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Environmental Studies: Research and Analysis

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A Framework for Ally Development

Environmental and social injustice occurs when groups are considered politically insignificant and deemed disposable by Eurocentric institutions. More often than not, what results is a slow violence “that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all … that is neither spectacular nor instantaneous … [with] repercussions playing out across a range of temporal scales” (3). When confronted with this type of slow violence we need to “engage the representational, narrative, and strategic challenges posed by the relative invisibility” (Nixon, 3). It is this kind of slow violence that stems from the apathy of dominant groups that I aim to address. I will focus on what it means to be a racial justice ally because all environmental and social injustice is inextricably tied to race.

Race is a central organizing feature of our social world. “Racial, cultural and economic divides continue to starkly define American life well into the twenty-first century … In Flint, Michigan, we are witnessing this young century’s most profound illustration of civic evil, an entire city collectively punished with lead-poisoned water for the crime of being poor, Black, and politically disempowered” (Hill). We have a set of dual realities in this world, “for the powerful, justice is a right; for the powerless, justice is an illusion” (Hill). Now is the time to fight harder than ever for racial, social and environmental justice. If you choose this journey as I have, in order to be effective, it is important to know where you start and ask yourself some critical questions.

I come from a suburban area of East Orange County in Southern California. I was raised within walking distance to three community parks and two grocery stores with farm fresh produce. Trees lined our streets, and industrial areas were nowhere in sight. I was fortunate to live in an area where I felt safe to ride my bike to school. I didn’t have to wonder about chemicals running in our rivers – I could just jump in. Growing up, it never occurred to me that this was a result of white privilege. Privilege can be defined as an institutional set of benefits granted to those who resemble the people who dominate our culture and the powerful positions in our institutions. These benefits include: cultural affirmations of ones worth; assumed universality of ones own experiences; and the freedoms to speak, move, and work freely. It is only after recognition of these privileges that we can fight to relinquish and share power. (Comey)

Whiteness is a term used to convey the “dynamic non-essentialist understanding of what it means for an individual to be white in America” (Reason). Whiteness is a relational category, whether acknowledged or not tends to be the norm (Aveling), and “those who have societal privilege have the freedom to ignore that privilege” (Geiger). Because I am a white male living in a white-centered patriarchy I have never had to critically think about my identity. On the other hand, those excluded as ‘other’ would have to think about their identity almost everyday of their lives in a white-centered culture.

From a young age, it was clear that I had a strong desire to help others. Through my education, I have developed a social consciousness that includes a disdain for oppressive institutions, policies and language. The American creed of “liberty, equality, justice and fair opportunity for all” is incompatible with the reality of racial and class inequality. Communities have been considered statistically and politically insignificant and deemed disposable by apathetic institutions. This is a byproduct of a country built on colonization, slavery, racism and classism. We must realize there is more to racism than verbal and physical abuse. The ignorance of various forms of slow violence emphasizes the need to tackle injustice. These problems will not go away until there is a more equal distribution of power, risks, and rewards. I want to use my normative position as a white, able-bodied male to advocate for environmental, economic and social policy that more equitably distributes risks and rewards within and between communities.

I know that I am coming from a particular *place*. For anyone in tune with the history of colonization, I embody the face of oppression. This relationship will intrinsically breed skepticism and resistance among marginalized communities I work with. In order to be effective I need to ask some questions. Where are there points of intervention? As an ally, what are my limitations in working with non-dominant groups? How can I appropriately use my socio-political privileges to work for social justice? More broadly, I wish to explore tools and strategies in an effort to create a framework for ally development. I do not intend to generalize marginalized groups by categorizing various standpoints under the umbrella of non-dominant groups. This is not intended to be a guidebook, but rather an analysis of a wide range of ally related issues. I will take a broad approach, because the examination of only one identity may seem to essentialize people and not consider gender, ethnicity, age, ability status, class, sexuality, culture, etc.

It is important to realize that ally development is important intervention, but does not necessarily lead to any permanent transformation. It more importantly describes the first step in a long process of social, racial and environmental justice advocacy. Crossing the line as an outsider working within is a messy process. Its not just theoretical, it is slow, it is difficult, and it requires personal interaction and risk. This work may prove to be invaluable in creating meaningful change. Through my research I have found the tools and strategies for being an effective ally are highly contextual, that is, they vary dependent on time, place, and space. Although, commonalities and patterns are visible and together form a general framework for ally development. Ally refers to someone invested in addressing social inequality. Development implies a continual process of self-evaluation, critique and adaptation. Framework refers to a non-specific approach in our efforts to address the varying scope of time, place and space in relation to injustice.

To understand the complexity of oppression, we must avoid simple solutions and singular answers. Social injustice must be understood through the lens of intersectionality: the ways that multiple forms of oppression operate simultaneously against the vulnerable. “Understandings of racism cannot be reduced to intentional acts of bigotry, beliefs in biological determinism, or even subconscious prejudices. Instead, we must rely on a thicker analysis, one that accounts for the structural, psychological, and cultural dimensions” including socially constructed narratives (Hill).

**Affirmation**

Ally development requires contact with the reality of oppression, an increased awareness of social justice, a sense of efficacy to bring about change, understanding ones role in relation to change, a deep understanding of the socio-political context of social issues, and engagement in advocacy (Bhattacharyya). Two general traits that are desired by non-dominant groups from allies are *affirmation* and *informed action*. This includes, acknowledging power differentials and understanding one’s own racial identity, becoming knowledgeable about communities other than one’s own, and taking action among ones own racial group by confronting inappropriate actions and facilitating meaningful dialogue (Brown). Affirmation requires intrapsychic work that includes maintaining a learning orientation and being continually curious about dynamics around privilege, reflecting on an ongoing basis about how ones racial story affects ones current thinking, resisting the tendency to speak for others or assume universality, and understanding that societal context is continually at work.

One school of thought is to “problematize privilege”. This requires that we confront realities about race, power, and society with particular focus on what it means to be white, the socially constructed nature of white identity and the impact of whiteness on intergroup relations. Geiger describes this process as critical self reflection in an effort to understand “how whiteness came into existence, how it is lived, how white people sustain it through the dynamics of power and privilege and learning about issues such as trust, guilt, defensiveness, denial, dualistic thinking, blame and how they are viewed by others,” as a space to process these difficult issues before engaging in interaction.

**Informed Action**

Self-efficacy can be fostered by focusing on relative strengths and privileges and finding points of intervention within your realm of influence. It’s important to recognize that we all have a sphere of influence. It’s your job as an ally to identify your respective sphere, and consider how it might be used to interrupt the cycle of racism (Aveling). To environmental studies students, Dr. Sarah Wald recommends, “lean back, don’t always try to lean in, embrace a bystander position, stuff the envelopes”. It is important to remain strategic and know that you are going to make mistakes.

Allies not targeted by threat of violence are encouraged to use that role to create a safe space to ask questions and develop skills. It is not the role of the ally to communicate non-dominant groups personal experience (Bhattacharyya). Interpersonal work includes making race visible both in relationships and in the system, problematizing privilege, seeking critique, and examining unconscious assumptions about the relationship of race to merit. The goal here is to facilitate a space to unmoor and strategically address racial and class antagonisms that have long been held in awkward restraint.

When communicating ideas in regard to injustice, representing factual information about societal inequality does not necessarily prompt people to examine beliefs and assumptions surrounding these facts. I may be met with resistance that stems from the myth of meritocracy, an underlying assumption of capitalism, where those who succeed are the most qualified without consideration of advantages and disadvantages that accompany an unequal distribution or power and privilege (Geiger). Often people unwittingly follow the logic of our current moment -- one that is marked by “post-intentional racism”. We must be critical of a system “engineered to target, exploit, and criminalize” non-dominant groups (Hill).

“Racial melancholia” can result when a beneficiary of whiteness realizes unearned privileges. This is why it is important to employ critique and hope in equal measure. Awareness about racism without hope for social change is a recipe for despair (Aveling). The type of interpersonal work that is required is a messy process. Guilt and shame is not the end goal, but rather a more thoughtful self-reflective process directed at dismantling historical practices of injustice. It’s not so much about skin color but rather the “discursive practices that because of colonialism and neocolonialism, privilege and sustain the global dominance of white imperial subjects and Eurocentric views” (Aveling). Only when armed with an understanding of the unearned privileges that accompany whiteness are we ready to do something about racism.

*Outside actions* include becoming allies to those marginalized by society, building diverse networks, modeling the ability to talk about race across race, and creating structured and safe settings to engage in honest discussion. Activist and Black Lives Matter founder Alicia Garza calls for an active opposition that occurs in real time at the individual and regional level. People that have a historical standpoint of fighting for justice need to lead the movement, because they have knowledge as to how to be effective while minimizing damage (Sharpe-Levine).

We cannot begin to address the various forms of oppression experienced by America’s vulnerable without radically changing a system that defends class at all costs. Unlike other forms of difference, class creates the material conditions and relations through which racism, sexism, and other forms of oppression are produced, sustained, and lived (Hill). Perhaps the most advantageous role I can play as an ally and advocate is in creating and/or being a part of strong coalitions that aim to change the system. This comes back to knowing your sphere of influence and playing to ones strengths; in order to avoid division and a white savior complex I must listen first. I must listen to other people’s truths. I must understand the power and implications behind the production of knowledge. Who benefits? Who has ownership? I must recognize language is a part of the strategy and its role in the perpetuation of power as well as the potential for dismantling, redistributing, and creating new ownership. We must ask ourselves, who becomes more and less powerful in the establishment of a certain set of facts as the true ones (Robbins)? Increasing the sense of ownership within a movement increases participant efficacy and provides new avenues for intervention. I must be clear of intentions and motivations from the start. A clear intellectual and values framework in the development of social justice actions has proven to be invaluable (Bhattacharyya).

An effective ally will also be a reflective practitioner. Managing uncertainty by acknowledging the value of alternative forms of knowing and the limits of compartmentalized ‘expertise’ will allow for a more open-ended approach that allows for continued critique and evolution. Taking heed to Neimanis’ call to avoid compartmentalization when engaging issues we look to Corburn for advice in developing “citizen humanities”, where we take up practical cultures of everyday life and reengage publics as producers and owners of knowledge. Talking with community opens the framework of an issue to include a greater historical, political, and cultural perspective. This local knowledge can be used to advocate with greater foresight and achieve more equitable and realistic policy outcomes.

Local knowledge can be understood as scripts, images, narratives, and understandings used to make sense of the world. The ally will benefit from acknowledging different worlds in which people live and respecting the understandings that accompany any temporal, cultural, or place based experience. Corburn notes that there are limits to local knowledge in that the insights are often highly contextual, and policy solutions tend to be more general. Street science emphasizes the need to open up both problem framing and subsequent methods of inquiry to local knowledge and community participation. Focusing on local knowledge and drawing on first hand experience, provides a kind of contextual intelligence that can better reach sustainable solutions and contribute to a community’s ability to make healthy lifestyle choices, avoid disease, prolong life, organize, and present valuable and trustworthy capacities for future planning (Whyte).

I invite you to join me. If you choose to engage in this work remember that what is most important is ongoing self-examination. It is ok to be uncomfortable. Embrace the messiness and discomfort. Put your safety on the line and stand in the way of violence. Begin from a position of love, but make room for anger. It is a long battle, and those who can use their anger as motivation to keep pushing are the ones who will see change. I seek to improve the quality and demographic character of policymaking by amplifying the historically silenced voice. As an ally, I pledge to combat the inequality that is entrenched in the foundation of our country, because it is an inequality that is being perpetuated by the apathy of white Americans and white leaders.

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