Journal of Natural Science Collections

An Introduction to Ally Skills for Natural History Collections Professionals

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Abstract

Natural science collections are, by their nature, collaborative and cumulative and benefit from the inclusion of diverse people with varied experiences and backgrounds. Yet many of us recognize that our workplaces, and STEM at large, are not welcoming to all, even after decades of efforts. It is increasingly clear that one of the challenges is that we lack training in turning our shared values into action. Allyship - the action-driven practice of leveraging privilege or power to make meaningful change in eradicating oppression - is one such strategy for implementing change. In this paper, we introduce allyship skills as a framework for actions to effect this change, discuss both preemptive and responsive allyship efforts, and share some simple daily actions you can take to get started.

Keywords: allyship, diversity, equity, inclusion

Introduction

This paper is for collections professionals and museum-affiliated scientists who strive to make natural history collections spaces more accessible, just, and inclusive through active allyship but may be overwhelmed and not quite sure where to start. We provide a brief overview of some current practices in diversity, equity, inclusivity, accessibility, and justice (DEIAJ) in academic spaces, and provide examples of how a history of colonial structure and inequity may manifest in collections-based work, and offer guidance on using both personal and institutional power to change existing systems that perpetuate oppression. To do so, we draw from examples in museum and library collections and social sciences, our individual experiences as academics in natural history fields, and conversations with students and colleagues about decolonizing existing systems. We include collections-based examples here, but much of our guidance is general and applies across academia and in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) disciplines.

As authors, we share a mutual goal of making academic and natural history spaces into inclusive environments for scientists and educators from all

backgrounds. All three of us have received training to promote and teach active allyship practices and lead workshops at our respective institutions. While all of the authors identify as members of various groups, some of them underserved (e.g., women, the queer community), we do not represent all axes of diversity and, therefore, do not and cannot speak for everyone.

Oppressive systems and manifestations

Academic spaces were historically created for only a small segment of the global population, specifically white, wealthy, cis men (Lynch and Alberti, 2010; Cheryan and Markus, 2020). The systems built around academia and scholarship were not created to be accessible to everyone and were, in fact, actively exclusionary through explicit rules and regulations for the majority of these institutions' existence (Neklason, 2019). More recently, academic spaces have changed policies that explicitly bar entry and participation, yet implicit barriers persist. These are the result of systemic inequalities created by controlling access to knowledge and other academic resources, as well as academic cultural practices that maintain racist and colonialist ideas (Allen, *et al.*, 2000).

Specific to natural history museums, many specimens were acquired through colonial activities, with research and educational initiatives entangled in colonial/white supremacist, patriarchal, Judeo-Christian, and cis- and heteronormative ideals (Machin, 2008; Ashby, 2017; Colwell, 2017; Das and Lowe, 2018; Wade, 2021). A famous example is the mission of the HMS Beagle including surveys for the purpose of securing British Empire shipping routes and to aid in missionary work (Browne and Neve, 1989). In addition, European museums were first created to house the physical objects accrued during the work of colonizing and for entertaining and educating European citizens with these objects through a Eurocentric lens. Colonial mindsets and a colonial legacy are seen in a variety of modern topics related to natural history collections, including in collecting practices, research, conservation work, and education (Das and Lowe, 2018).

Systemic issues transitioning to individual actions

There have been conversations within STEM about the importance of diversity and inclusion and the practical and moral need for a more diverse workforce for decades (Miriti, 2020). However, despite a multitude of different efforts and programs, STEM fields remain majority white, male, cis- and heteronormative, and able-bodied,

especially in leadership roles (Estrada, *et al.*, 2016; Rivers, 2017; Riegle-Crumb, *et al.*, 2019). One reason for this is that institutional "diversity and inclusion" efforts largely focus on recruiting members from oppressed groups or workshops aimed at helping people from underrepresented groups "fit in" (Peña, *et al.*, 2017). None of these efforts target existing systems of oppression. For real progress to be made, transformation is needed so that institutions work for all people. This transformation requires individuals to create and maintain inclusive spaces through the frameworks of decolonization ("the undoing of colonialism, which consists of one people extending their dominion over another"; Museums and Social Justice) and restorative justice ("an approach to repairing and addressing harm done within a community"; Jackson, 2021). (Miriti, 2020). For anyone new to these concepts, we recommend further reading on both restorative justice (Simpson, 2009; Karp and Schachter, 2018) and decolonization (Stein and De Oliveira Androtti, 2016; Das and Lowe, 2018). Also, The Strategic Plan (Karp and Schachter, 2018; Berry *et al.*, 2020) created by the Change Now collective, a collaboration among five early-career Black physicists at Femi National Accelerator Laboratory, is an excellent example of concrete actions institutions can adapt to create a more inclusive work environment (Mervis, 2021).

Who should be responsible for changing academic institutions? Although the default is to expect individuals who need help to ask for change or accommodations, this assumption often does not reflect reality, particularly because members of oppressed groups who advocate for changes or accommodations are often punished for doing so (Pyke, 2018; Williams, 2019; Karami, *et al.*, 2020). The result is that institutions remain largely un-changed because social and power dynamics main-tain a status quo that preserves the existing hierar-chy. Consequently, systemic change can only be achieved when people whose identities intersect with an enfranchised group (and thus have more privilege and more power; see Table 1) work to enact change--both directly and through redistrib-uting power in ways that are inclusive of members of oppressed groups.

What is allyship?

Allyship is the practice whereby individuals leverage their privilege or power to make meaningful change in eradicating oppression (Patel, 2011). Similarly, an ally is a person who works to end oppression for and with oppressed communi-ties other than their own. Here, we focus on ally-ship as a practice over ally as an identity;

Table 1. *We acknowledge that there are many different perspectives on these topics and multiple fields of study where experts examine these issues in depth. Here we define how we are using key terminology throughout this paper.*

* "Marginalized" inherently presents some people and groups as being in the "margins" of society; in fact, they are already present in society, but usually do not wield the same power as others. Thus, there is sometimes a preference to use "oppressed" or "underserved" to better capture the difference in power dynamics and avoid othering groups.
** We note that other terminology is discussed (e.g., accomplice, co-conspirator) as a way to better emphasize the actions, costs, and risks that are needed to enact change; however, we use "ally" here because of its familiarity and to emphasize that the actions of allyship are of primary importance, relative to any identity labels, self-assigned or otherwise.

Terminology	Definition
Accessibility	Equitable access to opportunities and resources regardless of human ability or experience.
Allyship	The practice whereby individuals leverage their privilege or power to make meaningful change in eradicating oppression for and with oppressed communities other than their own.
Diversity	The state of having people in a group who differ along race, gender, sexuality, age, disability, religion, class, caregiver status, etc.
Equity	Resources are allocated to give everyone equal access to opportunities.
Inclusion	Everyone in a group is valued, included, and respected, without discrimination or bias.
Justice	The dismantling of barriers to ensure that everyone leads a full and dignified life.
Intersectionality	The various combinations of one's social, cultural, and political identities creating unique modes of power and discrimination; the origins of this concept are rooted in Black Feminism (Crenshaw, 1989).
Marginalized person*	A member of a group that is the primary target of a system of oppression.
Oppression	A systemic inequality that is present throughout society, that benefits people with more privilege and harms those with fewer privileges.
Power	The ability to influence what and how others value, believe, and behave.
Privilege	An unearned advantage conferred by society to some people, but not others.

because privilege (and, subsequently, oppression) is both contextual and intersectional, *we all have the ability to be allies in different situations* (see Table 2). Unequivocally, engaging in allyship requires 1) understanding one's own power and privilege and 2) intentional and active work to use one's power and privilege to achieve equity, inclusion, and justice (Kim, 2019).

Allyship takes many forms. We divide allyship actions into two overarching categories: **preemptive** and **responsive**. The goal of preemptive allyship is to create and maintain inclusive spaces through practices that explicitly convey shared values and that facilitate everyone's ability to participate. These actions help to reduce harm before it can occur. Responsive allyship, on the other hand, focuses on responding to incidents (e.g., speech or behavior) and mitigating the resulting harm and potential for ongoing harm or escalation. While not mutually exclusive

(preemptive allyship reduces the need for responsive allyship), we find these descriptions useful for categorizing various approaches and strategies.

Preemptive allyship

Many spaces and environments are historically preferential to certain groups (e.g., naturalists were originally wealthy white gentlemen with free time). Because members of oppressed groups who speak up to request changes or accommodations face repercussions for doing so, those with power and privilege need to be proactive in making existing spaces more inclusive (Pyke, 2018; Williams, 2019; Karami, *et al.*, 2020). Thus, preemptive allyship involves cultivating inclusive spaces and using awareness of biases (implicit and otherwise) to establish norms of behavior with explicit policies and specific activities.

Table 2: *Power and privilege. This table is intended to guide readers to consider the ways in which their identity may confer power and/or privilege to take allyship action. It is not an exhaustive list. As a reminder, power and privilege are both contextual and intersectional - some sources may apply in one situation but not others, or in one circumstance but not another.*

*For some of these sources, it may be difficult to recognize if it applies to you. One guideline is that if you haven't experienced systemic oppression for **not** having that privilege, you probably have that privilege. You can also have part of a privilege - privilege is rarely all or nothing. Some sources may also be the product of both personal effort and systemic advantages; for example obtaining a degree requires the opportunity to participate in an degree-conferring system and work to complete.*
Adapted from handout from Frameshift Consulting: https://files.frameshiftconsulting.com/Ally%20Skills% 20Workshop%20handout%20-%20Letter.pdf.

Sources of privilege	Sources of power and/or privilege
Part of the enfranchised ethnic and/or racial group	Educated
Male	Technically experienced
Masculine (in speech, behavior, or appearance)	Wealthy (compared to peers)
Cisgender (you identify as the gender assigned to you at birth)	Limited financial obligations/restrictions
Straight	Any position in a hierarchy that is not the bottom of the hierarchy (e.g. management position)
Not disabled	Professor, teacher, supervisor, teaching assistant, etc.
A legal resident or citizen	Parent or family leader
Speak in the language or accent associated with high(er) status	Widely recognized as an expert
Neither "too young" nor "too old"	Large audience (social media following, fans, etc.)
Certain height/size/shape	Access to media (reporters, TV shows, editors, etc.)
Not a mother	Respected by powerful people
Not a caregiver	
From an upper- or middle-class family	
High caste	

Codes of Conduct

Clear guidelines on language use and behavior are important for establishing shared values in both physical and online spaces (e.g., conference, classroom, mailing list). Codes of Conduct are effective tools for documenting these group norms and should include: describing behaviors that are expected (e.g., constructive and actionable feedback) and excluded (e.g., humor based on racial or gender stereotypes are not allowed), proactive inclusion measures, and a clear system for reporting and enforcement (Nitsch, *et al.*, 2005; Emery, *et al.*, 2021). It is important to be aware that some common features of Codes of Conduct can - intentionally or unintentionally - reinforce systems of oppression. For example, a requirement for "professional" appearance and behavior without explicitly defining "professional" can gatekeep personal identities by requiring everyone to con- form to the sociocultural identities of groups that hold power (e.g., some hairstyles associated with the Black community have been listed as "unprofessional").

Land or territory acknowledgements

Starting group gatherings with a land or territorial acknowledgement recognizes the colonial nature of collections and academic spaces. This action reminds everyone that indigenous people and nations exist and that both institutions and people continue to benefit from historical injustices. Indigenous groups have noted that, while important, these acknowledgements alone are performative actions (Asher *et al.*, 2018). Therefore, we encourage using these events as springboards for further education or action, which can include discussions of historical back- ground, calls for reparations, or restorative justice, as in the following example (https://osf.io/ych3w/ wiki/Land%20Acknowledgment/):

> *The Living Data Project (LDP) is a collaborative effort by researchers at institutions across Canada. We collectively acknowledge that we live and work on the traditional, treaty, and unceded territories of many Indigenous peoples, including Coast Salish, Syilx (Okanagan), Niitsitapii*

(Blackfoot Confederacy), nêhiyawak (Cree), Anihšinābēk (Saulteaux), Métis, Attawandaron, Mississaugas, Kanien'kehá : ka (Mohawk), and Haudenosaunee (Iroquois). The LDP brings together instructors and students from many different places with distinct Indigenous traditions and colonial histories. We encourage participants to seek more information about the traditional territories on which they live: https://native-land.ca.

Sharing pronouns

Sharing pronouns is a preemptive allyship action that identifies the space as welcoming of everyone's gender identity. It also establishes expectations that people will be referred to by what they want. Specific recommendations for pronoun sharing include:

- Make the sharing of pronouns optional - some individuals may not be ready or feel safe to share their pronouns in the current setting.
- Refer to pronouns as "pronouns" or "personal pronouns" -the term "preferred pronouns" has been weaponized by those who claim that being asked to use someone's "preferred" pronouns is an infringement of free speech.
- Remember that gender is not a binary; pronouns can include "they/them/theirs" and "ze/hir/hirs", among others - be prepared to respond firmly about respecting everyone's pronouns if someone reacts negatively.
- Establish a clear policy for using "they/them" or the person's name when someone's pronouns are unknown and that it is ok to ask for someone's pronouns instead of assuming pronouns based on appearance.
- Simple language: If you forget or are unsure of someone's pronouns, you can ask to be reminded. It is better to ask than to refer to someone with the wrong pronouns. This exercise is important to help everyone in this room participate and avoid unintentionally disrespecting each other, so please take it seriously and listen carefully.

Accessibility measures

Accessibility measures are necessary to ensure that everyone's ability to participate does not *require* anyone to seek out additional resources or accommodations. For example, screen-readers are a type of assistive technology used by people who are blind or have visual impairments. To work correctly, screen-readers, documents, and websites should have clear page layout and design, clearly identify elements through use of headings and alternative text ("alt-text") descriptions of images, and have

search and find capabilities (Slatin, 2001; Singleton and Neuber, 2020).

In addition, many accessibility measures improve experiences for everyone, not just for those with disabilities. For example, captioning services are a common accommodation for the deaf or hard-of-hearing but also benefit many more groups, including English-language learners, listeners who use a lower audio volume setting, and those with auditory processing disorders. It can also help to create a written record of meetings that is helpful for asynchronous participants.

Language usage

Understanding and using the recommended terminology for different groups is important for clear communications and countering stereotype threat—the fear that people will conform to (negative) stereotypes about a group. For example, the concepts of sex chromosomes, "sex" as a social construct, and gender identity, are not interchangeable. There are critical differences between these concepts that are important when discussing topics such as reproductive biology or data involving human subjects. A list of the most important terms and definitions are provided in a handout from Frameshift Consulting: https://files.frameshiftconsulting.com/Ally%20Skills%20Workshop%20handout%20-%20Letter.pdf.

The purpose of these recommendations for language are to improve the inclusivity of a space. For example, "lame" is commonly used to refer to something inferior or unpopular; however, we discourage usage of this word because the association of a physical impairment with negative connotations is harmful to people with disabilities.

Responsive allyship

Cultivating an inclusive environment also entails enforcement of boundaries and responding to situations as they arise. It is our experience that many academics avoid conflict, especially about matters that are not their primary research subject area. Therefore, in order to respond in a positive and timely manner, it is important to be prepared. We provide general guidelines in this section, along with resources for further training and practice.

First, it is important to recognize different types of situations and realize that you will not always be present when an incident occurs. In general, many incidents are unreported, so it is much more likely that an incident report is indicative of a pattern of issues than someone making a false report (Nitsch, *et al.*, 2005; Weiser, 2017). It is important to take

reports seriously and to provide empathy to the person who is reporting a violation or problem. Harassers will push boundaries gradually over time, relying on the predisposition towards civility or being defended by those who have had only positive interactions with the harasser, and are thus able to remain in a space.

Identifying incidents

When someone says or does something that gives you pause but does not appear to be a clear violation of a Code of Conduct, it could be a microaggression. A good habit to practice is to interrogate the language or the action and isolate the issue to identify both the harms and the target(s) of the oppression. You may wish to refer to the definitions in Table 1 and ask yourself these questions:

- What systems of oppression are at work in this scenario?
- What privileges or power would be helpful to act as an ally?
- What are some ways to respond?

Responding to incidents

Responding to an incident or situation should focus on setting boundaries and expectations for behavior. In other words, concentrate on an offender's actions and their impacts on marginalized groups rather than their intent. Offenders (especially repeat offenders) can still be excluded from a space, but it should be clear that this is done to ensure the safety of a space and not as a value judgment on the individual.

Guidance for responding:
- Be firm and direct about the problematic behavior. Remember to focus on the impacts rather than intentions.
- Avoid criticizing the offender through humor and/or personal comments. This type of response does not address the behavior and its harm; instead it can harm others by insulting personal qualities such as visual appearance, hygiene, etc.
- Simple responses can be effective for interrupting and preventing ongoing harm. (e.g., "Yikes!", "We don't do/say that here.")
- Similarly, redirecting a conversation to focus on workplace goals can be a less confrontational way of stopping problematic behavior in the moment. (e.g., "Let's focus on making the primary message of this presentation clearer.")
- Alternatively, reframing the action from the lens of systemic prejudice can be educational

for a person or group. (e.g., "Asking for a native English speaker reinforces the wrong idea that non-English speakers are not welcome and does not address any actionable issues in communication.")
- In some settings, you may want to make your point and move on rather than engage someone who may be debating in bad faith. Remember, your goal is to *enforce consequences for actions and establish boundaries, not to convince everyone that you are right.*

Example incident and response:
> *At a meeting to evaluate faculty candidates (or seminar speakers, grad students, etc.), someone says, "It's great to hire more Latinx people, but let's not lower the bar." Before you can reply, someone else says, "Oh yes, we'll be careful not to lower the bar"* (https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1ApXtF-9gQEE9XFH7LEAlxcF0W4HP0z-8WXDWul2KHZs/export/pdf).

These utterances may give you pause, yet it may not be immediately clear as to *why* they are problematic. Again, develop a habit of interrogating the language to isolate the issue and identify both the harms and the targets of oppression. Here, the core problem is the discussion of a "lower bar" for applicants in association with an ethnic group. This phrasing implies that members of that group are held to a lower standard compared to members of other groups, and that members of that group have fewer qualifications. One possible response is to remind everyone that the applicants should be judged based on their qualifications and that any expectation that a group has a "lower bar" is problematic.

A more in-depth response could reframe the discussion and explore the assumption that assessment is purely meritocratic. For example, one relevant finding is that members of marginalized groups are often held to a higher standard (i.e., "men are judged for potential, women are judged for performance"; Player, *et al.*, 2019) and are more likely to engage in mentorship and other activities that are valued but which are not reflected in common metrics (Davies *et al.*, 2021). Discussion of these issues as an entry into revising evaluations could be a pathway towards systemic change for the organization. Furthermore, one does not need to be an expert to initiate this change! There are many advocacy groups who already provide specific guidance - allyship also includes finding and implementing these practices (e.g., Inclusive Hiring Practices: https://projectinclude.org/hiring).

Accountability
A key part of allyship is responding appropriately when your mistakes are pointed out. By definition, allyship requires active involvement, and it is very likely you will make mistakes and have those mistakes be pointed out and/or criticized. Rather than letting the fear of mistakes and criticism prevent you from acting, accept that mistakes will happen and prepare ahead of time by learning to respond appropriately.

When your speech or actions have caused harm, it is necessary to apologize for the impacts and avoid defending your intentions. We recommend these three steps:
- Acknowledge *what* you did.
- Thank the person for pointing out your mistake.
- Commit to doing better (and following through).

Although being corrected or called out is never an enjoyable experience, explaining your intentions will create a situation where your own errors or emotions are now the focus of conversation. This may cause other people to feel obliged to make *you* feel better! Instead, focus on corrective actions and mitigating harm in a public setting. And do reach out to your friends, family, therapist, etc., as necessary on your own time, to address your feelings.

Microallyship

As you consider allyship actions to address oppression at your institution, here are some simple daily actions you can take to get started. These tips come from a presentation given originally by Neha Batra entitled "Microallyship: micro servicing your team's culture" (2019). We also find them useful as different perspectives for evaluating allyship actions.

Amplify.

Leverage your own social and professional networks to amplify the voices of members of oppressed groups.
People with power and privilege are better connected to other people with power and privilege. Because so much of academic advancement depends on peers (e.g., publication, invitations, tenure and promotion), members of oppressed groups can face more challenges as a result of reduced access to these networks. To counter this, consider using your social capital to promote members of oppressed groups by sharing their work, nominating them for awards, or inviting them as reviewers and panelists, etc. In particular, when members of oppressed groups

are asked to talk about DEIAJ topics, they may not be offered the same honoraria as other speakers. If you are in a position of power, you can request that honoraria policies be standardized. Even seemingly small activities can help, such as re-sharing content on social media from activists of oppressed groups rather than trying to recapitulate the same ideas in your own words.

Attribute.

Ensure that credit for ideas, concepts, and work is given to the appropriate person or group.
The contributions from members of oppressed groups are often overlooked or mistakenly credited to other people or groups with prestige and status (e.g., the "Matthew/Matilda Effect"; Rossiter, 1993). To combat this, you need to ensure that credit is properly assigned for work, especially in your area of expertise. For example, women staffers in the Obama administration established a practice of repeating, and providing attribution for, key points made by other women (Landsbaum, 2016). This tactic prevented others from - intentionally or unintentionally - claiming an idea as their own. In collections, creating and maintaining documentation and records to assign credit to every staff member, student, and volunteer who contributes is a way of making sure that the work of every individual is correctly acknowledged.

Volunteer.
Do your share of service tasks that are overwhelmingly done by members of oppressed groups.
Members of oppressed groups often end up doing service tasks that should be equitably distributed - taking notes, cleaning shared spaces, organizing workplace social activities - while simultaneously being perceived as taking up more time and space than they actually do (Cutler and Scott, 1990). To combat this in your own spaces, establish general rules for meetings to ensure that everyone has the opportunity to give input and that "office house-work" tasks are shared among all members of the team. For example, establish a rotation schedule for taking minutes rather than asking for people to volunteer.

Educate.

Self-educate to understand your own points of privilege and power as well as to understand oppression and how to counteract it.
It is tempting for the would-be ally to ask the nearest member of an oppressed group how they can be a better ally. We recommend against this course of action (Niemann, 2016). It is not the job of your colleagues to educate you on oppression or their personal experiences. Instead, do your

own research and follow diverse news sources to build your awareness of issues and actions already being implemented by leaders from marginalized groups. You may also want to advocate that your organization sponsors educational initiatives that everyone can participate in. Also, be aware that terminology and practices are often in flux. A phrase or practice that may have been acceptable at one time may no longer be appropriate a few years later. Recognizing that this change is common and being ready to learn (and apologize when you make a mistake) are important aspects of allyship.

Ask.

Before acting, ask how you can best support someone. One popular slogan in disability and other activism communities is "nothing about us without us" (Charlton, 1998). This slogan refers to the practice of ensuring that members of an oppressed group be given agency to comment or decide on actions which affect them. For microallyship, this philosophy translates to checking in with individuals or groups before taking corrective actions. This practice is important, because retaliation is more likely to occur against members of oppressed groups than allies who speak up about oppression, so consent is necessary before taking actions that could result in further harm. Furthermore, if a member of the oppressed group chooses to address the incident, step back and support them as best you can. Do not take over the situation unless asked or specifically given permission. In addition, many groups already exist that are doing good work. Before taking an action or starting a new committee, ask yourself if you might be reinventing the wheel or if it would be better to redirect resources and energy to existing activists.

Conclusions

We conclude with a reminder of the primary and most critical message that allyship is about actions and not intent. Although it is tempting to believe that good intentions are enough to create a just environment, this passive approach misses the reality of systemic inequality. Commonplace practices that appear neutral or beneficial at first glance are sometimes revealed to be exclusionary upon deeper inspection through the lens of oppressive systems. Allyship also requires introspection on such facets, to update our mindsets, and enable action to address the implicit and explicit biases that persist in the field of natural history collections, our institutions, and society broadly. We write this as a practical introductory guide for actions you can take, some on a daily basis, to improve DEIAJ in the spaces where you have privilege and power.

What is true is already so.
Owning up to it doesn't make it worse.
Not being open about it doesn't make it go away.
And because it's true, it is what is there to be interacted with.
Anything untrue isn't there to be lived.
People can stand what is true,
for they are already enduring it.
—Eugene Gendlin

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