression Olympics’, whereby privileged agents seeking to be good allies are enjoined not to engage in imaginatively entering others’ worlds, but instead to iteratively evaluate and compare the relative oppression of different people. He argues that it is part of the practice of solidarity that ‘those on the top are always answerable to those on the bottom’ (Kolers, 2016: 115). Yet, this does not wholly mitigate a worry first about demandingness, of which more below, but also that something valuable, some good intrinsic to the practice of solidarity, is lost by displacing empathy with equity as the moral glue that binds participants in a solidarity struggle.

First and foremost, shared experience of oppression can be a hugely important source of solidarity, even if it need not entail a shared identity: Given the complexity of an imputed identity grounded in characteristics or features of a life that are socially constructed in ways that facilitate oppression, e.g., through racist hierarchies or heteronormativity, identity-based solidarity cannot be assumed (Shelby, 2008; cf. Hall, 2016; Marin, 2016; Scholz, 2008). Yet, there are both heuristic and well-being goods to be realised in the discussion of shared experience. Consider, for example, Fricker’s (2007) account of the development of the concept ‘sexual harassment’ as a hermeneutic resource. There are benefits for society as a whole, and particularly for women, in there being a name for this concept and for it being widely understood. There is also a direct psychological benefit for women who have experienced harassment in seeing that they are not alone (though to see just how pervasive harassment is, is perhaps detrimental to women’s mental health).¹⁰

9 Kolers’ account is overtly Kantian. He does not use the term dignity, though he does refer to ‘equal status’.

10 Indebted to Fricker, Freedman (2020) notes the benefits to women of finding community in #MeToo, but also draws attention to the psychological costs of contributing to shared hermeneutic resources vis-à-vis oppression.

That sense of being ‘seen’, being understood, understanding that one’s own (painful, oppressive) experience is shared by others, is fundamentally dependent on empathy. Perfect empathy between any two individuals may well be unattainable, and is particularly implausible by those outside the group, but an important part of the practice of deference looks to be rooted in a commitment to the value of a sincere attempt at empathy for what it brings to solidarity as a practice experienced by those who are oppressed, even if they are never aware of the empathy of specific individuals. As Stauffer argues, those who have experienced profound injustice ‘needed to have the wrongness of what befell them confirmed and denounced, not mainly by legal institutions or perpetrators, but by the surrounding society in which they would have to live henceforth’ (2015: 29). Solidarity movements perform this function. Practicing deference to someone who has been oppressed, by bearing witness to their experience and their agency (in recounting their story or articulating what justice requires), is to show respect for them as a person, as an epistemic agent and a member of one’s moral community. To do so is both a cognitive and an emotional and imaginative activity.

If, in contrast, one practices deference to another, not to attend to their lived experience, but in place of one’s own suspended ethical judgment about means, having used an independent criterion (of equity) to select ends (as in Kolers’ argument), then one seems to come at things from an odd angle. It seems to say, I will stand with you, but I do not listen to you. Consider how often in activist circles one currently encounters claims such as, ‘all I can do is tell my truth.’ Implicit in this is an avowal that the oppressed person’s truth should be attended to, and that to fail to do so is in some sense disrespectful of that person and of her standing in the community.¹¹

What this uneasiness perhaps reveals is that political solidarity, even solidarity directed towards a shared goal, is properly about the people who are oppressed;¹² deference to them is an affirmation that those people matter and a disavowal

11 Note that agency over one’s own story – the terms in which it is told and communicated – is important here. People who have experienced oppression are unlikely to wish to be defined by that in others’ perceptions of them, and many will not wish to speak publicly or even privately of painful experiences. There is thus a delicate balance between on the one hand affirming the value of bearing witness and on the other hand resisting the idea that people who have lived experience of oppression are in any sense required to disclose their experiences to others.

12 Here we focus specifically on solidarity directed at people or oppressed groups. Political solidarity movements directed at climate justice, environmental protection, and perhaps animal rights, may be an exception here, but they may not be (cf. Eckersley, 2020; Scholz, 2013).

of the legitimacy of the hierarchies and patterns of marginalisation, violence and oppression perpetuated and sustained by privilege.¹³ To the extent that one benefits from social and material privilege, bearing witness to the experience of oppression seems to be the least that is owed to those disempowered by the same systems, and bearing witness should itself be seen as a solidaristic endeavour, one that requires valuable resources of time and emotional energy. Deference, then, is a crucial part of practices of solidarity not just because it is instrumentally valuable in allowing us to better understand the goals of the solidary movement, but because adhering to the NDD offers privileged allies a way of holding in esteem those who have been unjustly dis-esteemed in structures of privilege and (dis-)advantage.¹⁴

How should the would-be solidaristic activist or scholar practice deference?

Thus far, we have argued that there are plausible and compelling reasons to accept the NDD, insofar as deference promotes two distinct and important goods in a practice of solidarity: it yields crucial epistemic insights that are plausibly unavailable otherwise, and it accords recognition to people who have been undeservingly disesteemed by bearing witness to their lived experience. We accept that some questions about the NDD remain, such as how allies should respond if there are divergent views to defer to amongst those with relevant lived experience. We do not have space to address such dilemmas here; our argument is that the NDD is at least *prima facie* valid and we move forward from here to reflect on strategies for meeting the NDD. These are at best sketchily laid out in the normative literature on theorising solidarity. Nevertheless, we argue that a picture emerges of what we will call a ‘gold standard’ version of direct engagement, wherein allies are direct participants in activist movements led by people with lived experience of oppression.

For reasons already adduced above, the leadership of solidarity movements by oppressed people seems important: it would seem to mitigate the risks of such movements having exclusionary tendencies or generating actions that are

13 One might object that what people facing enduring poverty most care about is having secure access to immediate relief and then to a sustainable livelihood, and that what people experiencing forced migration really want is refuge. That is a reasonable objection, but recognition also matters.

14 There are some affinities here with Arto Laitinen’s (2016) view of social solidarity as mutual recognition, which he differentiates from political solidarity, but whilst Laitinen is interested in mutual recognition as an expression of a thin moral universalism, what we are gesturing towards here is the affirmative and to some extent reparative potential of bearing witness as an expression of political solidarity.

insensitive to the experience of oppression. The being together, the habituation to one another's co-presence, the shared experience of practice, have the potential to bind the participants together much more strongly than seems possible in solidarity practices that are more distant. For both theorists and activists, there is a sense that this kind of engagement is the gold standard for solidarity.

We find this model both in theoretical work on solidarity (Gould, 2007; Kolers, 2016; Lugones, 1987; Scholz, 2008), and in recent attempts to develop a methodology for solidaristic normative theorising (Ackerley, 2018; Ackerley et.al., 2021; Cabrera, 2020). For example, emerging scholarship on grounded normative theory (GNT) is a self-conscious attempt to address concerns akin to the dilemma of solidarity by getting normative theorists out of their ivory towers and into the field of lived experience. GNT is normative research that draws substantially upon empirical sources, typically reasonably extensive fieldwork (Cabrera, 2020), sometimes ethnography (Van Der Anker, 2008), and sometimes qualitative data. Brooke Ackerley et. al. posit 'epistemic accountability' as one of four core features of GNT:

'Epistemic Accountability: GNT, especially when involving qualitative field research, typically gives attention to potential power imbalances in the conduct of research itself, i.e. between those engaged in political contestation and those who research it. In more solidaristic approaches, theorists foreground epistemic responsibility to ideas and persons disadvantaged in political struggles against exploitation, exclusion, oppression, and domination' (Ackerley et al, 2021: 6).¹⁵

While we accept that such direct participation is valuable and preferable, we argue there is also a place for a weaker form of second order engagement, which has been comparatively neglected and undervalued within the solidarity literature.¹⁶ In the rest of this article, we sketch out some ways in which second order engagement is at least consistent with the NDD, whilst having the value of lowering costs for both would be allies and people with lived experience of oppression.

15 GNT seems to offer us an answer to the over-simplified extreme thought that theorists who do not themselves have relevant lived experience should simply get out of the business of studying injustice, but it also raises as many questions as it answers: 'The GNT commitments to epistemological inclusion and accountability may seem to lead theorists to privilege the raw data over their own analysis or to privilege endless recursive reflection over developing a normative analysis' (Ackerley et al., 2021: 19) We return briefly to the question of what theorists can/should do below.

16 Even amongst literature on bearing witness as a practice, direct engagement is often privileged (see, e.g., Phipps, 2019).

Direct engagement will not always be possible, and in fact, it may not always be desirable. While there may be much to be said for upping sticks and volunteering with organisations directly supporting migrants in Calais or Lesbos, there is quite rightly scepticism about voluntourism in developing countries. Indeed, given the transnational or global character of many contemporary challenges (think of the increasing hostility to migration and safe routes to asylum, for example), accessible forms of engagement are necessary for building networks.

Moreover, while there are undoubtedly respectful and responsible academics engaged in solidaristically-oriented normative fieldwork, Diana T. Meyers (2018) has written compellingly of the impact on human rights victims of being repeatedly asked to tell their stories by visiting academics, NGO researchers, journalists and others, with the best of intentions, perhaps, but nevertheless imposing real burdens (psychological and taking up time). Meyers' work underscores the multiple harms of belonging to a group that is the subject of media, activist and academic interest and she argues for an ethics of asking people (victims, in her phrasing) to recount their experiences. We argued above that solidaristic engagement may in itself be a means of bearing witness, which might be a key normative practice of solidarity. Further, Ackerley et al. (2021) observe in their account of GNT a commitment to both accountability and recursivity which entail an obligation at least to report back the findings, in usable form, to subjects of solidaristically oriented research.

All of this asks of research subjects that they accept the time and emotional costs of participating in the research, and we should not underestimate those costs (cf. Freedman, 2020). We note, for example, the wariness of some NGOs to participate in research projects, particularly where the aims and objectives of the research project are not co-produced, which, as Ackerley et al. (2021: 14) accept, they will not generally be in GNT, in contrast to participatory action research. We also note here the efforts of our own University to coordinate and limit the demands placed on local organisations supporting migrants, asylum seekers and refugees, whilst at the same time promoting ethical and sensitive co-production of research with migrants, refugee and asylum-seeking communities and organisations. Such action would seem necessary if the current trend towards co-produced research continues. Even in more local contexts, there is a risk that too much of the work (time, effort, resources) of the solidary movement is taken up with effectively educating more privileged would-be allies. Hence several prominent Black activists and writers engaged in the struggle against racism have overtly rejected the presumed obligation to educate white allies (Edo-Lodge, 2018). As B.L. Wilson (2020) observes, 'few things are more off-putting to a black person than being subjected to Socratic

questioning by a white person over seemingly trivial matters that may actually be deeply personal and painful.’ Feminists have similarly noted the emotional labour required of them to defend MeToo, and trans* rights activists also draw attention to the sheer exhaustion of being debated and of the psychological toll this takes.

Thus, for both practical and ethical reasons, there is a valuable role for a form of second-order engagement – reading ethnographies, narrative work of any kind (fact or fiction), watching films or listening to podcasts, that offer testimonies or reflections on lived experience – which, to some extent, may be taken as a practice of solidarity that expresses deference to those with lived experience of oppression. This may evolve into not just reading or watching material, but promoting and distributing material: organising exhibitions, screenings, readings (though it may not). Such engagement offers scope for enhanced knowledge and understanding of experiences that are unfamiliar from the context of a more privileged life, and is also a means of bearing witness to the injustices of oppression; to that extent, second order engagement is consistent with the NDD.¹⁷

This will often be desirable, particularly as a pre-cursor to directly joining an activist group or engaging in some more concrete way in a solidarity movement. This approach is not merely a matter of responding to concerns about the demandingness of direct engagement for the would-be ally, which have already been somewhat rehearsed in the literature (see Kolers, 2016), it also takes seriously the demandingness of being an object of solidarity. What we’re calling second-order engagement (what one of us has previously described as second-order inclusion (Hobbs, 2018), seems an important practice of solidarity. One that can express an appropriate deference to those with direct experience of oppression, that responds to the ethical loneliness of such injustices being ignored or forgotten, and which will be much more accessible to most ordinary citizens, who have limited time and resources and also perhaps many simultaneous responsibilities, and yet, who are, as we noted at the beginning of our paper, currently subjected to multiple calls to solidarity. If we wish to evaluate how ordinary citizens might meaningfully respond to such calls, this less direct

¹⁷ One might ask whether the first-order/second-order distinction collapses here, since what matters is not the mode of engagement, but the fact of deference: if, in reading novels, organising film screenings, we defer to what those with lived experience (would) ask us to read, organise, etc, isn’t that just a first-order manifestation of deference, since I defer to the judgment of the person who so directs me? For the purposes of our argument, we can accept this charge, since our target is really the dominant preference in the scholarship for what we are calling a ‘gold standard’ model of direct engagement with those with lived experience is clearly oriented towards participation and direct dialogue with people who have the relevant lived experience, and what we are trying to show here is that there is value in a less direct form of engagement. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for raising this point.

but more readily accessible practice looks to be potentially important, and practically necessary where calls to solidarity are transnational or cosmopolitan in nature. Moreover, the accessibility and modest demandingness of second-order engagement also recommends the practice as a viable means of solidarity building between different oppressed groups and individuals, who already face significant psychological and practical demands in comparison to the relatively privileged.

Yet, this weaker form of engagement is relatively neglected in the literature on solidarity. Ackerley et al. (2021) note in passing that drawing on published material may lower the time and resource costs of solidaristically-oriented GNT, whilst Van der Anker (2008) notes (again in passing) that published accounts will most likely have been written by ‘insiders,’ and so can be taken to be authoritative, but little is said methodologically about the selection of appropriate published accounts, nor of how this kind of engagement might be approached systematically.

The value of this kind of engagement, particularly for building empathy, has received some attention in feminist literature: For example, Uma Narayan (2004) underscores the greater value, compared to reporting or more analytic texts, of narrative work – fiction, poetry, storytelling – in transmitting understanding of different lived experiences across profound cultural and social distance. Mihaela Mihai (2020) draws on Lugones’ notion of world-travelling to argue for the power of engaging with art and literature to transform one’s moral understanding of the experience of oppression and struggles for justice. Martha Nussbaum (2000) has also famously argued for the role of the humanities in general and classic literature in particular in cultivating pro-social attitudes. There is considerable enthusiasm for the idea that imaginatively entering into another’s world through hearing their stories may simultaneously build understanding and empathy (Shuman, 2008; Woods, 2020).¹⁸ There is also manifest popular, activist support for this view, as can be seen in the prevalence of the injunction to ‘educate yourself’ about social justice matters, and in the existence of projects such as the Empathy Lab, which curates reading lists and projects intended to build empathy amongst school children.

Taken as a practice of solidarity, the hope here is that by engaging with published material – particularly narrative stories (fact and fiction) – those external to the group practice deference towards those internal to the group by seeking to learn about the lived experience of oppression, and opening

¹⁸ Note that both these texts approach the assumption that such engagement builds empathy with a degree of caution. We do not have space in this paper to develop those concerns.

themselves to a deeper understanding of the reality that the world is far less safe than more privileged people may have reason to fully apprehend, without adding to the burdens of oppression, and whilst building at least some of the shared understanding and motivational glue that solidarity requires.

The value, then, is implicitly accepted, but what this looks like as a method – how one should go about this – is not something that theorists of solidarity have paid much attention to. Notwithstanding the fact that reading books or watching documentaries is more accessible than going on fieldwork or volunteering, it remains the case that worries about demandingness well-rehearsed in relation to fieldwork or directly participating in a movement also seem to apply to this second-order form of engagement. So much material is available – how much should one read or watch or listen to? Where should one start? To the extent that the selection is self-guided, deference begins to fade a little.

Given these concerns, the curation and promotion of relevant materials may be one plausible task for the theorist (and for the social activist who has time and means), which may offer one answer to the question, what role remains for the theorist if we take seriously the demands of deference as a practice of solidarity. Another, of course, is reflection on how to engage with these materials – consider, e.g., Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's notion of 'reparative reading' – which, again, is surprisingly taken for granted in the solidarity literature (Sedgwick, 1995; Woods, 2020). Novels, films, plays and so on treating injustice are not, after all, factual reports, yet they are widely held by theorists and activists to have important lessons for the practice of solidarity.

To assign to the scholar-activist the role of curating texts and (re-)directing the reading of them is a complicated, perhaps controversial proposal, since it entrenches a privileged status and a degree of power, which the idea of deference as a practice of solidarity is intended to undercut. Yet, it is also realistic. If Kolers (2016) is right to draw an analogy between the status of experts in a democracy and the status of lived experience accounts as expert claims about injustice, then it plausibly analogously falls to those with relevant skills to assess varying expert accounts and offer an explanation as to why one might be more insightful or more valuable than another. In doing so, the scholar-activist will have to make hard choices, for example adjudicating between detailed accuracy and immediately emotive stories. Yet, insofar as the scholar-activist might be thought to have some knowledge of the would-be solidaristic audience (alongside some professional expertise in normative reasoning), they look well placed to do so and to successfully amplify stories such that the ethical loneliness of authors is to some degree diminished. Moreover, although this route does shift a degree of

power away from the party facing injustice and oppression and onto the already (relatively) privileged scholar-activist, in doing so, it also removes some of the educative burden from those facing injustice and oppression and places this on the scholar-activist. If we are correct to argue that the demand to educate others concerning lived experience of injustice or oppression places an unwelcome and unjustified psychological cost on those facing these realities, then this shift in the division of labour is to be welcomed, and arguably constitutes a solidaristic act by the would-be ally.

There will be a worry that the activist-scholar who lacks relevant lived experience may yield to their own biases and prejudices – may fail to defer, in other words – but we may say that it is a demand of solidarity that one guards against this as vigilantly as possible. Whereas in the more direct mode of engagement, contact with others in the movement (particularly in movements led by people with relevant lived experience) may serve as a check on one's biases, the only corrective available on the second-order engagement model is recursive self-reflection. This is hardly fool-proof, but nor is it an empty gesture, and indeed such self-reflection is in any case accepted as part of the practice of solidarity by theorists who focus most of their attention on direct engagement (Ackerley et al., 2020; Scholz, 2008).

Moreover, if we accept that second-order engagement is a plausible, or even required, means by which to foster solidarity, due to the more modest temporal and emotional demands it makes on individuals facing injustice and oppression, and its ability to further solidarities beyond borders (which is important given the global scope of some contemporary challenges and calls for solidarity), then mediation of some form will necessarily be a feature of the practice. This will be the case, whether accounts reach the public via the publisher, the translator, the social media moderator or algorithm. Therefore, despite the gate-keeping concern raised above, there is valuable work for the scholar-activist to do in amplifying and promoting accounts of lived experience.

There is also an opportunity here for the role of the scholar-activist to go beyond mere curation, and to offer some indication or guidance as to how these materials may be engaged with. Although this practice needs to be sensitive to the normative concerns raised above, such guidance may reduce the risk of accounts of lived experience being approached in a manner that fails to show deference, for example ironically or voyeuristically. Insofar as highlighted features or talking points are co-authored or identified with the guidance of the original authors, or other members of the solidaristic group, the risks of this approach going awry can be mitigated. To the sceptical reader this guided

reading may sound uncomfortably like a seminar or book group. As the journalist and activist Tre Johnson (2020) notes, in his devastatingly titled article ‘When Black People are in Pain, White People Just Join Book Clubs’:

‘Their book clubs will do what all book clubs do: devolve into routine reschedulings and cancellations; turn into collective apologies for not doing the reading or meta-conversations about what everyone should pretend to read next; finally become occasional opportunities to catch up over wine’ (Johnson 2020).

Johnson may have a point. Not all second-order engagement will be solidaristic, or even worthwhile from an intrinsic nor from an instrumental perspective. Yet the same is true, of course, of the direct engagement that is so prevalently foregrounded in the solidarity literature. Free agents will always be free to fall short of best intentions.

Yet, we may address these concerns by way of return to the account of deference to lived experience canvassed above, where the practice has solidaristic value through i) bearing witness and ii) providing the epistemic and motivational resources to engender further solidaristic action. The sort of second order engagement with accounts of lived experience fostered by book clubs, for example, may fail on both counts, but it need not. Although there is a need for self-reflection and recursivity, where texts are approached in a self-congratulatory manner or as an exercise in self-flagellation, the act of bearing witness will fail, as bearing witness requires that the subject of the account is foregrounded rather than the would-be bearer of solidarity themselves.

Similarly, second-order engagement can fail to generate further solidaristic action, as observed in the title of Johnson’s article, where much of the criticism rests on ‘just join[ing] book clubs’ (2020). But while what we are proposing here is undoubtedly weaker than the NDD when thought of in terms of direct engagement, nevertheless, second-order engagement may usefully serve as a pathway, or first step, towards a more encompassing commitment. As indicated above, deeper understanding amongst the privileged of the fact of fairly prevalent profound injustice, even if the lived experience of it cannot be fully understood, may be a crucial part of moving putative solidarity away from pity on the one hand and self-congratulation on the other and towards shared responsibility for (re)building a more just world. Given the scale and scope of the contemporary challenges and divisions, pathways towards greater solidarity seem both necessary and urgent. Second-order engagement in line with the NDD is thus akin to Pablo Gilabert’s (2012) concept of a ‘dynamic duty,’ where we ought to act such that we develop the motivational resources to render further action feasible.

Concluding Remarks

Solidarity has an important role to play in responding to many contemporary global and local injustices. But would-be allies of those facing injustice confront a dilemma: to be neutral in the face of calls to solidarity may be to side with the oppressor, but to speak or act on injustices where one has no direct knowledge, no lived experience, itself risks compounding oppression. Theorists of solidarity have implicitly endorsed what we identify as the NDD in response to this dilemma, but the value and practice of deference has remained under-theorised. We have argued that adhering to the NDD has two benefits, (I) epistemic benefits, (II) the benefits of bearing witness and giving recognition to those who have been affected by profound injustice.

As it has been deployed within the literature on solidarity and in activist circles, the NDD is mostly thought of as best met by direct engagement with people or movements who have direct lived experience of the injustice that is being fought. Yet, we have argued, there are costs to this gold standard of direct engagement, not least for those who are already experiencing injustice or oppression. We have therefore defended the value of a form of second-order engagement that has been comparatively neglected and is sometimes viewed with suspicion and scorn.

Deference should not be taken narrowly to mean simply following what others direct us to do – not least because, as noted above, on any given injustice there will be more than one figure giving directions, which may or may not point in the same direction. Deference in a larger sense is about affirming the lived experience of those affected by injustice, so as to help insulate them from ethical loneliness. What we have shown is that there is value in a less direct form of engagement towards that end.

Thus, whilst acknowledging that this second-order form of engagement is weaker, and also faces some of the same challenges that direct engagement faces, we nonetheless argue that, far from it being trivial, second-order engagement has an important place within the practice of solidarity. First, at a practical level, accessible ways of meeting the NDD are needed at local levels, and may be especially important in relation to transnational and global calls for solidarity. Second, we may think of second-order engagement as something like a preliminary step on a pathway to more direct or more committed solidarity. Identifying and promoting such steps towards a more profound commitment is both (I) a theoretical task that must be addressed for a coherent theory of solidarity that is not just a spontaneous phenomena but rather a dynamic social

and political process, and (II) a practical task that may take the form of curating and promoting relevant and useful media, as well as reflecting on how one might attend to such materials. This practical task raises valid gatekeeper concerns and is not without difficulties, but it is also a valuable form of work that may contribute to helping solidarity movements and would-be allies adhere to the NDD.¹⁹

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