EXPLORING THE RELATIONAL DYNAMICS OF WORKPLACE ALLYSHIP: A BENEFICIARY-CENTERED GROUNDED THEORY

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Exploring the Relational Dynamics of Allyship: Understanding Marginalized Individuals' Perspectives

Abstract

This study develops a process-oriented model of workplace allyship that explains how allyship is interpreted, evaluated, and responded to by marginalized employees. Drawing on a constructivist grounded theory approach, I analyze in-depth interviews with 50 marginalized professionals across Canada and the United States to examine how workplace support is experienced across organizational contexts.

The findings reconceptualize allyship as a relational process unfolding across four stages, Awareness, Action, Reflection, and Adaptation, through which marginalized employees make sense of workplace support and determine how to engage with allies. Challenging prior research that often treats allyship as inherently beneficial, the findings demonstrate that the consequences of allyship depend not only on supportive actions, but also on how those actions are interpreted within workplace relationships and organizational contexts.

The findings further highlight the importance of authenticity, credibility, emotional experience, power, and organizational context in shaping allyship evaluations. Participants distinguished between support that felt meaningful and support that appeared symbolic, emphasizing the importance of consistency, advocacy, and support during consequential situations. Although similar patterns of allyship emerged across participant groups, differences were evident in the criteria used to evaluate support across identities and contexts.

Together, these findings extend emerging beneficiary-centered allyship scholarship by providing a process-oriented framework for understanding how allyship is interpreted and evaluated and how it becomes meaningful, trusted, and sustained within workplace relationships over time.

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Exploring the Relational Dynamics of Allyship: Understanding Marginalized Individuals' Perspectives

Chapter One: Introduction

Over the past two decades, organizations in North America and Western Europe have invested heavily in equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) initiatives as a means of addressing persistent workplace inequalities. Yet, despite significant financial and institutional commitment, disparities across race, gender, sexual orientation, and disability continue to shape employee experiences and outcomes (Janssens & Steyaert, 2019; Kalev et al., 2006; Leslie, 2019). Recent shifts in the socio-political landscape have further complicated these efforts. In the United States, for example, policy developments targeting the rollback of EDI programs (White House, 2025) have intensified scrutiny over organizational diversity initiatives, raising questions about their effectiveness, legitimacy, and sustainability.

Within this context, allyship, broadly defined as actions through which individuals from socially dominant or advantaged groups actively support, advocate for, and work to reduce inequities experienced by marginalized groups (Amis et al., 2020; Ganegoda et al. 2024; Salter & Migliaccio, 2019), has emerged as a prominent relational alternative to formalized diversity interventions. Marginalized groups refer to individuals and social groups who experience structural disadvantage, exclusion, underrepresentation, or unequal access to power, resources, and opportunities within organizational and broader societal contexts due to socially devalued identities, such as race, gender, sexual orientation, disability, ethnicity, or other intersecting identities (Collins, 2022; Crenshaw, 1989; Shore et al., 2018). In the context of allyship, these individuals constitute the beneficiaries of allyship, meaning those toward whom allyship actions

are directed and whose experiences and interpretations influence how support is understood within workplace relationships (Dang & Joshi, 2023).

The term allyship, however, is characterized by conceptual variation and is not without criticism. Traditional definitions generally conceptualize allies as members of socially dominant or relatively advantaged groups who act in support of marginalized groups to which they do not belong (Droogendyk et al., 2016; Edwards, 2006; Kutlaca & Radke, 2023; Radke et al., 2020). Adjacent concepts, including advocacy, solidarity, collective action, sponsorship, and prosocial behavior, similarly describe actions intended to support others or challenge inequality, although they differ in their assumptions regarding group membership, power, motivation, and the nature or target of support (Kutlaca & Radke, 2023; Radke et al., 2020; Warren & Warren, 2023). Importantly, social advantage and marginalization are not mutually exclusive or fixed across identity domains. Intersectionality scholarship recognizes that individuals simultaneously occupy multiple social positions and may experience disadvantage along one identity dimension while holding relative advantage along another (Collins, 2022; Crenshaw, 1989; Holvino, 2010). Accordingly, individuals who experience marginalization along one identity dimension may occupy a relatively advantaged position in relation to another focal identity and may therefore engage in allyship or solidarity with members of other marginalized groups (Collins, 2022; Crenshaw, 1989; Uluğ et al., 2026). Although broader conceptualizations therefore allow for allyship across differently marginalized groups, the present study adopts the more established workplace conceptualization of allyship as support enacted from a position of relative social advantage in relation to the focal identity. This approach recognizes the intersectional and context-dependent nature of social positioning without requiring individuals acting as allies to

occupy socially dominant positions across all dimensions of their identities (Collins, 2022; Crenshaw, 1989).

The term has also been subject to criticism because conceptualizing someone as an ally may imply a stable or self-ascribed identity and may inadvertently center the intentions, motivations, or self-perceptions of those providing support rather than the experiences of those receiving it (Droogendyk et al., 2016; Edwards, 2006; Knowlton et al., 2022). Related scholarship has raised concerns about performative, paternalistic, or self-serving forms of allyship and cautioned against assuming that actions intended as supportive necessarily produce beneficial outcomes for marginalized individuals (Chu & Ashburn-Nardo, 2022; Droogendyk et al., 2016; Knowlton et al., 2022). Despite these conceptual debates, the present study retains the term allyship because it remains widely used within organizational scholarship to describe efforts to support marginalized colleagues and address inequity, and because the contested meaning of allyship is itself theoretically relevant to this research. Consistent with the study's beneficiary-centered orientation, allyship is therefore not treated as a status that individuals can simply claim for themselves or as a label automatically conferred by supportive intentions. Rather, it is approached as a relational phenomenon whose meaning, and authenticity are interpreted and evaluated by beneficiaries through workplace interactions.

Within workplace settings, this relational understanding of allyship draws attention to everyday interpersonal actions that complement formal institutional programs and through which individuals in relatively advantaged positions may support marginalized colleagues (Dang & Joshi, 2023; Ganegoda et al., 2024). As organizations increasingly turn toward informal and relational mechanisms of inclusion, allyship is often positioned as a practical and scalable pathway for advancing equity within workplace interactions. This relational emphasis makes it

particularly important to understand not only what individuals intending to act as allies do, but also how those actions are experienced and interpreted by those they are intended to support.

Existing allyship scholarship has generated important insights into how individuals from dominant groups become allies, enact supportive behaviors, and navigate identity-based inclusion efforts within organizations (Edwards, 2006; Ganegoda et al., 2024; Radke et al., 2020; Warren & Warren 2023). Much of this work conceptualizes allyship as a form of prosocial action intended to support marginalized employees through advocacy, mentorship, amplification, and interpersonal support (Droogendyk et al., 2016; Erskine & Bilimoria, 2019). More recent scholarship has further complicated idealized portrayals of allyship by examining performativity, allyship pitfalls, authenticity concerns, relational accountability, and beneficiaries' perceptions of support (Bhattacharyya et al., 2024; Knowlton et al., 2022; Kutlaca & Radke, 2023; Tedder-King et al., 2025; Uluğ et al., 2026). Collectively, these studies suggest that allyship is neither uniformly experienced as credible nor inherently beneficial, but is relationally negotiated, contextually interpreted, and shaped by organizational power relations. Despite these advances, an integrative process explanation of how beneficiaries' interpretations and evaluations of allyship develop across repeated workplace interactions and shape subsequent relational engagement remains underdeveloped. Despite its growing prominence, the theoretical foundations of workplace allyship remain fragmented. Existing research has generated important knowledge about allyship intentions, identities, behaviors, consequences, and beneficiary evaluations, yet important questions remain regarding how these elements become organized into an evolving relational process (Dang & Joshi, 2023; Edwards, 2006; Radke et al., 2020; Tedder-King et al., 2025). This fragmentation creates four interrelated theoretical limitations that

constrain current explanations of how allyship is experienced, evaluated, and sustained over time.

First, allyship is frequently assumed to be inherently beneficial. Much of the literature implicitly treats ally behaviors as positive contributions to inclusion, often equating action with impact (Dang & Joshi, 2023; Radke et al., 2020). However, emerging research complicates this assumption, demonstrating that allyship may be experienced as superficial, intrusive, or even harmful when perceived as performative, misaligned, or self-serving (Chu & Ashburn-Nardo, 2022; Knowlton et al., 2022; Tedder-King et al., 2025). These findings suggest that allyship cannot be evaluated solely based on intent or behavior, but must be understood through the lens of those who experience it. Allyship is not judged by what allies intend or even what they do, but by how their actions are interpreted over time, particularly when they demonstrate, or fail to demonstrate, consistency under conditions of risk.

Second, the role of power within allyship relationships remains insufficiently theorized. Allyship unfolds within systems of structural and organizational inequality, where allies often possess greater institutional authority, social capital, legitimacy, or status than those they seek to support (Acker, 2006; Collins et al., 2021; Creary, 2024; Ray, 2019). Yet, power does not automatically confer trust or legitimacy. Marginalized individuals may question the motivations behind ally actions, particularly when such actions appear driven by reputational concerns or symbolic compliance (de Leon et al., 2024; Iyer & Achia, 2021). Recent work also demonstrates that the meaning and consequences of allyship depend on factors such as who acts, who is supported, the target of the action, its potential costs, and the broader structural context in which the action occurs (Uluğ et al., 2026). Thus, although relative social advantage may provide resources that enable allyship, existing research provides comparatively limited explanation of

how power asymmetries interact with beneficiaries' interpretations of support across workplace relationships.

Third, beneficiary perspectives remain comparatively underdeveloped within allyship research. Although existing scholarship has devoted substantial attention to allies' motivations, identities, and behavioral intentions (Dang & Joshi, 2023; Edwards, 2006; Radke et al., 2020), a growing body of research has begun to examine allyship from beneficiaries' perspectives, demonstrating that marginalized individuals actively interpret and evaluate the support they receive (Bhattacharyya et al., 2024; Knowlton et al., 2022; Tedder-King et al., 2025; Uluğ et al., 2026). These studies provide important insight into beneficiaries' experiences and evaluations of allyship. However, less is known about how these evaluations develop across repeated workplace interactions, shape subsequent responses and engagement, and evolve within changing relational and organizational contexts. This process-oriented gap, rather than the absence of beneficiary-centered scholarship itself, provides an important foundation for the present study. Fourth, allyship research remains fragmented across identity domains, with limited theorization of how a shared allyship process may be differentially interpreted across identity groups. Existing studies frequently examine allyship within specific identity categories, such as gender, race, LGBTQ+ inclusion, or disability, often treating these contexts as conceptually distinct rather than examining whether common underlying relational processes operate across groups (Dang & Joshi, 2023; Ganegoda et al., 2024; Radke et al., 2020). As a result, allyship scholarship has tended to produce identity-specific insights while offering limited explanation of how marginalized employees across groups may engage in similar processes of interpreting workplace support and navigating allyship relationships. At the same time, this fragmentation obscures how identity-specific experiences shape the criteria through which allyship is

interpreted. For example, LGBTQ+ employees may place greater emphasis on visibility and relational safety, whereas racialized employees may evaluate allyship more critically in situations involving institutional risk, advocacy, or the use of power (Creary, 2024). Consequently, existing research provides limited understanding of how allyship may simultaneously operate as a shared relational process while remaining differentially experienced across social identities and organizational contexts.

Taken together, these limitations point to the need for an integrative process perspective that builds on emerging beneficiary-centered allyship scholarship while explaining how allyship relationships evolve over time. Recent research demonstrates that marginalized employees actively interpret, evaluate, and respond to allyship rather than simply receiving supportive actions as inherently beneficial (Bhattacharyya et al., 2024; Knowlton et al., 2022; Tedder-King et al., 2025; Uluğ et al., 2026). Building on these advances, comparatively less is known about how beneficiary evaluations develop and change across repeated workplace interactions, how prior experiences shape subsequent interpretations, how these evaluations influence ongoing relational engagement, and how these processes are shaped by organizational context, power, and identity. I address this process-oriented gap by examining how marginalized employees experience, interpret, evaluate, and respond to allyship over time. . The study is guided by three research questions:

1. How do marginalized employees experience, interpret, and evaluate allyship from relatively advantaged group members within workplace interactions over time?
2. How do marginalized employees adapt or regulate their engagement with allyship relationships across interactions and contexts?

3. How does identity-related variation shape marginalized employees' experiences, expectations, interpretations, and evaluations of allyship?

Using a constructivist grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2006), I develop a theoretical explanation grounded in participants' experiences across multiple identity groups and organizational contexts. This study contributes to allyship and inclusion scholarship by extending emerging beneficiary-centered research through a process-oriented explanation of workplace allyship. First, rather than introducing the beneficiary perspective itself, the study theorizes how marginalized employees' interpretations and evaluations of allyship develop across repeated workplace interactions and shape subsequent relational engagement. Second, it contributes to emerging scholarship on the relational and contextual nature of allyship by explaining how emotional–relational experiences, organizational conditions, and power dynamics shape the evolution of allyship relationships. Third, by examining experiences across multiple marginalized groups, the study identifies both shared process dynamics and context-specific variation in how allyship is interpreted and evaluated.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

2.1 Workplace Allyship and Its Emerging Complexities

Workplace allyship has emerged as a prominent mechanism through which organizations seek to advance equity, inclusion, and social justice under conditions of persistent inequality. Across organizational behavior, diversity, and social psychological scholarship, allyship is increasingly viewed as a critical means through which individuals with relatively greater social or institutional power may leverage their position to support marginalized employees and challenge exclusionary systems (Ganegoda et al., 2024; Kossek et al., 2024; Warren & Warren 2023). Recent scholarship further positions allyship as central to broader organizational efforts aimed at fostering advocacy, solidarity, and structural inclusion within workplaces (Kossek et al., 2024). This growing emphasis on allyship reflects broader organizational recognition that inclusion cannot be achieved solely through formal diversity initiatives, but also requires interpersonal and relational forms of support capable of disrupting everyday marginalization (Droogendyk et al., 2016; Erskine & Bilimoria, 2019).

Early allyship scholarship largely conceptualized allies as members of dominant social groups who advocate for marginalized individuals through supportive behaviors, advocacy, and solidarity (Edwards, 2006; Washington & Evans, 1991). Within workplace contexts, allyship has been associated with actions such as confronting discrimination, amplifying marginalized voices, mentoring underrepresented employees, advocating for equitable opportunities, and challenging biased practices (Erskine & Bilimoria, 2019; Ganegoda et al., 2024;). Research has also demonstrated that allyship can shape broader organizational climates by influencing observer behavior, encouraging social learning, and legitimizing support for marginalized groups (Lyubykh et al., 2024). These conceptualizations positioned allyship as a fundamentally

prosocial and inclusion-oriented phenomenon capable of improving organizational belonging and reducing experiences of exclusion.

As allyship research expanded, scholars increasingly examined the motivations, identities, and behavioral orientations associated with ally enactment. Research explored why individuals engage in allyship, how allies develop social justice orientations, and what behavioral characteristics distinguish more versus less effective allies (Dang & Joshi, 2023; Radke et al., 2020). Studies have highlighted factors such as moral conviction, empathy, perspective-taking, and identity awareness as important antecedents of ally behavior (Droogendyk et al., 2016; Kutlaca et al., 2020; Uluğ et al., 2026). Importantly, Phillips et al. (2024) demonstrate that different underlying motivations produce different allyship outcomes, showing that self-transcendent motivations are associated with more effective allyship than self-enhancing motivations centered on image management or self-presentation. Other research has examined the tensions allies experience when navigating competing organizational pressures, reputational concerns, or fears of social backlash (Knowlton et al., 2022).

At the same time, a growing body of scholarship has begun to complicate idealized portrayals of allyship by demonstrating that supportive intentions do not necessarily translate into meaningful support for marginalized employees (Cheng et al., 2019; Knowlton et al., 2022). Emerging work on performative allyship suggests that allies may engage in symbolic or low-cost actions that signal moral alignment without assuming substantive interpersonal or institutional risk (Kalina, 2020). For example, de Leon et al. (2024) show that employees actively distinguish between sincere organizational solidarity and performative organizational allyship, evaluating whether organizational actions reflect genuine commitment or symbolic image management. Related scholarship demonstrates that allyship may unintentionally reproduce paternalism, saviorism,

emotional defensiveness, or self-centering when allies prioritize identity validation over structural change (Cheng et al., 2019; Knowlton et al., 2022). Such findings challenge the assumption that allyship is inherently beneficial and instead position it as relationally contingent and evaluatively unstable.

Importantly, a growing body of beneficiary-centered scholarship demonstrates that intended beneficiaries actively evaluate whether allyship is credible, meaningful, responsive, and trustworthy rather than automatically interpreting supportive intentions as beneficial (Bhattacharyya et al., 2024; Tedder-King et al., 2025; Uluğ et al., 2026). This work has been important in shifting attention toward beneficiaries' experiences and demonstrating that allyship is relationally interpreted rather than defined solely by allies' intentions or behaviors. However, despite these advances, existing research provides comparatively less explanation of how beneficiary evaluations develop cumulatively across repeated interactions and how those evaluations subsequently shape trust, relational engagement, and responses to future allyship. Thus, the remaining gap concerns the dynamic and processual development of beneficiary evaluations rather than the absence of beneficiary perspectives themselves.

Importantly, emerging scholarship increasingly suggests that intended beneficiaries of allyship actively evaluate whether supportive actions are credible, meaningful, and trustworthy rather than automatically interpreting ally intentions as beneficial (Bhattacharyya et al., 2024; Creary, 2024; Edwards, 2006; Kutlaca et al., 2020; Phillips et al., 2024; Tedder-King et al., 2025; Uluğ et al., 2026). Research further suggests that perceptions of allyship legitimacy may vary depending on who enacts allyship, with both dominant-group and marginalized-group allies evaluated differently depending on relational credibility, identity positioning, and perceived authenticity (Preston et al., 2024). Research demonstrates that marginalized individuals may

perceive allyship as insufficient, inconsistent, or even harmful when supportive actions fail to align with their needs or reproduce unequal power dynamics (Cheng et al., 2019; Warren & Warren, 2023). This emerging work shifts attention toward the interpretive and relational dimensions of allyship, suggesting that allyship cannot be understood solely through allies' intentions or behaviors. Additionally, allyship scholarship has increasingly expanded beyond traditional diversity domains to examine support processes across broader work and life experiences, including transitions such as postpartum return-to-work experiences (Chawla et al., 2024). These studies further reinforce the idea that allyship unfolds relationally and contextually rather than as a fixed set of universally effective behaviors.

However, despite these advances, existing research provides comparatively less explanation of how beneficiary evaluations develop cumulatively across repeated interactions and how those evaluations subsequently shape trust, relational engagement, and responses to future allyship. Thus, the remaining gap concerns the dynamic and processual development of beneficiary evaluations rather than the absence of beneficiary perspectives themselves.

2.2 Allyship as Relational and Dynamic

Although early allyship scholarship often conceptualized allyship as a relatively stable set of supportive attitudes and behaviors enacted by dominant-group members (Ganegoda et al., 2024; Warren & Warren 2023), more recent research increasingly recognizes that allyship is interactionally complex, relationally negotiated, and contextually contingent (Knowlton et al., 2022; Kossek et al., 2024; Kutlaca & Radke, 2023). Rather than assuming that allyship is uniformly beneficial or consistently experienced positively, emerging scholarship demonstrates that allyship may involve ambiguity, emotional tension, unintended harm, performativity, and relational uncertainty (Kalina, 2020). These developments represent an important shift away

from static behavioral conceptualizations toward more nuanced understandings of allyship as socially interpreted and dynamically enacted within organizational relationships.

At the same time, recent scholarship increasingly acknowledges that allyship unfolds through ongoing interaction rather than through isolated supportive acts alone. Research on performative allyship, for example, demonstrates that marginalized employees often distinguish between symbolic expressions of support and substantive commitments to equity and inclusion (de Leon et al., 2024; Kalina, 2020). Similarly, work examining ally motivations suggests that allyship effectiveness is shaped not only by whether support is enacted, but also by how allies' intentions, values, and relational orientations are perceived by others (Phillips et al., 2024). Together, these perspectives suggest that allyship is not simply enacted by allies, but interpreted, evaluated, and negotiated relationally.

Importantly, growing beneficiary-centered scholarship recognizes that marginalized employees are not passive recipients of allyship but active interpreters and evaluators of relational engagement (Bhattacharyya et al., 2024; Iyer & Achia, 2021; Tedder-King et al., 2025; Uluğ et al., 2026). Marginalized individuals assess whether allyship is experienced as credible, trustworthy, emotionally safe, and responsive to unequal power relations. Research additionally suggests that allyship may be interpreted differently depending on who enacts support, how advocacy is framed, and whether actions are perceived as aligned with justice-oriented goals versus reputational or self-enhancement concerns (Ganegoda et al., 2024; Phillips et al., 2024). These studies provide an important foundation for understanding allyship from the perspective of those it is intended to support.

Nevertheless, despite increasing recognition of relationality and interpretive complexity, existing dynamic allyship perspectives remain comparatively limited in explaining how allyship

relationships evolve over time through ongoing cycles of interaction, interpretation, and reassessment (Bhattacharyya et al., 2024; Creary, 2024; Knowlton et al., 2022; Kutlaca & Radke, 2023). For example, Knowlton et al. (2022) importantly demonstrate that allyship is characterized by uncertainty, defensiveness, and interactional tensions that complicate ally enactment. Their framework highlights the emotional and relational difficulties allies encounter while navigating privilege, accountability, and social expectations. However, the primary analytic focus remains on the tensions surrounding ally behavior itself rather than on how beneficiaries continuously reassess allyship legitimacy across repeated interactions and changing contextual conditions (Bhattacharyya et al., 2024; Creary, 2024; Knowlton et al., 2022). Consequently, existing tension-based models provide limited explanation of how allyship relationships evolve over time and across changing workplace interactions (Kutlaca & Radke, 2023).

Similarly, relational leadership perspectives advance the literature by emphasizing vulnerability, accountability, reflexivity, and interpersonal engagement within allyship relationships (Creary, 2024). These approaches importantly recognize that allyship is socially embedded and co-constructed within ongoing relational processes rather than reducible to discrete behaviors (Creary, 2024; Knowlton et al., 2022; Kossek et al., 2024). Yet, relational leadership perspectives remain comparatively centered on ally or leader enactment processes rather than on how marginalized employees evaluate the legitimacy, credibility, and consequences of allyship over time (Bhattacharyya et al., 2024; Creary, 2024). This limitation suggests the need for greater attention to how marginalized employees experience and interpret allyship within workplace relationships and organizational contexts.

A similar limitation emerges within existing conceptualizations of ally authenticity. Kutlaca and Radke (2023), for instance, conceptualize authenticity along motivational and behavioral continuums, distinguishing between more versus less genuine orientations toward support. Related scholarship similarly examines how ally motivations shape perceptions of sincerity, effectiveness, and relational credibility (Phillips et al., 2024). While these approaches significantly advance understanding of performative versus authentic allyship, authenticity remains primarily conceptualized as a relatively stable orientation, disposition, or motivational quality associated with allies themselves. Emerging work on organizational allyship further demonstrates that employees actively distinguish between sincere solidarity and symbolic or performative support, reinforcing that authenticity judgments are socially interpreted and interactionally negotiated rather than objectively determined (de Leon et al., 2024).

Taken together, existing dynamic and relational perspectives have significantly advanced allyship scholarship by recognizing complexity, performativity, accountability, and interactional variability (Creary, 2024; Knowlton et al., 2022; Kossek et al., 2024; Kutlaca & Radke, 2023). However, these frameworks remain comparatively episodic, ally-centered, or orientation-based, focusing primarily on ally motivations, developmental trajectories, relational enactment, or authenticity orientations rather than on how beneficiaries experience and evaluate allyship across ongoing interactions (Phillips et al., 2024; Radke et al., 2020). Existing research increasingly recognizes that allyship is relationally interpreted and contextually contingent, yet less attention has been devoted to understanding how beneficiaries' evaluations develop, change, and are influenced by ongoing workplace experiences over time (Bhattacharyya et al., 2024; Creary, 2024; Knowlton et al., 2022; Kutlaca & Radke, 2023;). Collectively, these limitations suggest the

need for research that examines allyship as an evolving relational phenomenon from the perspective of those who receive and interpret support.

2.3 Authenticity and Evaluative Allyship

Although allyship scholarship increasingly acknowledges interpretive complexity, relational variation, and contextual influences, authenticity remains comparatively underexamined within the literature (Bhattacharyya et al., 2024; Knowlton et al., 2022; Kutlaca & Radke, 2023). Existing research suggests that marginalized employees do not automatically accept supportive actions as beneficial or credible but instead assess the value and sincerity of allyship in workplace interactions (Bhattacharyya et al., 2024; Creary, 2024; Knowlton et al., 2022). As a result, authenticity has emerged as an increasingly important consideration in contemporary allyship research. The distinction between authentic and performative allyship reflects growing recognition that allyship is evaluated rather than assumed (de Leon et al., 2024; Kalina, 2020; Radke et al., 2020). Rather than inferring allyship solely from supportive actions, beneficiaries often consider whether support appears meaningful, accountable, and responsive to their experiences (Bhattacharyya et al., 2024). This perspective challenges earlier assumptions that allyship can be understood primarily through allies' intentions or behaviors and highlights the importance of beneficiaries' interpretations.

Research on performative allyship further demonstrates that supportive actions may serve symbolic, reputational, or image-management purposes rather than substantive commitments to equity and inclusion (Kalina, 2020). For example, organizational actors may publicly endorse diversity initiatives while avoiding actions that challenge existing inequities or require meaningful organizational change. Similarly, de Leon et al. (2024) found that employees

distinguish between organizational actions perceived as sincere expressions of solidarity and those viewed as symbolic efforts to protect organizational reputation.

Existing studies also suggest that beneficiaries pay attention to the consistency and credibility of allyship behaviors (Bhattacharyya et al., 2024; Knowlton et al., 2022). For example, allies who publicly endorse equity initiatives may nevertheless be viewed critically when their actions appear inconsistent with those commitments or fail to address exclusionary practices (Bhattacharyya et al., 2024; Kalina, 2020; Knowlton et al., 2022). Conversely, supportive actions that are perceived as accountable and responsive may contribute to more favorable perceptions of allyship. Collectively, these findings suggest that authenticity plays an important role in shaping how allyship is understood and experienced by marginalized employees.

Research further indicates that perceptions of allyship are associated with broader concerns regarding trust, credibility, inclusion, and workplace relationships (Bhattacharyya et al., 2024; Creary, 2024; Knowlton et al., 2022). Marginalized employees often navigate organizational environments characterized by exclusion, scrutiny, and unequal access to opportunities, making evaluations of support particularly consequential (Collins, 2022; McCluney & Rabelo, 2019). Bhattacharyya et al. (2024), for example, found that women of color beneficiaries assessed whether allies recognized unequal power relations and demonstrated responsiveness to intersectional experiences. Similarly, Ganegoda et al. (2024) showed that advocacy efforts may be interpreted differently depending on who engages in advocacy and how that advocacy is perceived.

At the same time, existing conceptualizations of authenticity often locate authenticity within allies themselves rather than within beneficiaries' interpretations of allyship. Kutlaca and

Radke (2023), for instance, conceptualize allyship authenticity along motivational and behavioral continuums, distinguishing between more versus less genuine orientations toward support. Similarly, Phillips et al. (2024) found that allies motivated by self-transcendent values are generally perceived more positively than those motivated by self-enhancement concerns. While these approaches advance understanding of authentic versus performative allyship, authenticity remains primarily conceptualized as an attribute, orientation, or motivational quality associated with allies themselves (Kutlaca & Radke, 2023; Phillips et al., 2024). Consequently, comparatively less attention has been devoted to how authenticity is understood from the perspective of marginalized employees.

Taken together, existing research demonstrates that authenticity is an important consideration in how allyship is interpreted and evaluated within workplace relationships. However, current scholarship provides comparatively limited understanding of how beneficiaries' authenticity evaluations develop across repeated interactions, how perceptions of consistency, accountability, and responsiveness accumulate over time, and how these evaluations influence subsequent relational engagement. Greater attention to beneficiaries' perspectives may therefore extend existing understandings of authenticity by conceptualizing it not solely as an attribute of allies or their motivations, but as an evolving relational judgment constructed through beneficiaries' experiences of allyship over time.

2.4 Intersectionality, Power, and Beneficiary-Centered Perspectives

Understanding allyship as a relational and evaluative process requires explicit engagement with intersectionality and power (Acker, 2006; Bhattacharyya et al., 2024; Collins, 2022; Crenshaw, 1989; Holvino, 2010; Ray, 2019). Intersectionality theory argues that systems of inequality such as racism, sexism, colonialism, and heteronormativity operate simultaneously

and relationally, shaping individuals' experiences in distinct and uneven ways (Collins, 2022; Crenshaw, 1989; McCall, 2005). Rather than treating identities as additive or independent categories, intersectionality emphasizes that experiences of marginalization emerge through interlocking systems of power that structure both opportunity and vulnerability (Acker, 2006; Holvino, 2010; Ray, 2019).

Although allyship fundamentally involves the redistribution and negotiation of power within unequal social systems (Bhattacharyya et al., 2024; Collins, 2022; Washington & Evans, 1991), existing allyship research has focused more extensively on ally motivations, identities, and supportive behaviors than on examining how power asymmetries shape relational dynamics, interpretation, credibility, and legitimacy within allyship interactions (Dang & Joshi, 2023; Knowlton et al., 2022; Warren & Warren 2023). Emerging scholarship has begun to acknowledge that power influences not only who is positioned to enact allyship, but also how allyship is experienced, evaluated, and trusted by marginalized employees (Bhattacharyya et al., 2024; Kossek et al., 2024). Nevertheless, much of the literature continues to implicitly treat supportive behaviors as inherently beneficial, without sufficiently theorizing how structural inequalities and relational asymmetries shape the meanings, risks, and consequences associated with allyship for marginalized individuals (Bhattacharyya et al., 2024; Knowlton et al., 2022).

Importantly, power asymmetries shape allyship not only by influencing who has the capacity to act, but also by shaping the interpersonal and organizational consequences attached to action and inaction (Acker, 2006; Collins, 2022; Ray, 2019). For marginalized employees, engaging with allies may involve emotional exposure, dependency risks, reputational vulnerability, or potential career consequences, particularly when allies occupy positions of formal or informal authority (McCluney & Rabelo, 2019; Purdie-Vaughns & Eibach, 2008;). As

a result, evaluations of allyship are often inseparable from assessments of whether allies are willing to leverage power, incur relational costs, and remain supportive under conditions of organizational risk (Bhattacharyya et al., 2024; Collins et al., 2021; Knowlton et al., 2022).

These asymmetries are especially salient for women of color, whose workplace experiences are shaped by intersecting systems of racialized and gendered inequality (Collins, 2022; Smith & Nkomo, 2021). Research demonstrates that women of color experience compounded forms of marginalization, including racialized gender stereotyping, hypervisibility, invisibility, exclusion from leadership networks, and heightened scrutiny in professional settings (McCluney & Rabelo, 2019; Purdie-Vaughns & Eibach, 2008; Smith et al., 2019). Bhattacharyya et al. (2024) further demonstrate that women of color beneficiaries are particularly attentive to how allies recognize, negotiate, and act within unequal power relationships, suggesting that allyship evaluations are deeply shaped by intersectional experiences of vulnerability and risk.

Because women of color occupy structurally vulnerable and relationally precarious positions within organizations, they are uniquely positioned to evaluate the credibility, legitimacy, and consequences of allyship (Bhattacharyya & Berdahl, 2023; Collins, 2022; Collins et al., 2021; Crenshaw, 1989; Smith & Nkomo, 2021; Smith et al., 2019). Their evaluations are often shaped not only by whether allies express support, but also by whether allies recognize risk asymmetries, challenge unequal systems, and remain consistent under conditions of potential consequence (Bhattacharyya et al., 2024; Knowlton et al., 2022). These findings highlight the importance of incorporating beneficiaries' perspectives when examining how allyship operates under conditions of inequality (Bhattacharyya et al., 2024; Collins, 2022; Crenshaw, 1989;).

Consistent with this perspective, emerging beneficiary-centered allyship research demonstrates that marginalized individuals actively interpret, evaluate, and regulate relational engagement rather than simply receiving support as inherently beneficial (Bhattacharyya et al., 2024; Iyer & Achia, 2021; Tedder-King et al., 2025; Uluğ et al., 2026). Beneficiaries evaluate allyship in relation to trustworthiness, emotional safety, autonomy, identity, power, and potential relational costs. Research on allyship advocacy additionally suggests that support is interpreted differently depending on who advocates, how advocacy is framed, and whether actions are perceived as aligned with justice-oriented goals versus reputational concerns (Ganegoda et al., 2024). This literature establishes the importance of beneficiary agency in determining the meaning and legitimacy of allyship. What remains less developed theoretically is an explanation of how these evaluations evolve across repeated interactions and translate into subsequent decisions to deepen, calibrate, or restrict relational engagement. Taken together, intersectionality scholarship highlights that allyship unfolds within structurally unequal systems where power, risk, and relational vulnerability shape how support is interpreted and evaluated (Acker, 2006; Collins, 2022; Crenshaw, 1989; Holvino, 2010; Nkomo, 2021). However, existing research provides limited insight into how marginalized employees interpret allyship experiences and respond to them across workplace relationships and organizational contexts (Bhattacharyya et al., 2024; Knowlton et al., 2022; Kutlaca & Radke, 2023).

2.5 Toward a Process Understanding of Allyship

Across allyship scholarship, increasing attention has been devoted to relationality, performativity, authenticity, accountability, beneficiaries' perspectives, and the contextual conditions shaping allyship action (Bhattacharyya et al., 2024; Knowlton et al., 2022; Kossek et al., 2024; Kutlaca & Radke, 2023; Tedder-King et al., 2025; Uluğ et al., 2026). Existing work

has importantly demonstrated that allyship is neither uniformly effective nor inherently beneficial and that marginalized employees actively interpret the consequences and socioemotional signals associated with allyship behaviors (Bhattacharyya et al., 2024; Knowlton et al., 2022; Tedder-King et al., 2025). Related scholarship further demonstrates that allyship actions vary in their targets, costs, and meanings across social and structural contexts, highlighting the importance of power and context in understanding allyship (Uluğ et al., 2026). These studies provide a critical foundation for understanding allyship as relationally interpreted and contextually situated. At the same time, intersectionality scholarship demonstrates that these evaluations occur within structurally unequal contexts characterized by asymmetrical risks, power differences, and relational vulnerability (Acker, 2006; Collins, 2022; Crenshaw, 1989; Holvino, 2010).

Despite these advances, the literature still lacks an integrative process explanation of how beneficiary evaluations of allyship evolve across repeated workplace interactions. Existing frameworks provide comparatively limited explanation of how prior experiences inform subsequent interpretations, how authenticity and credibility judgments accumulate or deteriorate, how emotional–relational experiences shape future engagement, and how beneficiaries recalibrate allyship relationships as relational and organizational conditions change (Bhattacharyya et al., 2024; Dang & Joshi, 2023; Knowlton et al., 2022; Kutlaca & Radke, 2023; Tedder-King et al., 2025; Warren & Warren, 2023).

More specifically, existing frameworks do not sufficiently explain how workplace experiences influence subsequent interactions, how evaluations of support develop across repeated encounters, or how allyship relationships change over time (Creary, 2024; Knowlton et al., 2022; Kutlaca & Radke, 2023). Nor do current models adequately explain how contextual

conditions, including organizational norms, relational risk, power asymmetries, and identity positioning, shape interpretations of allyship behaviors (Bhattacharyya et al., 2024; Collins, 2022; Crenshaw, 1989;).

Taken together, these limitations point to the need to extend emerging beneficiary-centered research by examining how marginalized employees' interpretations and evaluations of allyship develop across workplace interactions and over time. Rather than assuming that support is inherently meaningful, effective, or trustworthy, greater attention is needed to how marginalized employees interpret allyship, assess its significance, and regulate their subsequent engagement across changing relational and organizational conditions. Building on existing beneficiary-centered scholarship, the present study addresses this process-oriented gap by exploring how marginalized employees experience, interpret, evaluate, and respond to allyship in workplace settings. Through a constructivist grounded theory approach, the study seeks to develop a theoretical understanding of allyship grounded in participants' workplace experiences.

Chapter Three: Methods

3.1 Research Design

This study employed a constructivist grounded theory approach to examine how employees from marginalized groups experience, interpret, and navigate allyship within workplace contexts. Grounded theory is particularly well suited for developing theory about complex relational phenomena that remain underexplored in organizational research (Charmaz, 2017; Glaser & Strauss, 2017). Rather than testing predefined hypotheses, grounded theory enables researchers to inductively generate theoretical insights from participants' lived experiences through iterative cycles of data collection and analysis (Corbin & Strauss, 2014).

Although constructivist grounded theory and interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) both attend to participants' lived experiences and meaning-making, they differ in their primary analytic aims and procedures. IPA is concerned with developing a detailed, idiographic and interpretative understanding of how individuals make sense of significant lived experiences, typically emphasizing close analysis of individual cases before examining patterns across cases (Smith et al., 2009; Smith & Nizza, 2022). Constructivist grounded theory, while similarly attentive to participants' meanings and interpretations, is oriented toward developing an explanatory theoretical account of social processes through iterative coding, constant comparison, theoretical sampling, memo writing, and theoretical integration (Charmaz, 2017; Corbin & Strauss, 2014). Accordingly, IPA would have been particularly appropriate if the primary purpose of this study were to provide an in-depth account of what the lived experience of receiving workplace allyship meant to individual participants. However, the objective of this study extended beyond interpreting individual experiences to explaining the process through which beneficiaries recognize, experience, evaluate, and respond to allyship across workplace

interactions and over time. Constructivist grounded theory was therefore more appropriate for this research context because it enabled comparison across experiences and organizational contexts and supported the development of a process-oriented theoretical explanation grounded in participants' accounts (Charmaz, 2017).The constructivist orientation further aligns with the study's beneficiary-centered focus by emphasizing participants' meaning-making while recognizing that social realities are co-constructed within relational and organizational contexts (Charmaz, 2017). This perspective is particularly appropriate for examining allyship because supportive actions do not carry fixed meanings but are interpreted and evaluated by beneficiaries within specific workplace relationships and contexts. By centering these interpretations while using constant comparison and theoretical integration to examine patterns across experiences, constructivist grounded theory enabled the development of a process-oriented explanation of how marginalized employees experience, evaluate, and respond to allyship over time.

3.2 Research Context

The study focuses on professionals working across Canada and the United States, two institutional contexts in which diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives have become increasingly embedded in organizational discourse while structural inequalities in representation and leadership remain persistent. Both countries share interrelated histories of settler colonialism, racial stratification, and gendered labor hierarchies that continue to shape workplace dynamics and opportunities for marginalized groups (Collins et al., 2021; Glenn, 2015).

Contemporary leadership statistics illustrate the persistence of these inequalities. In Canada, women occupy approximately 40% of board seats but women of color remain significantly underrepresented in executive and board-level positions (The Conference Board, 2024). Similar patterns are evident in the United States, where women hold roughly one-third of

board seats in large public companies, while racialized women continue to be substantially underrepresented in senior leadership (Catalyst, 2024). These disparities highlight the continued importance of allyship in shaping marginalized employees' experiences of inclusion, belonging, and advancement.

Data for this study were collected between June 2025 and October 2025, a period characterized by heightened public debate surrounding diversity, equity, and inclusion in North America. At the broader societal and sociopolitical level, policy developments in the United States, including executive and legislative actions affecting diversity-related programs in federal institutions, contributed to intensified public scrutiny of DEI and broader debate regarding equity-related initiatives. These developments constituted part of the wider societal environment in which participants' workplace experiences occurred but are analytically distinct from the organizational conditions examined within participants' specific workplaces.

At the organizational level, participants described workplace-specific conditions such as leadership support, organizational norms, psychological safety, power structures, and the visibility or perceived stability of diversity and inclusion initiatives. These conditions shaped whether allyship was encouraged, constrained, or perceived as carrying interpersonal or professional risk within particular workplaces. Organizational context is therefore treated in this study as the more proximal environment surrounding allyship interactions, whereas the broader societal and sociopolitical context represents the wider environment within which organizations and employees were situated. Although the two levels may interact, for example, broader political debates may influence organizational priorities or employees' perceptions of risk, they are not treated as analytically equivalent.

This distinction is important for interpreting participants' accounts. The study primarily examines allyship as it was experienced within workplace relationships and organizational contexts, while recognizing that these experiences occurred within a broader societal environment characterized by changing public discourse around equity, advocacy, and inclusion. Examining these nested but distinct contextual levels provides a more precise understanding of how marginalized professionals experienced relational support, credibility, and trust during the period of data collection.

3.3 Sampling Strategy

I recruited participants using purposive and criterion-based sampling to capture diverse experiences of workplace allyship among employees belonging to equity-seeking groups (Charmaz, 2017; Patton, 2015). The study intentionally focused on individuals who had direct experience interacting with allies or observing allyship dynamics in organizational settings. The study focused on three equity-seeking groups: Black professionals, LGBTQ+ employees, and women. These groups were selected for both theoretical and institutional reasons. From a theoretical perspective, these groups experience persistent forms of workplace marginalization while also representing distinct yet overlapping systems of inequality through which allyship, advocacy, and relational support are frequently negotiated in organizational life (Collins, 2022; Crenshaw, 1989; Kossek et al., 2024). Prior research demonstrates that race, gender, and sexual orientation are among the most salient identity dimensions shaping workplace exclusion, visibility, credibility, and access to organizational support, making these groups particularly relevant for examining how allyship is experienced and interpreted in everyday workplace interactions (Ganegoda et al., 2024; Ragins, 2008; Smith & Nkomo, 2021).

Importantly, these groups were not selected to compare identity categories as fixed or isolated experiences, but rather to examine whether common relational and evaluative processes of allyship across differing forms of marginalization. From an intersectionality perspective, systems of inequality operate relationally and simultaneously, shaping how trust, legitimacy, support, and risk are experienced within workplace interactions (Collins, 2022; Crenshaw, 1989; Holvino, 2010). Sampling participants across these identity positions therefore enabled exploration of both shared relational dynamics and variation in how allyship is negotiated and reassessed over time.

Beginning with these groups allowed the study to explore allyship across multiple dimensions of marginalization while maintaining analytic focus during the early stages of theory building. During the initial phase of recruitment, I sought to ensure sufficient experiential variation across participant groups, industries, organizational roles, and workplace contexts while preserving analytic depth within the emerging categories. I recruited participants through a combination of professional networks, organizational contacts, employee resource group networks, LinkedIn outreach, and snowball sampling. Recruitment occurred iteratively across participant groups rather than sequentially within a single group. This approach allowed emerging categories and relational patterns to be examined across varying organizational, occupational, and identity contexts throughout the data collection process. This sampling strategy was particularly important given the study's process-oriented and beneficiary-centered theoretical aim. Because allyship legitimacy is shaped through ongoing evaluations of credibility, relational safety, accountability, and risk, participants occupying different marginalized positions provided analytically rich insight into how allyship unfolds across varying organizational and identity contexts (Bhattacharyya et al., 2024; Collins, 2022;

Crenshaw, 1989)Rather than seeking demographic representativeness, the sampling strategy prioritized theoretical depth and variation to support development of an integrative process model capable of capturing both recurring relational mechanisms and contextual differences in allyship experiences (Charmaz, 2017; Corbin & Strauss, 2014).

From an institutional perspective, these groups correspond to categories recognized within North American equity and human rights frameworks. In Canada, the *Employment Equity Act* identifies four designated groups: women, visible minorities, Indigenous peoples, and persons with disabilities (Employment Equity Act, 1995). In the United States, federal Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) legislation similarly recognizes protected categories including race and sex, while subsequent legal and policy developments have extended protections related to sexual orientation and gender identity under interpretations of Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission [EEOC], 2020; *Bostock v. Clayton County*, 2020). Women and racial minorities therefore represent core categories within both Canadian and U.S. equity frameworks, while LGBTQ+ employees have increasingly been recognized within organizational diversity and inclusion initiatives across North American workplaces.

Although other equity-seeking groups, such as employees with disabilities or religious minorities, are also important within broader equity frameworks, the present study focused on a subset of groups in order to maintain analytic depth within a qualitative research design. Constructivist grounded theory requires intensive engagement with participants' narratives, and including too many identity groups can dilute the ability to develop theoretically meaningful insights within a single study (Charmaz, 2017; Corbin & Strauss, 2014). The selected groups also allowed the research to capture variation across visible and less visible identities, as well as

across historically entrenched (gender and race) and more recently institutionalized (sexual orientation and gender identity) categories of workplace inclusion.

The selected groups also represent different forms of identity visibility: gender and race are often externally visible, whereas sexual orientation may be concealable. Including both visible and concealable identities allowed the study to capture variation in how allyship is recognized, enacted, and interpreted across different forms of marginalization.

3.3.1 Intersectionality and Scope of the Sample

Although participants are described across three focal groups (women, Black employees, and LGBTQ+ employees), the study does not treat these categories as homogeneous or mutually exclusive. Many participants identified with multiple marginalized identities (e.g., Black women, LGBTQ+ women, or Black LGBTQ+ professionals), and these intersections were analytically attended to during coding and theory development.

At the same time, the study was not designed as a comparative intersectional analysis in which within-group differences constitute the primary analytic focus. Instead, the theoretical contribution lies in examining allyship as a relational process that unfolds across multiple dimensions of marginalization, identifying common conditions, evaluative patterns, and decision points that transcend single identity categories while remaining sensitive to contextual variation.

This approach reflects a deliberate theoretical positioning. The study prioritizes breadth across marginalized experiences rather than exhaustive depth within any single identity group. While this design limits claims regarding within-group heterogeneity, it strengthens the development of a process-oriented theory capable of capturing common patterns across diverse experiences of marginalization. Accordingly, the purpose of including multiple marginalized groups was not to

compare identity categories as separate populations, but to examine whether similar allyship processes emerged across varied workplace experiences. Questions regarding intersectional variation and within-group differences remain important directions for future research and are revisited in the Discussion and Limitations chapters.

3.3.2 Theoretical Sampling

Consistent with grounded theory methodology, data collection and analysis proceeded concurrently, allowing emerging insights to inform subsequent recruitment decisions (Charmaz, 2017; Glaser & Strauss, 2017). After the initial set of interviews, preliminary coding suggested that participants' experiences of allyship varied less according to structural characteristics such as industry or hierarchical level and more according to differences in workplace experiences, relationships, and organizational contexts. Early analysis identified several recurring patterns related to how participants interpreted workplace support, navigated relationships, and responded to inclusion-related experiences.

These preliminary insights informed my subsequent recruitment decisions aimed at elaborating, refining, and challenging emerging categories. As analysis progressed, I intentionally recruited participants to explore variation in experiences across different workplace settings, organizational roles, industries, and identity positions. For example, I sought additional participants when emerging categories required greater contextual variation or when additional perspectives were needed to clarify the conditions under which particular experiences occurred. I therefore focused recruitment decisions on deepening conceptual understanding rather than achieving demographic representativeness or increasing sample size alone. These theoretically informed recruitment decisions allowed me to refine emerging categories and explore variation across contexts rather than simply increasing sample size (Charmaz, 2017). Throughout the

study, I adapted recruitment in response to the ongoing analysis, selecting new participants to elaborate developing categories, examine variation across experiences, and assess the robustness of emerging interpretations. In this way, sampling and analysis proceeded iteratively, consistent with constructivist grounded theory's emphasis on theory development through constant comparison (Corbin & Strauss, 2014).

3.3.3 Assessment of Theoretical Saturation

I assessed theoretical saturation iteratively throughout data collection and analysis in accordance with constructivist grounded theory principles, whereby coding, constant comparison, memo writing, and theoretical sampling occurred simultaneously (Charmaz, 2017; Corbin & Strauss, 2014). Following Moore et al. (2026), I conceptualized saturation as the point at which additional data no longer contributed meaningful conceptual development to the emerging theoretical framework. Consistent with their recommendations, I assessed saturation in terms of conceptual depth, category robustness, and explanatory completeness rather than sample size alone.

I evaluated saturation at the level of the emerging process model rather than separately within participant groups. Throughout the study, I continuously compared interviews across participants, identities, and organizational contexts to determine whether new data introduced novel conceptual categories, substantially altered relationships among categories, or extended the explanatory power of the developing framework. I paid particular attention to whether additional interviews generated new insights regarding allyship evaluation, emotional–relational impact, contextual conditions, or engagement regulation.

Evidence of saturation emerged during the later stages of data collection (approximately interviews 40–45), when subsequent interviews largely reinforced existing categories and theoretical relationships. Although later interviews occasionally provided additional contextual nuance, they did not introduce new process dimensions or substantially modify the core structure of the Dynamic Allyship Process. I nevertheless continued data collection beyond this point to assess the stability and explanatory sufficiency of the emerging model across diverse participant groups and organizational contexts. Taken together, these indicators suggested that the conceptual categories and relationships underlying the Dynamic Allyship Process had achieved sufficient theoretical saturation to support theoretical integration and model development (Moore et al., 2026).

3.4 Participant Overview

The final sample consisted of 50 participants across three equity-seeking groups: Black professionals (n = 15), LGBTQ+ professionals (n = 15), and women professionals (n = 20). Participants were located in Canada (n = 35) and the United States (n = 15) and represented a broad range of organizational contexts and industries, including manufacturing, oil and gas, finance, technology, consulting, and consumer goods.

Participants also varied in organizational tenure and hierarchical level. Organizational tenure ranged from less than five years to more than thirty years, capturing both early-career and highly experienced professionals. The sample included employees across several hierarchical levels, including individual contributors, supervisors, managers, directors, partners, and vice presidents, allowing the study to capture allyship dynamics across different positions of organizational power.

The sample further reflected intersectional diversity across gender identity, sexual orientation, and racial or ethnic background. Participants identified as women (n = 32), men (n = 17), and transgender (n = 1), and reported a range of sexual orientations including heterosexual, gay, lesbian, queer, and transgender identities. Participants also represented multiple racial and ethnic identities, including Black, White, Hispanic, Indian, and Middle Eastern backgrounds. Table 1 summarizes the demographic and organizational characteristics of the study participants.

Insert Table 1 about here

This study employed a purposeful, followed by theoretical sampling strategy consistent with constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2017). I initially recruited participants through professional associations, LinkedIn and other social media platforms, employee resource group networks, and my professional diversity and inclusion networks across North America. Participants were required to have at least one year of work experience and to self-identify as belonging to one of the equity-seeking groups included in the study. I continued sampling until I determined that theoretical saturation had been reached, defined as the point at which additional interviews no longer generated substantively new conceptual insights relevant to the emerging grounded theory.

3.5 Interview Protocol Development

The interview protocol was designed to support the exploratory and inductive aims of the study while providing sufficient structure to facilitate comparison across interviews. Consistent with constructivist grounded theory, the protocol served as a flexible guide rather than a

standardized questionnaire, allowing participants' experiences and interpretations to shape the direction of the conversation (Charmaz, 2017; Corbin & Strauss, 2014).

I developed the interview protocol based on three sources: existing literature on workplace allyship and inclusion (e.g., Erskine & Bilimoria, 2019; Knowlton et al., 2022; Radke et al., 2020), the study's research questions, and constructivist grounded theory principles emphasizing participants' lived experiences and meaning-making processes (Charmaz, 2017). The interview guide focused on how marginalized employees understood, experienced, interpreted, and responded to allyship within workplace contexts.

Interviews began with background and definitional questions before moving to participants' experiences with allyship. The central portion of the interview employed a critical incident approach (Flanagan, 1954; Hughes et al., 2007), inviting participants to describe specific allyship encounters and their interpretations of those experiences. Follow-up probes were used to explore participants' emotional responses, relational interpretations, and behavioral reactions to allyship interactions (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

Consistent with grounded theory methodology, I refined the protocol iteratively throughout data collection. As emerging categories developed during analysis, I introduced additional probes to further explore concepts such as relational safety, authenticity evaluation, emotional–relational impact, and engagement regulation. This iterative process enabled later interviews to elaborate and refine the emerging Dynamic Allyship Process while maintaining consistency in the overall structure of the interviews.

3.6 Data Collection

I collected data through semi-structured, in-depth interviews that I conducted via Zoom between June and October 2025. Each interview lasted 40–60 minutes and followed an open-ended protocol (Appendix A) exploring participants' definitions of allyship, workplace experiences, and interpretations of support within organizational settings. Key questions included: What is allyship to you? How do you recognize if someone is being an ally at work? Can you share a time when someone showed up as an ally for you in a meaningful way? Is your organization a place where you see allyship behaviors? Why or why not? Follow-up probes encouraged participants to elaborate on emotions, expectations, and relational boundaries. With participants' informed consent, I audio-recorded all interviews, which were subsequently transcribed verbatim. Following critical qualitative inquiry principles (Denzin, 2017), I maintained detailed reflexive memos after each interview to capture initial impressions, emerging categories, and analytic puzzles.

3.7 Data Analysis Procedures

3.7.1 Analytic Approach

Data analysis followed a constructivist grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2017), informed by principles of critical qualitative inquiry (Collins et al., 2021; Crenshaw, 1989; Denzin, 2017). This approach prioritizes participants' meaning making while remaining attentive to power relations, structural inequality, and relational context. Consistent with this orientation, allyship was not conceptualized as a fixed set of behaviors or predefined categories. Instead, the analysis focused on how marginalized individuals *interpreted, evaluated, and responded* to allyship encounters as they unfolded within workplace contexts.

Rather than beginning with predefined constructs such as “authentic” or “performative” allyship, I derived analytic categories inductively from participants’ descriptions of how they assessed allies’ credibility, interpreted intent, weighed emotional and professional risk, and decided whether to engage, recalibrate, or withdraw. Constructs such as authenticity, trust, and boundary setting thus emerged as *evaluative outcomes* of participants’ sensemaking rather than as a priori analytic distinctions.

3.7.2 Analytical Transparency

Consistent with constructivist grounded theory, I identified analytic categories based on their theoretical significance and explanatory contribution to the emerging framework rather than frequency alone (Charmaz, 2017). While recurring patterns across participants, identities, and organizational contexts provided evidence of category robustness, I retained themes because they illuminated how marginalized employees interpreted, evaluated, and responded to allyship. Consequently, both frequently occurring patterns and less common but theoretically important experiences informed the development of the Dynamic Allyship Process when they contributed to explaining relationships among categories and advancing theoretical understanding.

3.7.3. Iterative Analytic Process

Consistent with constructivist grounded theory, data collection and analysis occurred concurrently through an iterative process guided by constant comparison (Charmaz, 2017; Glaser & Strauss, 2017). Early coding and memo writing informed subsequent interviews, recruitment decisions, and analytic attention, allowing emerging categories to be refined and elaborated throughout the study. I continually compared new data with previously coded material to

examine similarities, differences, and variations across participants, identity groups, and organizational contexts.

This iterative process supported the development of increasingly abstract conceptual categories and the specification of relationships among them. Through ongoing movement between data collection, coding, memo writing, and theoretical sampling, the analysis progressed from descriptive accounts of allyship experiences toward the development of the Dynamic Allyship Process model.

3.7.4 Coding Stages

The analytic process unfolded across four interconnected coding stages: initial coding, focused coding, axial coding, and theoretical integration. Movement between stages was iterative rather than strictly linear, allowing emerging insights to inform ongoing analytic attention and category refinement (Charmaz, 2017; Corbin & Strauss, 2014). Throughout the coding process, I paid particular attention to participants' evaluative language, emotional responses, and relational interpretations of allyship encounters.

3.7.5 Initial Coding

In the first stage, I examined all interview transcripts using line-by-line coding to capture actions, emotions, interpretations, and relational dynamics described by participants. I prioritized codes Nvivo drawn directly from participants' own language in order to preserve the experiential meaning of participants' narratives and avoid premature theoretical abstraction. Initial coding generated a large number of descriptive codes reflecting participants' diverse experiences of allyship, including moments of support, disappointment, ambivalence, and withdrawal.

Examples of initial codes included expressions such as *"being seen," "speaking up only when safe," "educating allies is exhausting," "trust as safety," "they disappeared when it mattered,"* and *"protecting my energy."* At this stage, the analytic goal was not to impose conceptual structure but to document the full breadth of participants' experiences and interpretations of allyship interactions. These initial codes formed the foundation of the first-order concepts later represented in the data structure.

3.7.6 Focused Coding

The second stage involved focused coding, during which I identified and clustered the most analytically significant and recurrent initial codes into more abstract conceptual categories. Through constant comparison across transcripts, patterns began to emerge in how participants interpreted allyship behaviors and evaluated their meaning within relational contexts. For example, I grouped initial codes such as *"only supportive in public," "ally disappears,"* and *"silent during promotions"* were grouped into focused categories reflecting inconsistency under risk and selective ally engagement. Similarly, I consolidated emotional responses including fatigue, relief, guarded optimism, and resentment were consolidated into categories capturing emotional–relational consequences of allyship interactions. During this stage, analytic differentiation became clearer between awareness-oriented interpretations, action-oriented observations, evaluative judgments, and adaptive responses to allyship behaviors.

3.7.7 Axial Coding

The third stage involved axial coding, during which I examined relationships among emerging categories by considering the conditions, actions, and consequences associated with

allyship experiences. This stage clarified that participants did not interpret allyship behaviors in isolation; rather, they evaluated them within broader relational and organizational contexts..

Participants frequently described how contextual conditions such as organizational hierarchy, leadership visibility, prior experiences of discrimination, and perceived power asymmetries shaped their interpretations of allyship behaviors. These contextual factors influenced whether allies' actions were perceived as credible, ethically congruent, or performative. Participants' responses to allyship, including engagement, cautious acceptance, boundary-setting, or withdrawal, were therefore understood as relational adaptations shaped by both interpersonal dynamics and organizational context.

During axial coding, I interpreted authenticity not as a predefined analytic category but as an outcome of participants' evaluations of consistency, accountability, and willingness to act under risk. This analytic insight helped differentiate allyship intention from allyship credibility and informed the conceptual structure of the emerging framework.

3.7.8 Theoretical Integration

The final stage involved theoretical integration, during which I synthesized relationships among categories into a coherent conceptual framework. Through constant comparison, memo writing, and ongoing analysis, I moved from identifying individual categories to examining how those categories related to one another within a broader explanatory framework (Charmaz, 2017; Corbin & Strauss, 2014). As analysis progressed, I identified recurring patterns across participants' accounts and organized the categories into an integrated process model. I focused on specifying relationships among categories, examining variation across experiences and contexts, and developing a theoretical explanation grounded in participants' narratives. The

resulting framework integrates the major categories that emerged from the analysis and provides an explanation of how participants experienced, interpreted, and responded to allyship over time. The structure and relationships comprising the final model are presented in detail in Chapter Four.

3.7.9 Analytic Demonstration: From Data to Theory

To illustrate the analytic progression, the following example traces how a segment of interview data moved through successive stages of analysis.

Interview Excerpt. *"They always say the right things in meetings, but when it came to promotions, suddenly it was silence. After a while, I stopped expecting support and just focused on protecting my energy."*

Initial coding captured participants' perceptions of performative support and self-protective responses, reflected in codes such as *"saying the right things," "silence during promotions," "inconsistency between words and action," "withdrawing expectations,"* and *"protecting my energy."* Through focused coding, I consolidated these codes into broader patterns of misalignment between rhetoric and action, selective ally engagement, and emotional withdrawal. Through axial coding, I identified the underlying process, showing that ally support was often experienced as limited to low-risk situations,leading participants to reassess credibility, reduce trust, and establish stronger emotional and relational boundaries.

At the theoretical level, I interpreted this pattern as a process of authenticity and credibility evaluation, in which marginalized employees assessed whether allyship remained consistent under conditions of organizational risk. When support failed to materialize in consequential situations, participants responded by recalibrating engagement and protecting

themselves from further disappointment. This process contributed directly to the development of the Reflection stage, where allyship credibility is evaluated, and the Adaptation stage, where engagement is regulated through mechanisms such as engagement calibration and boundary safeguarding. This example illustrates how theoretical categories were developed inductively from participants' accounts and how the Dynamic Allyship Process emerged through iterative movement between coding, constant comparison, memo writing, and theoretical integration.

3.7.10 Data Structure and Conceptual Boundaries

The final data structure (see Figure 1) is organized around an integrated process framework that connects the major categories emerging from the analysis. The framework includes four process stages as well as additional categories that shape how participants experienced and interpreted allyship across workplace interactions. The process stages capture recurring patterns in participants' experiences over time, while the additional categories provide context for understanding variation across relationships, situations, and organizational environments. Together, these categories illustrate how participants interpreted allyship, evaluated workplace interactions, and adjusted their engagement across different experiences. Figure 1 presents the overall structure of the final data model and the relationships among the major categories that emerged through the analysis. These categories and their interrelationships are examined in detail in Chapter Four.

3.8 Reflexivity and Researcher Positionality

Reflexivity was maintained throughout the research as both an ethical commitment and an epistemological practice (Alvesson, 2003; Denzin, 2017). In qualitative research, knowledge is co-constructed through interactions between researchers and participants; therefore,

acknowledging the researcher's social location, experiences, and assumptions is essential for analytic transparency. Rather than seeking neutrality, I adopted a reflexive stance that recognizes how the researcher's positionality shapes access, interpretation, and theoretical sensitivity.I bring both professional and lived experience to this research. I am an immigrant from Turkey to Canada and was originally trained as a chemical engineer. During myeducation and early career experiences, I encountered male-dominated industrial environments, including being the only woman in production settings during internships. These environments were characterized not only by gender imbalance but also by informal workplace cultures and language norms that contributed to exclusion and limited belonging. These experiences shaped an early awareness of how organizational dynamics, power, and everyday interactions can constrain participation and opportunity, particularly for individuals positioned at the intersection of gender, newcomer status, and professional identity.

These formative experiences influenced my decision to shift my academic and professional focus toward equity, diversity, and inclusion, and specifically toward allyship. My research interest in allyship is grounded in the belief, shaped by lived experience, that individuals in relatively advantaged positions can meaningfully influence the inclusion, advancement, and well-being of marginalized colleagues, and that such influence is neither automatic nor guaranteed. At the same time, I remained attentive to the possibility that allyship, even when well-intentioned, may fail or create unintended burdens for marginalized individuals. Professionally, I occupy a dual role as both a scholar and a Diversity and Inclusion practitioner. This dual positionality provided me with access to organizational contexts and enhanced my sensitivity to the language, tensions, and constraints surrounding workplace allyship. However, it also required ongoing reflexive engagement to guard against assuming shared meanings,

projecting practitioner frameworks onto participants' accounts, or privileging organizational narratives over lived experience. To address this, I maintained a reflexive journal throughout data collection and analysis to document my assumptions, analytic decisions, emotional responses, and moments of uncertainty. I used these memos not to resolve tension prematurely, but to interrogate how my experiences shaped interpretation and to ensure that theoretical claims remained grounded in participants' narratives. In this study, reflexivity also informed attention to emotion regulation both as a participant experience and as an analytic concern. Emotion regulation refers to the ways marginalized individuals manage, suppress, reframe, or contain emotional responses (e.g., frustration, disappointment, hope, fatigue) when navigating allyship encounters in the workplace. Reflexive engagement allowed me to distinguish between participants' emotional labor and my own emotional reactions , helping ensure that interpretations of emotional regulation reflected participants' meaning making rather than my personal resonance with similar experiences.

In sum, I did not attempt to bracket my positionality or treat it as a source of authority over participants' experiences. Instead, I approached it as a lens that heightened my attentiveness to power, exclusion, and relational dynamics, while using reflexive practices to anchor the analysis in participants' voices and sustain analytic rigor.

3.9 Trustworthiness and Rigor

To ensure methodological rigor, I employed multiple strategies to strengthen the credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability of the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). First, I used triangulation across identity groups by comparing emerging categories and process patterns across women, Black, and LGBTQ+ participants rather than relying on experiences from a single marginalized group. For example, I examined whether patterns such as

authenticity evaluation, relational safety, and responses to inconsistent allyship appeared across groups while also attending to differences in how these experiences were interpreted. Second, I conducted member checking with eight participants by sharing emerging interpretations and elements of the developing framework and inviting feedback on whether these interpretations reflected their experiences. Participant feedback was used to clarify and refine the developing analysis rather than as a simple confirmation exercise. Third, thick description was supported through the inclusion of contextualized participant quotations that illustrated not only what participants experienced, but also the relational and organizational circumstances surrounding those experiences. Fourth, I maintained an audit trail through NVivo documentation of coding decisions, category development, and changes in the emerging analytic structure, allowing the progression from initial codes to focused categories and theoretical integration to be traced. Finally, I maintained reflexive memos and a research journal throughout data collection and analysis to document emerging interpretations, methodological decisions, assumptions, and instances in which my professional and personal experiences could influence interpretation. Together, these strategies strengthened the transparency and analytic coherence of the research while helping ensure that the resulting theoretical framework remained grounded in participants' accounts.

3.10 Ethical Considerations

I obtained ethical approval from the York University Research Ethics Board (STU 2025-057). Participants provided informed consent and could withdraw at any time. Pseudonyms replaced identifying details, and all data were anonymized and securely stored. Given the potentially emotional nature of the topic, participants were offered follow-up support resources.

Chapter Four: Findings

Participants consistently described allyship as something that unfolded over time rather than as a single supportive act or isolated workplace behavior. Their accounts focused on how they recognized support, interpreted others' actions, evaluated credibility, and adjusted their engagement with allies across ongoing workplace interactions. Rather than judging allyship solely based on stated intentions or individual acts, participants described continuously assessing whether others were emotionally present, willing to act when it mattered, and consistent in their support across situations.

Participants further emphasized that allyship was experienced through both visible and subtle interactions. Experiences such as listening, validating concerns, creating psychological safety, speaking up, providing opportunities, and offering support during difficult situations were frequently described as meaningful indicators of allyship. At the same time, participants became highly attentive to inconsistency, silence during consequential moments, conditional support, and behaviors perceived as performative or self-serving. These experiences shaped whether trust deepened, engagement became more cautious, or relationships became more guarded over time.

Across interviews, four recurring themes emerged that captured how marginalized employees experienced and responded to allyship in workplace settings: Awareness, Action, Reflection, and Adaptation. Awareness reflected how participants became attentive to exclusion, inequality, and the need for support; Action captured the ways allyship became visible through behavior; Reflection involved evaluating the credibility and meaning of allyship over time; and Adaptation reflected how participants adjusted their trust, engagement, and relational investment based on these evaluations.

Figure 1 presents the final data structure and illustrates how participants' experiences were organized into these four interrelated themes. Table 2 provides definitions of the key elements identified through the analysis.

Insert Figure 1 about here

Insert Table 2 about here

The findings are presented in six sections. The first four sections describe the themes of Awareness, Action, Reflection, and Adaptation. The fifth section examines how participants described movement across these themes over time. The final section explores the emotional and contextual factors that participants identified as shaping their experiences of allyship across workplace relationships.

4.1 Participants' Understandings of Allyship

Before examining the process through which allyship unfolded, participants' accounts also revealed how they understood allyship itself. Across interviews, participants did not describe allyship through a single or uniform definition. Rather, their accounts emphasized several interconnected qualities, including relational support, advocacy, trust, safety, consistency, and genuine concern for others. At its most relational level, allyship was described as being present for others, listening without judgment, creating space for marginalized colleagues to express their experiences, and providing emotional and interpersonal support. One participant described allyship as "supportive and reciprocal," emphasizing the importance of

having “people you can trust to listen without judgment and support you through difficult situations at work” (TLMM). These accounts positioned allyship not only as intervention in moments of discrimination or exclusion, but also as an ongoing relational practice grounded in care, responsiveness, and psychological safety. This interpretation is consistent with participants’ broader descriptions of everyday relational support throughout the interviews.

At the same time, participants emphasized that allyship required action beyond interpersonal support. Allyship was associated with speaking up, challenging exclusionary comments or decisions, advocating for opportunities, amplifying marginalized voices, and using influence or positional power when support was needed. Participants particularly emphasized actions taken during difficult or consequential situations, suggesting that allyship became especially meaningful when individuals were willing to act despite potential interpersonal, professional, or organizational risk. Thus, participants’ understandings encompassed both relatively subtle relational behaviors and more visible forms of advocacy intended to influence workplace experiences or outcomes.

Importantly, participants also distinguished between performing supportive behaviors and being experienced as an ally. Support was not automatically regarded as allyship simply because an individual intended to help or identified themselves as supportive. Participants considered whether actions were consistent, responsive to their needs, grounded in genuine concern, and sustained across situations. For example, one participant described genuine allyship as “selfless” and distinguished it from helping that occurred only when it benefited the person providing support (NEE). Others emphasized accountability, willingness to learn, and continued support when advocacy involved discomfort or reputational risk.

Taken together, participants' accounts suggest an understanding of allyship as relational, behavioral, and evaluative. Allyship involved supportive relationships and meaningful action, but its legitimacy was ultimately shaped by how those actions were experienced and interpreted over time. This distinction became important in the subsequent analysis because participants did not simply describe what allies did; they described an ongoing process through which support was recognized, evaluated, and used to inform subsequent relational engagement. These understandings provided the empirical foundation for the Dynamic Allyship Process presented in the following sections.

4.2 Awareness

Participants described becoming increasingly aware of exclusion, inequality, and the need for support through everyday workplace interactions. Awareness often developed gradually as individuals observed how workplace experiences differed across employees and became more attentive to cues of marginalization, silence, unequal treatment, and vulnerability. Many participants explained that this awareness emerged through repeated observations of workplace dynamics, conversations with colleagues, or personal experiences that highlighted disparities in how people were treated, included, or supported. Rather than arising from a single defining moment, awareness was often described as an ongoing process of noticing patterns, questioning assumptions, and becoming more sensitive to the experiences of marginalized individuals. Participants frequently reflected on moments when they became aware that challenges they had previously viewed as isolated incidents were part of broader patterns of exclusion or inequity. Others described becoming increasingly attentive to situations in which colleagues lacked support, representation, or opportunities to have their voices heard. Rather than portraying awareness as a formal commitment to allyship or a fixed identity, participants described it as an

evolving sensitivity to the ways workplace interactions, organizational practices, and power dynamics affected marginalized employees.

For many participants, awareness emerged through experiences that prompted them to notice who was included, whose voices were heard, who appeared psychologically safe, and who faced additional barriers or scrutiny. As they became more attentive to these dynamics, participants described developing a greater understanding of how exclusion, support, and belonging were experienced by others. In this sense, awareness involved not only recognizing inequality but also becoming increasingly attentive to situations in which support, intervention, or advocacy might be needed.

Across interviews, awareness was described through two closely connected experiences: relational awareness and action readiness. Relational awareness reflected participants' growing sensitivity to the emotional, interpersonal, and structural realities of marginalization, while action readiness reflected their emerging recognition that awareness could carry implications for how potential allies might respond, offer support, or intervene. Together, these subthemes capture how participants began making sense of allyship-relevant situations and developing expectations about whether and how potential allies would translate awareness into action.

4.2.1 Relational Awareness

Participants described becoming more attentive to the emotional, interpersonal, and structural realities of marginalization through everyday workplace interactions. Rather than emerging through formal training or organizational initiatives alone, awareness often developed through conversations, observations, and repeated experiences that revealed how workplace dynamics affected people differently. Many participants explained that this awareness grew as

they noticed patterns in who was included, whose voices were heard, and who appeared to face additional barriers, scrutiny, or exclusion. Others described becoming increasingly sensitive to subtle cues, such as silence, discomfort, unequal participation, or the absence of support during difficult situations. Through these experiences, participants developed a deeper understanding of how workplace environments could shape individuals' sense of belonging, safety, and opportunity.

> Allyship is just simply being there for someone and accepting them as they come… being a good friend… a good support system. It's about making people feel safe, supported, and comfortable being themselves without fear of judgment or exclusion. Sometimes the smallest moments of empathy, listening, and showing up consistently can mean more than big public gestures. (ECC)

For many participants, allyship became recognizable through everyday interactions that communicated acceptance, empathy, and emotional safety. Participants frequently described paying attention to how colleagues listened, responded, and showed up over time, often viewing these relational experiences as early indicators of allyship.

Similarly, another participant explained that awareness began with individuals being "open to listen" and willing to "change their behaviors based on that education" (LMM). Across interviews, participants consistently emphasized that allyship awareness required openness to understanding perspectives and experiences different from one's own rather than assuming understanding automatically existed.

Participants also described becoming increasingly attentive to subtle interpersonal and environmental cues signaling whether relationships and workplace spaces felt psychologically

safe or potentially risky. LGBTQ+ participants in particular explained that allyship awareness was often assessed through small gestures, language choices, tone, and patterns of interaction rather than through formal declarations of support. One participant explained that recognition of allyship often became "almost subconscious," where over time individuals "start to understand whether someone is on your side" through tone, language, reactions, and subtle relational signals rather than explicit statements of inclusion(ECC)..

Several participants further described becoming increasingly aware of how organizational structures and dominant workplace norms shaped whose voices were recognized, legitimized, or dismissed. One Black woman participant reflected on the heightened scrutiny associated with navigating a male-dominated professional environment:

Being a Black African-American female in a male dominant area… you have to go an extra mile to express your knowledge. You constantly feel like you have to prove your competence and credibility in ways that others may not. Sometimes it feels like your ideas are questioned more quickly, or you have to work harder just to be seen as equally capable and deserving of respect. (DHH)

Rather than describing this as an isolated interpersonal challenge, participants frequently connected such experiences to broader organizational dynamics involving credibility, visibility, and unequal expectations surrounding competence and authority. Others similarly described becoming more attentive to structural inequities embedded within organizational policies and workplace practices. As one participant explained, "It's clear that some policies unintentionally favor certain groups over others" (MLL). Such accounts suggest that relational awareness extended beyond interpersonal sensitivity alone and increasingly involved recognizing how workplace relationships were shaped by broader systems of power, hierarchy, and inequality.

Importantly, participants frequently described relational awareness as emotionally consequential. Becoming increasingly attuned to exclusion or inequality often generated discomfort, frustration, empathy, sadness, or moral unease that shaped how participants interpreted subsequent interactions. Awareness therefore emerged not only as cognitive recognition, but also as emotional and relational attunement to the lived consequences of workplace marginalization.

4.2.2 Action Readiness

Participants frequently described becoming attentive to moments in which recognition of inequality or expressions of support could translate into meaningful allyship action. From the beneficiary perspective, awareness alone was not sufficient. Participants paid close attention to whether colleagues who appeared supportive were willing to move beyond recognizing inequality or expressing supportive intentions and respond when support was actually needed. This created a degree of uncertainty, as participants could not necessarily know in advance whether potential allies would intervene, remain silent, or withdraw when action involved interpersonal, professional, or organizational risk. Action readiness therefore refers here to beneficiaries' perceptions and expectations regarding whether potential allies appeared prepared to translate awareness and supportive intentions into meaningful action.

One participant described this distinction between recognizing support and waiting to see whether it would translate into action:

You can tell when someone understands what is happening, but then you're waiting to see what they actually do. It's one thing for someone to say they support you, but when

something happens, that's when you see whether they're actually willing to step in or speak up for you. (OEE)

This account illustrates that beneficiaries did not necessarily interpret awareness or supportive intentions as sufficient evidence of allyship. Rather, participants attended to whether potential allies appeared ready to respond when circumstances created a need for support. Moments involving exclusion, unfair treatment, or unequal access were therefore particularly consequential because they created opportunities for beneficiaries to observe whether expressed support would be translated into action.

Participants also recognized that potential allies' readiness to act was shaped by the broader organizational and relational context. In workplaces perceived as psychologically safe, supported by inclusive leadership, or characterized by visible organizational commitments to equity, participants perceived fewer barriers to colleagues expressing support or challenging problematic behavior. Conversely, participants described hierarchical, politically sensitive, or psychologically unsafe environments as contexts in which potential allies might be more reluctant to act, particularly when visible support for marginalized colleagues could carry interpersonal or professional consequences. Thus, beneficiaries' perceptions of action readiness were informed not only by their assessments of individual colleagues but also by their understanding of the risks associated with ally action within a particular organizational environment.

Reflecting on why beneficiaries could not always assume that potential allies would intervene, one participant described the organizational risks that could discourage colleagues from acting:

People are afraid to stand up because they're afraid that they could lose their job… action against you. Speaking up can feel risky because you don't know how leadership or others around you will react. Even when people want to support someone, fear of professional consequences, damaged relationships, or being labeled negatively can stop them from taking action. (AHH)

Although this participant spoke generally about the constraints facing potential allies, the account illustrates how beneficiaries understood the organizational conditions surrounding ally action. From the beneficiary perspective, such conditions shaped expectations regarding whether supportive intentions would translate into observable action, particularly when doing so involved relational or professional risk. Consequently, the absence of action was not necessarily interpreted independently of context; participants considered the organizational conditions under which potential allies were deciding whether to intervene.

Participants also became increasingly attentive to the distinction between symbolic expressions of support and meaningful relational engagement. Rather than relying exclusively on verbal statements of support or visible expressions of inclusive values, participants described observing whether potential allies demonstrated consistency, accountability, willingness to understand marginalized experiences, and continued support when circumstances became more difficult. Action readiness therefore involved not only whether potential allies appeared willing to act, but also beneficiaries' emerging expectations regarding the quality and reliability of that support.

Speaking from the beneficiary perspective, one participant reflected on becoming increasingly skeptical of superficial expressions of allyship:

I've become more aware… sometimes people say they're an ally but they don't really understand the perspective. They may have good intentions, but if they haven't taken the time to listen, learn, or understand what people are actually experiencing, their support can feel surface-level or disconnected. Over time, you start paying attention to whether someone is truly willing to understand and support you consistently, not just say the right things. (SSS)

Such accounts demonstrate that beneficiaries were not simply assessing whether any action might occur. They were also becoming attentive to whether potential allies appeared genuinely willing to understand their experiences, sustain support over time, and remain engaged when relational or organizational risks emerged. Action readiness was therefore evaluated prospectively: beneficiaries drew on prior interactions, relational cues, and contextual conditions to form expectations about whether and how potential allies might respond when opportunities for support arose.

Across interviews, action readiness functioned as a transitional process linking Awareness to Action. As beneficiaries became aware of potential allyship cues, they developed expectations regarding whether supportive intentions would translate into observable behavior. These expectations did not determine how potential allies would subsequently act; rather, they provided a relational and contextual reference point against which subsequent allyship behaviors could be experienced and interpreted. Together, relational awareness and action readiness established the conditions through which beneficiaries subsequently encountered allyship actions and evaluated their credibility, meaning, and relational consequences.

4.3 Action

Participants described allyship becoming visible through actions that demonstrated support, care, advocacy, or intervention within everyday workplace interactions. Across interviews, participants emphasized that allyship was rarely judged based on intentions alone. Instead, they paid close attention to what people actually did when colleagues experienced exclusion, discrimination, barriers, or moments of vulnerability. Some participants described allyship through seemingly small but meaningful actions, such as listening without judgment, checking in after difficult experiences, offering encouragement, or creating space for marginalized voices to be heard. Others focused on more visible forms of support, including speaking up during meetings, challenging inappropriate comments or decisions, advocating for opportunities, or using influence to support colleagues facing barriers.

Participants frequently noted that the meaning of allyship was shaped not only by the action itself but also by the context in which it occurred. Actions were often viewed as especially meaningful when they took place during difficult, uncomfortable, or high-stakes situations where support was needed most. Several participants explained that allyship became most visible when individuals chose to act despite potential interpersonal, professional, or organizational risks. As a result, participants evaluated allyship not only by its visibility but also by whether actions contributed to feelings of support, safety, inclusion, empowerment, or meaningful change within workplace relationships and experiences.

Across interviews, participants described two broad forms of allyship action. Some actions focused primarily on providing interpersonal support and fostering trust within relationships, while others involved using voice, influence, or positional power to advocate for

marginalized colleagues. These experiences are reflected in the themes of Relational Support and Advocacy Action.

432.1 Relational Support

Participants frequently described allyship through everyday interactions that fostered trust, openness, and psychological safety. Listening, validating experiences, checking in, creating space for dialogue, and offering encouragement were commonly described as meaningful forms of support. Rather than evaluating these actions based on visibility or scale, participants emphasized how they made them feel supported, understood, and included within workplace relationships. Many explained that these interactions helped reduce feelings of isolation and uncertainty by providing reassurance that someone was willing to listen and care about their experiences. Participants also described relational support as creating a sense of emotional safety, making them more comfortable sharing concerns, discussing challenges, and seeking help when needed.

Across interviews, participants frequently described allyship as grounded in relatively ordinary interpersonal interactions that communicated consistency, care, and emotional presence. One participant described relational support as deeply reciprocal and emotionally sustaining within the context of everyday organizational challenges:

Allyship is supportive and reciprocal… you need a safe space to vent… you turn to allies to bounce ideas and seek honest feedback. It's about having people you can trust to listen without judgment and support you through difficult situations at work. Allyship also includes sharing successes and celebrating wins together because those moments help you feel valued, encouraged, and less alone in the workplace. (TLMM)

This account illustrates that participants evaluated relational support through responsiveness, reciprocity, and emotional consistency rather than through formal authority or highly visible acts of advocacy. For many participants, allyship became meaningful when colleagues remained emotionally available, listened without judgment, and consistently demonstrated care across repeated interactions. Such behaviors contributed to feelings of validation, belonging, and psychological safety within workplace environments that were otherwise experienced as uncertain or exclusionary.

Participants also described relational support as closely connected to visibility and symbolic cues signaling whether workplace environments were likely to be safe or welcoming. LGBTQ+ participants in particular emphasized that relatively small gestures, including inclusive language, visible support symbols, tone, and interactional openness, served as important indicators shaping decisions about disclosure, trust, and participation. Rather than dismissing these gestures as superficial, participants frequently interpreted them as pragmatic relational signals communicating emotional safety and acceptance.

One participant explained that over time individuals often "start to understand whether someone is on your side" through subtle relational cues and patterns of interaction rather than explicit declarations of support (ECC).. Such actions were experienced as meaningful because they reduced uncertainty and communicated that support was likely to be available if needed.

At the same time, participants emphasized that relational support derived its credibility from consistency over time rather than isolated expressions of kindness or inclusion. Participants frequently distinguished between individuals who occasionally expressed supportive sentiments and those who repeatedly demonstrated emotional presence, attentiveness, and relational reliability across everyday workplace interactions. Through these repeated experiences,

relational support enabled individuals to feel seen, heard, understood, and more comfortable participating within organizational settings.

Across interviews, participants described relational support as helping them feel seen, heard, and valued within workplace relationships. These experiences reduced uncertainty, fostered trust, and created a stronger sense of psychological safety. Although relational support did not necessarily change organizational structures or redistribute power directly, it often provided the interpersonal foundation that enabled continued engagement and trust over time.

4.3.2 Advocacy Action

Participants also described allyship through actions that extended beyond emotional support and interpersonal connection. These experiences involved speaking up, using influence, advocating for inclusion, creating opportunities, and challenging exclusionary behavior. Such actions were often viewed as especially meaningful when they occurred during situations involving power, visibility, or potential risk. Many participants explained that advocacy became most noticeable when allies acted during consequential moments rather than remaining supportive only in private conversations. Others described these actions as signals that individuals were willing to move beyond agreement and actively support marginalized colleagues when decisions, opportunities, or workplace outcomes were at stake. As a result, participants frequently viewed advocacy as one of the clearest demonstrations of commitment because it required action rather than simply expressing support.

Participants described advocacy action as extending beyond emotional support toward forms of intervention that actively challenged exclusionary practices or supported marginalized employees in moments involving power and accountability. Such actions included speaking up

during meetings, confronting discriminatory comments, advocating for inclusion in decision-making processes, amplifying marginalized voices, mentoring others, and creating access to opportunities that might otherwise remain unavailable.

Importantly, participants repeatedly emphasized that advocacy actions became most meaningful in situations where individuals chose to act despite potential interpersonal, professional, or organizational consequences. Participants distinguished meaningful advocacy from symbolic support by whether individuals remained supportive when intervention involved discomfort, visibility, or risk.

Participants described advocacy as particularly meaningful when allies used their influence or organizational position to support them in spaces where they had limited access or visibility. Reflecting on receiving this type of advocacy, one participant described how an ally "recommended me for this conference" and "spoke up for me in places I would never have been considered for" (SSS). Such experiences demonstrated that allyship could extend beyond interpersonal support by creating access to opportunities and ensuring that marginalized employees were represented in organizational spaces where they might otherwise have been overlooked.

Participants frequently interpreted such actions as especially credible because they demonstrated willingness to absorb personal or professional consequences in support of others. In these moments, allyship was evaluated not simply through verbal agreement or symbolic identification with inclusion-related values, but through whether individuals were willing to use their influence, credibility, or organizational position when it mattered most.

At the same time, participants emphasized that the absence of advocacy in high-stakes situations often carried greater evaluative weight than previous expressions of relational support. Several participants described situations in which colleagues appeared supportive privately or interpersonally, yet failed to intervene during moments involving organizational power, conflict, or potential risk. As one participant explained, some people are supportive "in private conversations," but "when something actually happens… they stay silent" (MGG). Such inconsistencies frequently undermined perceptions of authenticity and trustworthiness because participants interpreted silence during consequential moments as revealing the limits of allies' willingness to act.

Participants consistently distinguished advocacy from general support because it had the potential to influence outcomes, opportunities, and workplace experiences. Many described advocacy as becoming most visible when decisions were being made, opportunities were being allocated, or exclusionary behavior was occurring. While relational support helped individuals feel heard, understood, and emotionally supported, advocacy involved taking action that could affect workplace realities and access to opportunities. Participants frequently paid close attention to whether individuals were willing to speak up, use their influence, or intervene when support was needed most. These experiences often shaped how participants interpreted the significance of allyship and whether they viewed support as meaningful, reliable, and worthy of trust over time.

4.4 Reflection

Participants frequently described taking time to think about, interpret, and reassess allyship experiences after interactions occurred. Rather than accepting supportive behaviors at face value, they often reflected on whether those actions felt genuine, trustworthy, and

meaningful over time. These evaluations rarely emerged from a single interaction. Instead, participants described drawing conclusions gradually as they accumulated experiences with colleagues across different situations and workplace contexts. Through this process, they compared what people said, what they did, and how they responded when situations became difficult, uncertain, or consequential. Many participants explained that their initial impressions of allyship often changed as relationships evolved and new experiences provided additional information. Others described paying particular attention to moments when support was needed most, viewing these situations as important opportunities to assess whether allies' actions aligned with their stated commitments. As a result, reflection became an ongoing process through which participants made sense of allyship and determined what it meant for their workplace relationships moving forward.

Importantly, participants emphasized that reflection was not solely cognitive or detached. Evaluations of allyship were often emotionally charged and shaped by accumulated experiences of support, disappointment, uncertainty, validation, or relational risk. Many participants described revisiting earlier impressions of colleagues as new interactions provided additional information about their intentions, consistency, and willingness to act. Rather than forming fixed judgments, participants frequently reassessed allyship over time, particularly when workplace circumstances changed or when support was tested during difficult situations. Participants described continuously “watching,” interpreting, and reassessing whether allies remained supportive across changing situations, especially during moments involving organizational tension, power, visibility, or potential consequence. Several explained that seemingly small interactions could take on new meaning when viewed alongside later experiences, leading them to reconsider previous assumptions about trustworthiness or commitment. Across interviews,

reflection emerged through two interconnected dimensions: authenticity evaluation and ethical alignment.

4.4.1 Authenticity Evaluation

Participants frequently described assessing whether allyship felt genuine, trustworthy, and consistent over time. Rather than relying on isolated actions or verbal declarations of support, they paid attention to patterns of behavior across multiple interactions and situations. Many explained that credibility developed gradually as they observed whether allies remained supportive in both comfortable and difficult circumstances. Participants often described authenticity as something that revealed itself through consistency, follow-through, and ongoing effort rather than through intentions alone. These evaluations became increasingly important as relationships developed and expectations of support deepened.

Participants frequently described authentic allyship as emotionally natural, consistent, and integrated into a person's everyday behavior rather than selectively performed for recognition or visibility. One participant explained that genuine allyship was recognizable precisely because it did not feel forced or strategically performed:

Genuine allyship is just who they are, accepting of who you are… not putting on a mask. You can tell when somebody is supporting you because they genuinely care about you as a person, not because they're trying to look good or prove something to everyone else. It feels natural in the way they talk to you, include you, and treat you consistently over time, even in moments where there's no benefit for them. (ECC)

Across interviews, participants repeatedly emphasized that authenticity became visible through patterns of follow-through, attentiveness, and relational consistency over time. Several

participants described paying close attention to whether allies' behaviors remained aligned when circumstances became uncomfortable, politically sensitive, or professionally risky. One participant explained that genuine allies were people willing to support others "no matter the situation" rather than only when support was easy or socially rewarded (HII). Another participant reflected that authentic allies continued "doing the right things when nobody's looking" (KOO), suggesting that credibility was evaluated not through visibility alone, but through consistency across both public and private contexts.

Participants also emphasized that certain situations carried heightened evaluative significance. Moments involving organizational power, interpersonal conflict, or potential professional consequence frequently became critical tests of authenticity because they revealed whether allies remained supportive when advocacy involved discomfort or risk. As one participant explained, allyship became questionable when people were supportive only in comfortable situations but became silent "whenever they hear things that… tear other people down," describing such inconsistency as "kind of inauthentic" (PMM). Several participants similarly described becoming increasingly cautious when allies' behaviors shifted across contexts or audiences. One participant reflected that some individuals "say they're an ally but they don't really understand the perspective of the marginalized" (SSS), suggesting that participants evaluated authenticity not simply through intention, but through sustained effort to understand marginalized experiences meaningfully.

Importantly, participants did not expect allies to behave perfectly in every interaction. Instead, authenticity was often evaluated through how allies responded when mistakes or misunderstandings occurred. From the beneficiary perspective, acknowledging a mistake,

listening without defensiveness, and demonstrating a willingness to learn could strengthen perceptions of sincerity and trustworthiness. As one participant explained:

I don't expect someone to always get it right. What matters to me is what happens when they get it wrong. If they can acknowledge it, listen to me, and try to understand instead of becoming defensive, that tells me a lot. I'm more likely to trust someone who is willing to learn and do better than someone who acts like they already know everything. (JJJ)

Such responses were interpreted as indicators of authenticity because participants evaluated allies not according to an expectation of perfection, but according to their accountability, responsiveness, and willingness to learn following relational missteps.

Across interviews, participants described authenticity as something they continually reassessed rather than assumed. Consistency, accountability, responsiveness to mistakes, and follow-through strengthened trust because they signaled that support was likely to remain stable across situations. In contrast, perceived inconsistency, silence, or performativity frequently generated caution and skepticism. These evaluations influenced how participants interpreted allyship and shaped whether they became more open, more selective, or more guarded in workplace relationships.

4.4.2 Ethical Alignment

Participants also considered whether allyship reflected genuine concern for others or was motivated primarily by personal benefit, reputation, or social recognition. These evaluations focused not only on what allies did, but also on what participants believed motivated those actions. Many described paying attention to whether support appeared grounded in empathy, accountability, and concern for others or whether it seemed intended to enhance an individual's

image or standing. Participants frequently revisited these assessments as relationships evolved and new experiences accumulated. As a result, allyship was often evaluated through both behavior and perceived intention.

Participants frequently distinguished ethically grounded allyship from performative or strategically motivated support. Across interviews, ethically aligned allyship was described as selfless, empathetic, accountable, and oriented toward genuine concern for others' well-being rather than personal recognition or reputation management. Speaking from the beneficiary perspective about what they expected from allies, one participant explained: The ally should also be interested in your general well-being… genuine allyship would be selfless. It shouldn't just be about helping when it benefits them professionally or socially. You can usually feel when someone actually cares about your success, your comfort, and your well-being as a person, versus when they are simply trying to position themselves in a positive light. (NEE)

Participants also emphasized that ethical alignment became particularly visible through how allies responded during difficult or consequential moments. Support was perceived as more ethically grounded when individuals demonstrated willingness to absorb discomfort, challenge exclusionary behavior, or use their positional influence despite potential interpersonal or organizational costs. One participant described meaningful allyship as "supporting you outwardly… in a public arena… regardless of how they would be viewed" (AHH), highlighting the importance of visible commitment under conditions involving reputational or relational risk.

At the same time, participants actively identified and rejected forms of allyship perceived as conditional, self-serving, or image-oriented. Several participants described frustration with individuals who appeared supportive primarily to benefit themselves professionally or socially. One participant criticized forms of allyship that felt driven by personal agenda rather than

genuine concern, explaining that people sometimes use allyship "in a form of making themselves feel better" rather than truly understanding or supporting marginalized individuals (DHH). Another participant similarly described performative allyship as behavior motivated by recognition or praise, noting that some individuals appear to want "an award every time they do something that is a natural response" (UOO). Participants frequently interpreted such behaviors as emotionally exhausting and relationally unsafe because support appeared conditional, inconsistent, or strategically motivated.

Importantly, participants also distinguished ethically grounded adaptation from opportunistic inconsistency. Participants generally understood that allies sometimes navigated uncertainty, organizational constraints, or evolving learning processes. However, behaviors that shifted strategically across audiences or situations were frequently interpreted as lacking integrity. One participant explained that fake allyship often became visible when people "share an opinion" one day and "change the opinion" the next depending on context or audience (NEE). Such inconsistencies undermined perceptions of ethical grounding because participants interpreted them as signaling self-protection rather than genuine commitment.

Several participants further emphasized that ethically aligned allyship involved ongoing listening, learning, and accountability rather than assuming expertise or speaking over marginalized individuals. When describing what they expected from allies, one participant emphasized that allies should "amplify the voices of people within that community" rather than "speak for them" or overshadow lived experiences (SHH). Reflecting on what beneficiaries needed from allies before advocacy could be experienced as meaningful, one participant explained:

You need to listen to understand, not just to reply. People try to jump in and advocate immediately, but sometimes they haven't actually taken the time to build trust or understand what people are experiencing. You need that bridge of trust first before you can genuinely support someone in a meaningful way. (UOO)

Participants frequently interpreted allyship through the lens of values, accountability, and integrity. Support that appeared selfless, consistent, and grounded in concern for others was generally viewed as more credible and trustworthy. In contrast, support perceived as self-serving, conditional, or image-oriented often weakened trust and raised questions about the sincerity of allyship. These evaluations shaped whether participants felt comfortable relying on others and influenced the credibility they attributed to future acts of support.

4.5 Adaptation

Participants described responding to allyship experiences in different ways depending on how those experiences were interpreted and evaluated over time. Rather than passively receiving support, they actively made decisions about how much to trust others, how much of themselves to share, and how much emotional energy to invest in workplace relationships. These decisions were shaped by previous experiences, emotional reactions, and judgments about whether allyship felt genuine, reliable, and safe. Participants frequently emphasized that their responses changed over time as relationships evolved and new interactions provided additional information.

Importantly, adaptation was not described as a fixed endpoint. Rather, participants continuously reassessed relationships as new interactions unfolded and organizational contexts changed. Depending on how allyship was interpreted and experienced over time, participants described either deepening engagement with allies, strategically regulating their involvement, or

restricting engagement in order to protect themselves from emotional exhaustion, disappointment, or relational harm. Across interviews, adaptation emerged through three interconnected regulatory responses: relational intensification, engagement calibration, and boundary safeguarding.

4.5.1 Relational Intensification

When allyship was experienced as trustworthy, consistent, and emotionally safe, participants described becoming more open within workplace relationships. Many explained that they became increasingly willing to disclose experiences, seek support, and rely on others once trust had been established over time. Rather than occurring immediately, this increased openness developed gradually through repeated experiences of support, responsiveness, and reliability. Participants frequently connected these experiences to feeling safer, less isolated, and more confident engaging with others. As trust strengthened, relationships often became more meaningful and personally significant. One participant explained:

I keep parts of myself under wraps until I feel safe. As I've become more confident in who I am, the bar for what I expect from an ally has gone up, especially from those who are closer. I expect them to speak up for me, not stay quiet. If I trust someone and feel safe with them, then I expect them to actually show up when it matters, not just when things are easy or comfortable. (ECC)

This account illustrates that relational intensification involved more than simply feeling emotionally comfortable. As trust deepened, participants described developing stronger expectations regarding allies' consistency, accountability, and willingness to act under consequential circumstances. Increased relational investment therefore often produced

heightened evaluative standards because participants increasingly viewed allies as people who could meaningfully influence their workplace experiences and emotional safety.

Across interviews, participants described relational intensification as involving greater openness, emotional honesty, and willingness to engage more fully within workplace relationships. Several participants explained that when allyship felt authentic and emotionally reliable, they became more comfortable asking for support, discussing difficult experiences, sharing perspectives openly, and relying on others during challenging situations. One participant described feeling more willing to "be myself fully" around trusted allies because there was less fear of judgment, misunderstanding, or dismissal (KOO). Others similarly emphasized that sustained allyship reduced feelings of isolation and emotional vigilance over time.

Participants also noted that relational intensification strengthened not only interpersonal trust, but also broader feelings of workplace belonging and psychological safety. Consistent allyship enabled some individuals to participate more openly in organizational life, contribute ideas more confidently, and feel less emotionally guarded in everyday interactions.

Participants described becoming more comfortable engaging with allies when support was experienced as reliable and emotionally safe. Increased trust often encouraged greater openness, deeper relational investment, and stronger expectations that allies would remain supportive during consequential situations. Several participants explained that consistent allyship helped them feel more confident participating fully within workplace relationships. These experiences contributed to stronger feelings of trust, connection, and belonging over time.

4.5.2 Engagement Calibration

Participants also described being selective about how much they shared, how much emotional energy they invested, and when they chose to engage with others. These decisions often reflected efforts to balance openness with self-protection in situations where allyship felt uncertain, inconsistent, or emotionally demanding. Rather than fully trusting or fully withdrawing, participants frequently adjusted their involvement depending on the circumstances and the individuals involved. Many described making ongoing decisions about whether conversations, disclosures, or efforts to educate others felt worthwhile and emotionally sustainable. This selective approach allowed participants to remain engaged while managing potential emotional costs and preserving personal agency. One participant explained:

I've learned to be more intentional about when I engage and when I don't. Sometimes I'm willing to explain or educate, but only if I choose to, not because it's expected of me. Other times, I hold back what I share or how much energy I give, because I need to protect myself. You start realizing that constantly explaining yourself or educating other people can become emotionally exhausting if there isn't genuine effort or reciprocity on the other side. (SHH)

This account illustrates that engagement calibration involved ongoing decisions regarding when participation felt worthwhile, emotionally manageable, or relationally safe. Participants repeatedly emphasized that "educating others" was meaningful only when it remained voluntary rather than assumed or demanded (LMM). Several participants described becoming increasingly selective about where they invested emotional and cognitive labor, particularly when interactions began feeling extractive, repetitive, or one-sided.

Participants also described calibration as shaped by contextual and relational factors, including organizational climate, perceived openness of others, prior experiences of invalidation, and emotional capacity at a given moment. Some participants explained that they strategically adjusted their level of openness depending on "who was present, how psychologically safe the environment felt", or whether previous interactions suggested that support would be genuine and sustained (ARR). Others described choosing to disengage temporarily from emotionally draining conversations while remaining relationally connected in other ways.

Importantly, participants emphasized that engagement calibration did not necessarily reflect distrust, cynicism, or disengagement. Rather, it represented a conditional and adaptive form of participation that allowed individuals to remain involved while "preserving autonomy, emotional well-being", and relational boundaries (ATT). Participants frequently portrayed calibration as necessary for managing emotional energy within workplace environments where allyship quality could fluctuate across people and situations.

Across interviews, participants portrayed calibration as an important way of managing emotional energy while remaining engaged. By adjusting disclosure, participation, and emotional investment, individuals sought to protect their well-being without completely withdrawing from workplace relationships. Participants frequently described these decisions as practical responses to uncertainty rather than signs of distrust or disengagement. In this way, engagement calibration helped individuals remain involved while maintaining control over their emotional and relational boundaries.

4.5.3 Boundary Safeguarding

When allyship was experienced as performative, inconsistent, emotionally unsafe, or repeatedly disappointing, participants often described creating distance within workplace relationships. This included limiting disclosure, withdrawing from particular interactions, becoming more selective about whom they trusted, or reducing emotional investment in relationships that no longer felt safe or reciprocal. Many participants emphasized that these responses developed gradually following repeated disappointments rather than isolated incidents. Over time, unmet expectations and perceived inauthenticity led some individuals to become more cautious and protective of their personal boundaries. These actions were frequently described as necessary for preserving emotional well-being and reducing vulnerability within workplace environments. One participant described this withdrawal process in direct emotional terms:

I withdraw when it's not genuine. If it feels performative or forced, I just need to get out of that situation. At some point, you stop wanting to explain yourself or invest emotionally because it becomes draining when people are more focused on appearing supportive than actually understanding or supporting you in a meaningful way. (KAA)

Participants consistently framed withdrawal not as indifference or apathy, but as a deliberate form of self-protection intended to preserve emotional well-being, dignity, and psychological safety. Several participants explained that repeated exposure to performative or conditional allyship generated emotional exhaustion, disappointment, and heightened vigilance over time. In these situations, restricting engagement became a way of reducing vulnerability and protecting oneself from further emotional harm.

Importantly, participants emphasized that boundary safeguarding was often partial rather than absolute. Rather than completely disengaging from all workplace relationships, individuals frequently described limiting disclosure, emotionally distancing themselves from specific colleagues, avoiding certain conversations, or selectively participating in interactions perceived as emotionally risky. One participant explained that after repeated disappointments, they became "more careful about who I open up to and how much I share" (BBB), reflecting a shift toward more guarded relational engagement.

Participants also emphasized that boundary safeguarding could coexist alongside continued openness to allyship in other contexts. Even after negative experiences, many individuals remained willing to engage with allies who demonstrated authenticity, accountability, and emotional reliability over time. Thus, withdrawal was typically directed toward specific relationships or interactional patterns rather than toward allyship itself as a broader possibility.

Participants consistently framed these responses as forms of self-protection rather than disengagement or indifference. By establishing boundaries and limiting vulnerability in relationships perceived as unreliable or emotionally costly, they sought to preserve psychological safety, dignity, and emotional well-being. Participants often emphasized that these decisions were directed toward specific individuals or interactions rather than allyship itself as a broader possibility. Even after disappointing experiences, many remained open to engaging with colleagues who demonstrated authenticity, accountability, and consistency over time.

4.6 Process Dynamics: Movement Across Stages

Although the four stages of the Dynamic Allyship process, Awareness, Action, Reflection, and Adaptation, are presented sequentially for analytic clarity, participants'

narratives revealed that movement across these stages was rarely linear. Instead, participants described allyship as unfolding through an evolving relational process in which interpretations, evaluations, and responses were continuously shaped by new interactions and accumulated experiences.

Rather than progressing through stages in a fixed order, participants frequently moved back and forth across stages as new relational cues emerged, prior experiences were reconsidered, or contextual conditions shifted. For example, individuals sometimes reflected on allyship behaviors while interactions were still unfolding, revisited earlier interpretations when allies acted differently in later situations, or returned to heightened awareness when new forms of exclusion became visible.The following subsections describe the transition dynamics that participants most frequently described when narrating how allyship experiences evolved over time.

4.6.1 Transition from Awareness to Action

Participants consistently described the movement from Awareness to Action as gradual and situational rather than immediate or automatic. Awareness developed across repeated interactions and observations as beneficiaries became increasingly attentive to cues indicating whether colleagues recognized inequality, understood marginalized experiences, and appeared potentially supportive. These cues did not themselves constitute allyship action. Rather, they shaped beneficiaries' expectations about whether potential allies would translate awareness and supportive intentions into meaningful behavior when opportunities for support emerged.

From the beneficiary perspective, the transition became visible when situations created opportunities for potential allies to act. Participants described observing whether colleagues who

had previously expressed support or demonstrated awareness of marginalized experiences would intervene, advocate, offer support, or remain silent when action became consequential. These moments provided beneficiaries with an opportunity to compare earlier relational cues and perceived action readiness with the ally's subsequent behavior.

Participants therefore described the transition from Awareness to Action as becoming particularly salient when potential allies had opportunities to translate recognition and supportive intentions into observable behavior. These moments were consequential because participants could observe whether colleagues who appeared aware of inequality were willing to respond when support was actually needed. Repeated experiences also shaped these expectations, as participants increasingly distinguished between individuals who expressed awareness or supportive values and those who consistently translated those intentions into meaningful action.

Participants also described situations in which colleagues had previously expressed support or demonstrated awareness of marginalized experiences, but the credibility of those signals remained uncertain until an opportunity for action emerged. One participant described how a colleague's response during a difficult workplace situation changed their understanding of that person's support:

I knew they understood some of what I was dealing with because we had talked about it before, and they always seemed supportive. But I think the moment that really mattered was when something happened in a meeting and they actually spoke up for me. I didn't have to ask them to do it. Until then, I knew they cared, but seeing them act when it mattered showed me that their support went beyond just understanding what I was experiencing. (DSS)

This account illustrates the transition from Awareness to Action from the beneficiary perspective. Awareness created an expectation or possibility of support, but the meaning of that awareness became clearer when beneficiaries subsequently observed how potential allies responded in situations requiring action. The transition therefore did not represent beneficiaries themselves becoming ready to intervene; rather, it captured the movement from beneficiaries' perceptions of potential allyship and action readiness to their experience of actual ally behavior.

Importantly, this transition was not automatic. Participants described situations in which potential allies appeared aware of inequality or expressed supportive values but did not act when opportunities for intervention emerged. Such experiences demonstrated that Awareness and Action Readiness did not guarantee Action. Instead, the presence, absence, or form of subsequent action provided beneficiaries with additional relational information that became consequential for how the ally and the interaction were later evaluated.

The transition from Awareness to Action was therefore shaped by both expectation and observation. Beneficiaries entered situations with developing expectations based on prior interactions, relational cues, and perceptions of potential allies' readiness to act. When an opportunity for support arose, they could compare these expectations with the ally's actual response. Actions that aligned with prior signals of support could strengthen perceptions of credibility, whereas silence, withdrawal, or inconsistent behavior could create uncertainty or disappointment.

These experiences also demonstrate why the Dynamic Allyship Process is not strictly linear. Prior experiences with an ally informed what beneficiaries noticed and expected in subsequent interactions. An ally who had previously translated awareness into meaningful action might enter a later interaction with greater relational credibility, whereas previous inaction could

heighten beneficiaries' attention to whether support would materialize in the future. Thus, the movement from Awareness to Action was embedded within an accumulating relational history rather than occurring as an isolated sequence.

Once an ally acted or failed to act the beneficiary moved toward Reflection, where the behavior was interpreted in relation to its perceived authenticity, emotional–relational impact, consistency with prior behavior, and surrounding organizational context. In this way, Action provided new relational information that beneficiaries could evaluate, contributing to subsequent decisions about whether to intensify, calibrate, or safeguard their engagement with the ally.

4.6.2 Transition from Action to Reflection

Participants consistently described Reflection as emerging after observable allyship actions occurred. However, this evaluative process was rarely immediate. Instead, participants described a period of temporal distance during which they reassessed the meaning, consistency, and credibility of earlier interactions. Reflection often emerged gradually as participants accumulated additional experiences with allies across situations and over time.

Rather than evaluating allyship based on isolated actions alone, participants described comparing behaviors across interactions, contexts, and moments involving differing levels of visibility, discomfort, or organizational consequence. Through this process, participants compared allies' words and actions across different situations, paying particular attention to whether support remained consistent when circumstances became uncomfortable, difficult, or consequential. One participant described this retrospective realization:

After a while, when I started looking back, I noticed it only ever showed up in low-risk situations, when it didn't really cost them anything. That's when I started questioning whether

the support was actually genuine or whether it was only there when it was easy and comfortable. (NEE)

Participants emphasized that credibility evaluations often emerged through accumulated experiences rather than singular disappointments. Repeated instances of unfulfilled commitments, inconsistent advocacy, selective silence, or shifting behavior prompted deeper reflection regarding whether allyship was authentic, conditional, or performative.

Importantly, participants also described moving repeatedly between Action and Reflection while interactions were still unfolding. In some cases, individuals evaluated allyship behaviors in real time, reassessing credibility as new actions occurred or as allies responded differently across situations. Participants frequently described "watching closely" to see whether support remained consistent once discomfort, visibility, or organizational risk emerged.

These accounts highlight that Reflection functioned as an interpretive pause within the Dynamic Allyship process, allowing participants to compare intentions with outcomes and determine whether allyship behaviors aligned with evolving expectations of authenticity, accountability, and ethical commitment.

4.6.3 Transition from Reflection to Adaptation

Movement from Reflection to Adaptation occurred when evaluative judgments regarding credibility, authenticity, and ethical alignment translated into changes in relational engagement. Participants described this transition as gradual rather than abrupt, often emerging after repeated experiences of disappointment, emotional strain, uncertainty, or unmet expectations over time. Rather than responding immediately to isolated incidents, participants frequently described reaching an emotional threshold at which continued relational investment began to feel

unsustainable. This threshold was often shaped by accumulated feelings of frustration, fatigue, diminished trust, or emotional exhaustion. One participant described this gradual process of relational recalibration:

By the third or fourth time, when nothing really changed, I realized I didn't have the energy to keep pushing. That's when I started to distance myself. It wasn't one single moment, it was realizing over time that I was investing emotional energy into relationships that didn't really feel safe or reliable anymore. (MOO)

Importantly, participants emphasized that adaptation rarely involved complete disengagement. Instead, individuals described recalibrating expectations, adjusting disclosure, limiting emotional investment, or becoming more selective regarding whom they trusted and relied upon. In many cases, trust was not entirely removed, but strategically adjusted to reflect revised evaluations of credibility and reliability.

Participants also described situations in which credible allyship strengthened trust and encouraged deeper relational engagement over time. When allies repeatedly demonstrated accountability, support, and willingness to act across different situations, for example, by listening and offering support during early interactions, later speaking up when exclusion occurred, advocating for participants when they were not present, and continuing to provide support when doing so became uncomfortable or professionally consequential, participants increasingly viewed that support as consistent and credible. Over time, these accumulated experiences encouraged participants to disclose more personal experiences, rely on allies emotionally, and interpret support as durable rather than situational.Across interviews, participants described adjusting how much they trusted, relied on, and engaged with others based on their experiences over time. Some became more open and willing to seek support, while

others reduced disclosure, adjusted expectations, or became more selective about whom they trusted. These responses were shaped by accumulated experiences of support, disappointment, safety, and trust within workplace relationships.

4.6.4 Recursive Movement Across Stages

Although participants often described similar patterns in how allyship experiences unfolded, they rarely portrayed these experiences as straightforward or predictable. Instead, relationships evolved over time, and new interactions frequently led participants to reconsider earlier impressions, reassess trust, or adjust their expectations. Many explained that their interpretations changed as situations developed and additional experiences provided new information about allies and their actions. As a result, participants frequently described moving back and forth between different experiences of awareness, action, reflection, and adaptation rather than progressing through them in a fixed sequence. Several participants noted that trust, credibility, and engagement were continuously reassessed as workplace relationships evolved and new situations emerged.

One common pattern involved returning from Adaptation to Awareness when new interactions introduced ambiguity or inconsistency. For example, after initially trusting an ally and increasing relational engagement, participants described becoming newly attentive to relational cues when that same ally failed to act in a later high-stakes situation. One participant explained:

When somebody disappoints you after you trusted them, you start noticing everything differently. You pay closer attention to what they say, what they avoid saying, and whether they

actually show up when situations become difficult. Once trust is shaken, you become much more aware of the small things you may not have noticed before. (JJJ)

This prompted renewed awareness and reassessment of previously established trust. A second pattern involved oscillation between Action and Reflection within ongoing interactions. Participants described evaluating allyship behaviors in real time, particularly in situations where support appeared inconsistent or conditional. In these moments, reflection did not occur only after action but alongside it, as individuals continuously interpreted whether emerging behaviors aligned with earlier expectations. As one participant explained, “while things are happening, you’re already trying to figure out whether the support is genuine or not” (MRR).

Participants also described movement from Adaptation back to Action when new evidence of credible allyship emerged. In cases where earlier disappointment had led to boundary-setting or reduced engagement, subsequent demonstrations of consistent, risk-bearing support prompted renewed willingness to engage, disclose, or rely on the ally. One participant reflected that “when somebody consistently shows up again, it slowly changes how much you trust them” (KAA). This re-engagement did not erase prior evaluations but reflected a recalibrated openness shaped by updated interpretations.

Another recurring pattern involved movement from Reflection back to Awareness when participants encountered new forms of exclusion or shifting contextual cues. Rather than progressing directly into adaptation, individuals described becoming more attentive to subtle dynamics, reinterpreting interactions, and recalibrating their understanding of what constituted allyship in that context. One participant explained that “sometimes situations make you notice things you didn’t pay attention to before” (STT), illustrating how new experiences could reactivate heightened awareness and interpretive vigilance.

Participants also emphasized that trust and engagement were continuously renegotiated rather than permanently fixed. One participant described this process as emotionally cyclical and highly dependent on ongoing relational experiences:

Trust isn't something that stays permanent. Somebody can make you feel safe for a long time, and then one situation changes how you see everything. At the same time, people can also rebuild trust if they consistently show up differently afterward. So you're constantly reassessing based on what keeps happening over time. (DMM)

Similarly, credible allyship actions could prompt renewed engagement even after earlier disappointment had led to boundary-setting. Conversely, experiences of inconsistency or performative support could shift participants back into heightened vigilance, even in relationships that had previously been experienced as trustworthy. Several participants described trust as something that could "grow, weaken, and rebuild again depending on what happens over time" (MGG).

Across accounts, participants emphasized that these movements were not random but were shaped by accumulated interactions, emotional signals, and contextual conditions. Recursion often occurred when new information contradicted prior evaluations, when emotional responses intensified or shifted, or when contextual factors altered the perceived risk or meaning of allyship behaviors. Across interviews, participants emphasized that trust, credibility, and engagement were continually reassessed rather than permanently fixed. New experiences could strengthen trust, weaken it, or prompt participants to revisit earlier assumptions about relationships. These accounts suggest that allyship experiences evolved over time as individuals interpreted new information, responded to changing circumstances, and adjusted their engagement accordingly.

4.7 Mechanisms and Boundary Conditions Shaping the Dynamic Allyship Process

Across interviews, participants repeatedly described emotional experiences and workplace conditions as shaping how allyship was interpreted and experienced over time. Feelings such as trust, relief, validation, disappointment, fear, frustration, and emotional exhaustion influenced how participants understood allyship interactions and how they responded to them. Participants also emphasized that workplace conditions, including leadership behavior, organizational culture, power dynamics, and perceived risk, influenced whether support felt meaningful, credible, or safe. These emotional and contextual experiences appeared throughout participants' accounts and shaped how relationships developed, strengthened, weakened, or changed over time.

Participants frequently described emotional experiences as providing important information about the quality and meaning of allyship. Feelings of trust, comfort, validation, and safety often strengthened confidence in workplace relationships, whereas disappointment, frustration, fear, or emotional exhaustion prompted participants to reassess their expectations and engagement. Many explained that their emotional responses were shaped not only by individual interactions but also by patterns that developed across repeated experiences over time. As a result, emotional experiences influenced how participants interpreted support, evaluated relationships, and responded to subsequent interactions.

Participants also emphasized the importance of workplace context in shaping allyship experiences. Leadership behavior, organizational norms, inclusion practices, power dynamics, and perceptions of risk influenced how support was expressed, interpreted, and evaluated. Similar allyship behaviors were sometimes experienced differently depending on the organizational environment, the individuals involved, and the consequences associated with

taking action. Although participants most frequently discussed these influences when reflecting on allyship experiences and adjusting their engagement, emotional and contextual factors appeared throughout all stages of the process and were closely intertwined with how allyship was experienced over time.

4.7.1 Mechanisms: Emotional–Relational Impact

Participants repeatedly described emotional experiences as playing an important role in how they understood and responded to allyship over time. Feelings such as trust, relief, comfort, validation, disappointment, frustration, fear, and emotional exhaustion were frequently discussed when participants reflected on workplace interactions and relationships. Rather than describing these emotions as isolated reactions to individual events, participants portrayed them as developing across repeated interactions and accumulated experiences. Many explained that emotional responses influenced how they interpreted support, assessed trustworthiness, and decided whether to deepen engagement, become more cautious, or establish stronger boundaries within workplace relationships.

Participants also emphasized that emotions were closely connected to their experiences of relationships rather than existing separately from them. Feelings of trust, safety, respect, validation, disappointment, or uncertainty often provided important information about whether allyship felt meaningful, credible, and reliable. As workplace interactions accumulated over time, participants frequently revisited earlier impressions of colleagues and reassessed their expectations based on evolving emotional experiences.

Across interviews, three emotional experiences appeared most consistently in participants' accounts: relational safety, identity affirmation, and relational strain. Participants

described relational safety through feelings of trust, comfort, acceptance, and psychological safety within workplace relationships. Identity affirmation was reflected in experiences of feeling recognized, respected, valued, and included. Relational strain emerged through feelings such as disappointment, fear, frustration, mistrust, or emotional exhaustion, particularly when support felt inconsistent, conditional, or absent. Together, these emotional experiences shaped how participants interpreted allyship and how they responded to workplace relationships over time.

4.7.1.1 Relational Safety. Participants frequently described feelings of comfort, relief, acceptance, and trust when discussing positive allyship experiences. These emotional responses often emerged when individuals felt listened to, respected, supported, and treated with consistency over time. Many explained that allyship became easier to engage with when workplace relationships felt predictable and emotionally safe. Rather than worrying about judgment, exclusion, or misunderstanding, participants described feeling more comfortable speaking openly, asking for support, and engaging more authentically with colleagues. Across interviews, these experiences were frequently associated with feelings of trust and psychological safety within workplace relationships.

Across interviews, participants frequently described relational safety as emerging gradually through repeated experiences of emotional consistency and support. One participant explained:

The immediate thing was relief. Then trust started to build, and that trust strengthened the relationship. It made me more comfortable engaging and relying on them. Once you feel like somebody genuinely supports you and accepts you, you stop feeling like you constantly have to protect yourself around them. (LMM)

Participants emphasized that relational safety reduced uncertainty and enabled greater openness within workplace interactions. As trust strengthened, individuals described becoming more willing to disclose experiences, seek support, ask for help, and participate more authentically within organizational settings. One participant explained that when someone "consistently shows they have my back," trust gradually becomes reciprocal and "that's when it becomes a real relationship" (NEE). These accounts suggest that emotional safety functioned as an important relational foundation enabling deeper engagement and sustained trust over time.

Importantly, participants described relational safety not as a permanent state, but as something continuously reassessed across interactions and situations. Emotional safety strengthened when allies remained supportive consistently over time, particularly during uncomfortable or consequential moments. Conversely, inconsistency or silence during high-stakes situations often disrupted feelings of safety and trust.

Participants consistently described trust and emotional safety as important conditions for continued engagement. When support remained consistent across situations, individuals became more comfortable relying on others, sharing experiences, and participating more openly within workplace relationships. Conversely, moments of inconsistency or silence often weakened feelings of safety and prompted participants to reassess their expectations of support. These accounts suggest that emotional safety played an important role in shaping how participants engaged with allies over time.

4.7.1.2 Identity Affirmation. Participants frequently described allyship as most meaningful when it made them feel recognized, respected, and valued for who they were. Many explained that supportive interactions reduced feelings of invisibility, marginalization, or pressure to conceal aspects of their identity. Experiences such as being listened to, having

concerns taken seriously, feeling represented, or having others acknowledge experiences of exclusion were often described as particularly meaningful. Participants emphasized that these interactions communicated more than acceptance alone; they reinforced a sense of legitimacy, belonging, and inclusion within workplace relationships.

Across interviews, participants emphasized that identity affirmation carried both emotional and symbolic significance. Moments in which allies listened attentively, acknowledged experiences of marginalization, amplified voices, or challenged exclusionary behavior often reinforced feelings of belonging and legitimacy within workplace environments. Participants described these interactions as emotionally meaningful because they signaled that their identities and experiences were being taken seriously rather than minimized, ignored, or questioned.

One participant described the emotional significance of feeling genuinely accepted within workplace relationships:

When somebody accepts you fully for who you are, without making you feel different or like you need to hide parts of yourself, it changes how safe you feel around them. You stop constantly thinking about how you're being perceived or whether you need to filter yourself. It feels validating because you realize they're respecting and valuing you as a person, not just tolerating your presence. (DMM)

Participants frequently explained that identity affirmation strengthened perceptions that allyship was ethically grounded rather than performative. When allies demonstrated genuine curiosity, respect, and willingness to understand experiences of marginalization, individuals interpreted allyship as more sincere and trustworthy. Several participants described these

experiences as reducing feelings of invisibility, isolation, or emotional exhaustion within workplace environments where they often felt misunderstood or excluded.

Participants also emphasized that identity affirmation extended beyond interpersonal kindness alone. Meaningful affirmation involved feeling recognized as fully legitimate organizational members whose experiences, concerns, and perspectives deserved acknowledgment and respect. One participant explained that allyship felt most meaningful when others made them feel "comfortable being fully myself instead of constantly monitoring how much of myself I could show" (OEE). These interactions often strengthened emotional connection, trust, and willingness to remain engaged relationally over time.

Participants frequently connected these experiences to stronger feelings of belonging, trust, and connection. Feeling recognized and respected often increased confidence that support was genuine rather than symbolic. Several participants explained that these experiences made them more comfortable engaging openly with colleagues and participating more fully within workplace environments. Over time, these interactions strengthened perceptions that allyship was sincere, meaningful, and worthy of trust.

4.7.1.3 Relational Strain. Participants also described emotional experiences that made allyship feel uncertain, disappointing, or unsafe. Feelings such as frustration, betrayal, fear, hesitation, mistrust, and emotional exhaustion frequently emerged when support appeared inconsistent, conditional, or absent during important moments. Many participants explained that these emotions developed gradually as experiences accumulated over time rather than resulting from a single interaction. These emotional responses often prompted individuals to reconsider earlier impressions, become more cautious, or adjust how they engaged with workplace relationships.

Participants frequently described disappointment as one of the earliest emotional signals prompting reassessment of allyship credibility. One participant explained:

When someone presents themselves as an ally and then does the opposite, it feels like a betrayal. That disappointment is what makes you stop and reassess. You start questioning whether the support was ever really genuine or whether it only existed when things were easy or comfortable. (TLMM)

Several participants emphasized that relational strain often accumulated gradually across repeated interactions rather than emerging from a single incident alone. Experiences of inconsistent support, silence during difficult moments, lack of follow-through, or emotionally extractive interactions progressively weakened trust and increased emotional guardedness. One participant explained that after repeated disappointments, “my level of trust was ratcheted down” and although they did not “cut them off completely,” they “stopped expecting support” in the same way (SSS).

Participants also described fear, hesitation, and shock as emotional signals indicating heightened relational or environmental threat. These emotions often intensified vigilance and reduced willingness to disclose experiences or engage openly. One LGBTQ+ participant explained:

Fear, hesitation, and shock were the main emotions. It made me realize how unsafe that space actually was. After that, I became much more careful about what I shared, who I trusted, and whether I felt comfortable fully being myself there anymore. (ECC)

Similarly, another participant described withdrawing from interactions once they became emotionally unsafe or disrespectful, explaining that “continuing wasn’t worth the cost to my

dignity" (OEE). Participants consistently framed these responses as forms of self-protection rather than disengagement alone.

Participants consistently described these emotional experiences as signals that something within the relationship had changed. Feelings of disappointment, fear, or exhaustion often led individuals to reassess expectations, become more vigilant, or reduce emotional investment in particular relationships. Rather than viewing these responses as disengagement alone, participants frequently described them as efforts to protect themselves from further disappointment or emotional harm. These experiences often influenced how much trust they placed in others and how willing they were to remain vulnerable within workplace interactions.

4.7.1.4 Mechanism Summary. Taken together, participants consistently described emotional experiences as shaping how they interpreted and responded to allyship over time. Feelings such as trust, relief, validation, disappointment, fear, frustration, and emotional exhaustion influenced whether individuals became more engaged, more cautious, or more protective of their boundaries. Positive experiences often strengthened trust and encouraged continued engagement, while negative experiences frequently prompted reassessment, heightened vigilance, or reduced reliance on others. Across interviews, participants described these emotional responses as closely connected to how they understood allyship and how workplace relationships evolved over time.

Positive emotional experiences, particularly those associated with relational safety and identity affirmation, often strengthened trust and encouraged greater openness within workplace relationships. In contrast, experiences associated with relational strain frequently prompted participants to reassess expectations, become more cautious, or adjust how they engaged with others. Participants also described situations in which emotional signals felt mixed or

inconsistent, creating uncertainty and leading them to monitor relationships more closely before deciding how to respond.

Across interviews, participants repeatedly described revisiting earlier impressions of allies as new experiences emerged and relationships evolved. Feelings of trust, validation, disappointment, or uncertainty often influenced how individuals interpreted subsequent interactions and whether they became more engaged, more selective, or more guarded over time. These accounts suggest that emotional experiences played an important role in shaping how participants understood allyship and how workplace relationships developed across changing situations. As illustrated in Figure 1, emotional–relational impact connects allyship interactions, participants' evaluations, and subsequent responses within the Dynamic Allyship process.

4.7.2 Boundary Conditions: Contextual Conditions

Participants consistently emphasized that allyship could not be understood separately from the workplace environments in which interactions occurred. Across interviews, individuals described organizational culture, leadership behavior, workplace norms, power dynamics, and perceptions of risk as influencing how allyship was experienced and interpreted over time. Many explained that the same supportive behavior could feel meaningful and credible in one context but less significant, visible, or trustworthy in another. As a result, participants frequently discussed allyship in relation to the broader organizational and relational environments in which workplace interactions unfolded.

Participants described workplace conditions as shaping not only whether allyship behaviors occurred, but also how those behaviors were interpreted and responded to across relationships and situations. Leadership support, inclusion climates, organizational practices,

social norms, work design, and power dynamics all influenced whether individuals felt comfortable engaging in allyship, whether support appeared genuine, and whether marginalized employees felt willing to trust or rely on others over time. Several participants noted that organizational environments could either encourage allyship by making support feel visible and legitimate or discourage it by increasing uncertainty, hesitation, or perceived risk.

Across interviews, three interconnected aspects of workplace context appeared most consistently in participants' accounts: moral norms, organizational support, and power structures. Participants described these conditions as influencing how allyship was experienced, evaluated, and sustained within workplace relationships. Together, these contextual influences shaped the environments within which support, trust, credibility, and engagement developed over time.

4.7.2.1 Moral Norms. Participants frequently described drawing on broader social values, workplace expectations, and personal beliefs when interpreting allyship behaviors. Across interviews, individuals discussed ideas of fairness, inclusion, respect, and accountability when explaining why certain actions felt meaningful, appropriate, or credible. Many participants emphasized that their expectations of allyship were influenced by both workplace cultures and wider social conversations about identity, equity, and inclusion. These expectations shaped how they interpreted support, evaluated others' actions, and determined whether allyship felt genuine or consistent with their values.

Across interviews, participants emphasized that expectations surrounding allyship were shaped by changing social norms and generational differences. Several participants described younger generations as more open, accepting, and comfortable engaging in conversations about inclusion and identity. One participant explained:

Younger generations tend to be more accepting and open to these conversations, whereas with older generations there's often more hesitation, even when the intention might be good. You can feel the difference in how comfortable people are talking about identity, inclusion, and allyship depending on the environment and the people around you. (ECC)

At the same time, participants described long-standing organizational cultures and entrenched workplace norms as constraining behavioral change and limiting allyship engagement. One participant reflected that people who had "been here for twenty years are often stuck in certain ways of thinking," making it "harder to shift behaviors" within established organizational environments (BBB). These accounts suggest that moral norms shaped not only whether allyship behaviors occurred, but also how those behaviors were interpreted, judged, and evaluated over time.

Participants further emphasized that moral norms influenced whether allyship was perceived as ethically grounded or merely symbolic. When allyship aligned with broader expectations of fairness, inclusion, and accountability, participants interpreted behaviors as more credible and meaningful. Conversely, inconsistencies between stated values and observed actions frequently generated skepticism and reflection regarding authenticity and ethical commitment.

Participants frequently described comparing allyship behaviors against their own expectations of fairness, inclusion, and accountability. When actions aligned with these expectations, support was generally viewed as more meaningful and credible. In contrast, inconsistencies between stated values and observed behavior often prompted skepticism, reflection, and reassessment of trust.

4.7.2.2 Organizational Support. Participants consistently emphasized that allyship did not occur in isolation from organizational systems. Rather, leadership behaviors, workplace policies, communication practices, and organizational climates shaped whether allyship felt institutionally supported, personally risky, or left entirely to individual discretion. Across interviews, participants described workplace environments as influencing whether support felt visible, legitimate, and encouraged or whether it depended primarily on individual initiative. Many explained that organizational signals affected how comfortable people felt engaging in allyship and how credible support appeared when it was offered.

Leadership signaling emerged as particularly influential in shaping perceptions of legitimacy and safety surrounding allyship engagement. Participants described visible leadership support as reducing uncertainty and communicating that inclusion-related actions were genuinely valued within the organization. One participant explained:

If my manager sends an email to the team promoting Pride Month, that really shows this isn't just coming from corporate communications. It tells you leadership is actually willing to stand behind it, and that makes a difference in whether people feel comfortable engaging openly. (JUU)

Participants also emphasized that leadership credibility became especially meaningful when leaders absorbed personal, relational, or professional risk in support of employees. One participant described observing a manager prioritize an employee's trust and well-being over external pressures, explaining:

Her manager was willing to lose the customer rather than her trust and motivation. That told me everything. It showed that support wasn't just words or policy, it was something they were actually willing to stand behind even when there could be consequences. (SLL)

Beyond leadership signaling, participants described workplace inclusion climates and organizational practices as shaping everyday interpretations of allyship. In environments where inclusion was visibly embedded into organizational culture, participants described feeling more willing to engage openly and trust relational cues. One participant explained that visible symbols such as "a pride flag or a pride pin" immediately communicated "where they stand" and reduced uncertainty regarding psychological safety (ECC).

At the same time, inconsistencies between organizational messaging and actual practices often triggered reflection, skepticism, and emotional withdrawal. One participant explained that "saying you support inclusion is one thing" but "applying it to corporate culture is another" (BPP), highlighting the importance of alignment between symbolic commitments and organizational action. Similarly, another participant criticized organizations that publicly celebrated Pride Month while simultaneously supporting "anti-Pride organizations," explaining that "that's not allyship" (TPP). These inconsistencies frequently undermined trust and intensified perceptions of performativity.

Across interviews, participants described leadership behaviors, workplace practices, and organizational climates as shaping whether allyship felt supported, credible, and sustainable. Environments that visibly reinforced inclusion often increased trust and willingness to engage, whereas inconsistencies between organizational messaging and workplace realities frequently generated skepticism and caution. These experiences influenced how participants interpreted support and whether they felt comfortable relying on others over time.

4.7.2.3 Power Structures. Participants consistently described allyship as occurring within workplace relationships characterized by differences in authority, influence, visibility, and access to opportunities. Many explained that some individuals possessed greater organizational influence, decision-making authority, or access to resources than others, and that these differences shaped both the opportunities and limitations associated with allyship. Across interviews, participants frequently discussed how power influenced who could advocate, who could create opportunities, who could take risks, and whose voices were likely to be heard within organizational settings.

Importantly, participants emphasized that power itself did not automatically produce credible allyship. Rather, credibility depended on how power was used, particularly in moments involving advocacy, visibility, representation, or organizational consequence. Participants described allyship as especially meaningful when individuals used their influence to create opportunities, amplify voices, or provide protection in contexts where marginalized employees lacked equivalent access or authority.

One participant explained that an ally "put my name behind their project so it could get more visibility" (MLL), illustrating how power could be used to increase recognition and organizational access. Another participant described how an ally "recommended me for this conference" and "spoke up for me in places I would never have been considered for" (SSS), highlighting how advocacy extended opportunities beyond formal organizational access alone.

Participants also emphasized the importance of representation and advocacy in spaces where marginalized employees were absent or lacked influence. One participant described allyship as "knowing that you are represented well when you're not in the room" (MOO),

suggesting that credible allyship often involved extending protection and visibility into decision-making contexts where marginalized individuals could not directly advocate for themselves.

At the same time, participants emphasized that power could also constrain allyship and intensify relational risk. Several participants described situations in which individuals with authority controlled access, limited autonomy, or failed to use their influence meaningfully despite presenting themselves as supportive. One participant explained that certain individuals "didn't want to relinquish their attachment" even though "they were supposed to be helping me" (SSS), illustrating how gatekeeping behaviors undermined perceptions of allyship credibility and relational trust.

Participants further emphasized that power dynamics shaped the perceived risks associated with allyship engagement. One participant explained that employees often hesitate to intervene because they fear "they could lose their job… action against you" (AHH), highlighting how organizational power structures influenced both allies' willingness to act and marginalized employees' willingness to trust support.

Importantly, participants described power as both enabling and constraining simultaneously. While power created opportunities for advocacy, access, and representation, it also intensified vulnerability, dependency, and the potential consequences associated with failed or inconsistent allyship. Participants described power as creating both opportunities and challenges within allyship relationships. While influence and authority could be used to advocate, create access, and amplify marginalized voices, they could also increase dependency, vulnerability, and the consequences associated with inconsistent support. Across interviews, participants paid close attention to how individuals used their influence, often viewing these choices as important indicators of allyship credibility and trustworthiness.

4.7.2.4 Boundary Conditions Summary. Taken together, participants consistently described workplace contexts as influencing how allyship was experienced, interpreted, and responded to across relationships and situations. While participants often described similar patterns of awareness, action, reflection, and adaptation, they emphasized that these experiences unfolded differently depending on organizational climates, leadership behaviors, workplace norms, and power dynamics.

Participants consistently emphasized that allyship behaviors were not interpreted in isolation, but in relation to broader organizational climates, leadership signals, workplace norms, and power dynamics. These contextual conditions shaped whether emotional–relational signals were strengthened, constrained, or reinterpreted within particular environments. In supportive contexts, positive emotional signals such as trust, validation, and relational safety were more likely to foster sustained engagement and deeper relational investment. In contrast, within environments characterized by silence, weak institutional support, or heightened risk, the same positive signals often resulted in more cautious, selective, or conditional engagement.

Similarly, participants described negative emotional signals as having different consequences depending on contextual conditions. In unsupportive environments, disappointment, fear, or emotional strain frequently accelerated withdrawal, heightened vigilance, or boundary-setting. Conversely, in contexts where institutional support, leadership accountability, or inclusive norms were present, negative experiences were sometimes interpreted as opportunities for repair, dialogue, or renewed engagement rather than immediate disengagement.

Importantly, power structures played a central role in shaping these experiences by influencing both the opportunities and risks associated with allyship. Participants evaluated

allyship not only in terms of what actions occurred, but also who acted, under what conditions, and with what potential consequences. The visible use of power to advocate, create access, provide representation, or absorb risk strengthened perceptions of credibility and trustworthiness, whereas silence, gatekeeping, or selective support frequently intensified skepticism and recalibration of engagement.

Together, these accounts highlight the importance of context in shaping how allyship was understood and experienced over time. Across interviews, participants described workplace relationships as embedded within broader organizational environments that influenced how support was interpreted, how trust developed, and how engagement evolved across changing situations.

4.7.3 Summary of Mechanisms and Boundary Conditions Shaping Allyship Experiences

Across interviews, participants consistently described emotional experiences and workplace conditions as influencing how allyship was understood and experienced over time. Feelings such as trust, validation, relief, disappointment, fear, frustration, and emotional exhaustion shaped how participants interpreted interactions and responded to workplace relationships. At the same time, organizational climates, leadership behaviors, workplace norms, and power dynamics influenced whether support felt meaningful, credible, safe, or risky within particular situations.

Participants emphasized that allyship was rarely evaluated on the basis of individual actions alone. Instead, supportive behaviors were interpreted in relation to broader workplace environments, prior experiences, and the emotional responses they generated. Similar actions

were often experienced differently depending on the organizational context, the individuals involved, and whether support was accompanied by consistency, accountability, advocacy, or the willingness to absorb risk.

Across interviews, participants described emotional experiences and workplace conditions as closely interconnected. Feelings of trust and validation were often strengthened in supportive environments, whereas disappointment, uncertainty, or fear were more likely to emerge when organizational support was weak, inconsistent, or absent. Participants also emphasized the importance of power in shaping allyship experiences, particularly when individuals used their influence to create opportunities, provide representation, advocate for others, or challenge exclusionary practices.

Taken together, these findings suggest that allyship was experienced as an evolving relational process shaped by both interpersonal experiences and broader workplace contexts. Participants continuously interpreted interactions, reassessed relationships, and adjusted their engagement as new experiences emerged over time. Figure 1 summarizes the relationships among the stages, emotional experiences, and contextual influences described throughout participants' accounts.

4.8 *Identity-Related Variation in Allyship Experiences and Evaluations*

Although the Dynamic Allyship Process was evident across participants, the analysis also revealed variation in the relational cues and evaluative criteria that participants emphasized when interpreting allyship. These differences did not constitute separate allyship processes for Black, LGBTQ+, and women participants. Rather, identity-related experiences shaped which aspects of allyship became particularly salient within the shared process, including the signals participants

attended to, the risks they considered, and the criteria they emphasized when evaluating the credibility and meaning of support.

LGBTQ+ participants more frequently emphasized visibility, disclosure, and relational safety. Because sexual orientation or gender identity was not always immediately visible within workplace interactions, participants often described attending to early signals indicating whether a colleague or environment was likely to be accepting and psychologically safe. Visible symbols of inclusion, explicit expressions of support, and responses to disclosure could therefore carry particular significance in shaping expectations of allyship.

Black participants more frequently emphasized advocacy, the use of organizational power, and allies' willingness to act when support involved risk or consequence. Participants described paying particular attention to whether allies remained supportive in consequential situations, including circumstances involving leadership, advancement, organizational decisions, or potential interpersonal costs. Within these accounts, credibility was closely connected to whether expressed support translated into action when doing so required the ally to use influence or assume some degree of risk.

Women participants more frequently emphasized relational continuity, reliability, and sustained advocacy within hierarchical workplace relationships. Participants described evaluating whether support extended beyond isolated interactions and continued across career-related situations involving access, opportunity, recognition, and advancement. Consistent follow-through therefore became particularly salient in determining whether support was experienced as credible and dependable over time.

Importantly, these patterns represent differences in emphasis rather than categorical distinctions between groups. Participants across all three groups discussed safety, advocacy, consistency, authenticity, and risk. However, the relative salience of these considerations varied according to participants' identity-related experiences and workplace contexts. Identity therefore did not alter the underlying Awareness–Action–Reflection–Adaptation process; rather, it modulated how participants moved through and interpreted that process by shaping which relational cues, risks, and evaluative criteria carried particular significance.

These findings directly address the third research question by demonstrating that variation across marginalized identities was located primarily in what beneficiaries attended to and weighted most strongly when evaluating allyship, rather than in fundamentally different allyship processes. Across groups, beneficiaries engaged in a shared relational process of recognizing potential support, experiencing ally action, evaluating its meaning and credibility, and adapting subsequent engagement. Identity-related experiences shaped the interpretive lens through which that shared process unfolded.

Chapter Five: Discussion

5.1 Overview of the Dynamic Allyship Process Model

This study sets out to address a central limitation in allyship research: the tendency to conceptualize allyship primarily through allies' intentions, motivations, or supportive behaviors (Edwards, 2006; Radke et al., 2020). Building on a growing body of beneficiary-centered scholarship, the findings suggest that allyship is better understood as a relational process shaped by how supportive actions are interpreted and experienced by marginalized employees within workplace relationships (Bhattacharyya et al., 2024; Knowlton et al., 2022; Tedder-King et al., 2025; Uluğ et al., 2026). In doing so, the study extends emerging beneficiary-centered research by providing a process-oriented explanation of how allyship becomes meaningful, credible, and consequential across workplace interactions and over time.The Dynamic Allyship Process Model developed in this study offers a framework for understanding how marginalized employees make sense of allyship encounters and regulate engagement with allies over time. Rather than treating allyship as inherently beneficial or uniformly experienced, the findings demonstrate that supportive actions are interpreted through ongoing evaluations of credibility, relational meaning, emotional experience, and contextual conditions. As a result, allyship outcomes are not determined by supportive actions alone but by how those actions are understood within broader workplace relationships and organizational environments (Knowlton et al., 2022; Weick et al., 2005).

The findings further suggest that allyship is not experienced as a fixed or cumulative achievement. Instead, participants described continually revisiting, reconsidering, and responding to allyship experiences as workplace interactions unfolded. This observation extends existing allyship scholarship by highlighting the importance of interpretation, evaluation, and

adaptation in shaping allyship relationships over time (Langley et al., 2013; Weick et al., 2005). It also helps explain why similar allyship behaviors may produce different outcomes across relationships, organizational contexts, and situations.

Importantly, the model demonstrates that allyship cannot be fully understood independently of the emotional and contextual conditions surrounding workplace interactions. Participants consistently described emotional experiences and organizational environments as shaping how support was interpreted, trusted, and acted upon. Consequently, allyship emerged not simply as a set of supportive behaviors but as a relational process embedded within broader systems of power, organizational norms, and workplace relationships (Acker, 2006; Collins, 2022; Creary, 2024). Taken together, the Dynamic Allyship Process Model advances allyship theory by moving beyond static and behavior-focused conceptualizations toward a process-based understanding of how allyship is experienced and interpreted by marginalized employees. In doing so, it provides a foundation for examining how allyship relationships strengthen, weaken, stabilize, or deteriorate across workplace interactions over time (Emirbayer, 1997; Weick et al., 2005).

5.2 Reframing Allyship as an Evaluative Process

A central contribution of this study lies in extending emerging beneficiary-centered allyship scholarship by developing a dynamic and process-oriented explanation of how workplace support is interpreted, evaluated, and responded to over time. Although allyship research has devoted substantial attention to allies' motivations, identities, and supportive actions (Dang & Joshi, 2023; Edwards, 2006; Radke et al., 2020), a growing body of research has examined allyship from beneficiaries' perspectives. This scholarship demonstrates that marginalized individuals actively interpret and evaluate support, including its credibility,

responsiveness, trustworthiness, and attentiveness to unequal power relations, rather than automatically accepting supportive intentions as beneficial (Bhattacharyya et al., 2024; Knowlton et al., 2022; Tedder-King et al., 2025; Uluğ et al., 2026).

Building on this emerging scholarship, the present findings explain how beneficiary evaluations develop cumulatively across workplace interactions and become consequential for subsequent relational engagement. Participants did not evaluate allyship solely on the basis of whether supportive behaviors occurred. Instead, they interpreted those actions in relation to prior experiences, workplace context, relational expectations, and their own needs. These interpretations were continually revisited as new interactions occurred, shaping whether support became more or less credible and whether participants deepened, calibrated, or restricted subsequent engagement. The contribution of the Dynamic Allyship Process therefore lies not in introducing the beneficiary perspective itself, but in theorizing the temporal and recursive organization of beneficiary evaluation and response.

The four stages identified in the Dynamic Allyship Process help explain how these interpretations occur. Awareness reflects recognition of exclusion, inequity, and relational responsibility within workplace environments. Action captures the behaviors through which support becomes visible. However, participants rarely judged allyship on the basis of action alone. Instead, supportive behaviors became meaningful through Reflection, where participants considered what those actions signaled about commitment, accountability, and support. Adaptation demonstrates that these interpretations influenced subsequent engagement, shaping whether participants deepened involvement, remained cautious, or established clearer relational boundaries. Together, these findings extend emerging beneficiary-centered research by explaining how interpretations of support develop across repeated interactions and subsequently

shape beneficiaries' regulation of relational engagement over time (Bhattacharyya et al., 2024; Knowlton et al., 2022; Tedder-King et al., 2025; Uluğ et al.,2026). This perspective challenges dominant assumptions that allyship can be understood primarily through observable actions. Participants repeatedly emphasized that supportive behaviors alone were insufficient for establishing credibility or meaningful support. Similar actions could be experienced as helpful, performative, conditional, intrusive, or reassuring depending on how they aligned with broader relational experiences and workplace conditions. Consequently, participants relied less on isolated behaviors and more on broader patterns of interaction when interpreting allyship experiences. This finding is consistent with recent research on performative allyship, which suggests that supportive actions may be interpreted differently depending on perceived commitment, accountability, and responsiveness (Bhattacharyya et al., 2024; de Leon et al., 2024; Kalina, 2020).

The findings also highlight the importance of authenticity in shaping interpretations of allyship. Participants paid particular attention to whether supportive actions appeared consistent with broader patterns of behavior and whether support remained present during difficult situations. These observations suggest that perceptions of authenticity played an important role in how allyship was interpreted and experienced. Rather than being assumed, authenticity became something participants assessed through workplace interactions. In this respect, the findings extend prior research that has largely conceptualized authenticity as a characteristic of allies' motivations or orientations toward support (Kutlaca & Radke, 2023; Phillips et al., 2024).

Participants frequently relied on emotional signals such as trust, relief, validation, disappointment, fear, and relational strain when interpreting allyship experiences. These emotional experiences informed how support was understood and influenced subsequent

responses within workplace relationships. Positive emotional experiences often encouraged greater openness and engagement, whereas disappointment or relational strain frequently prompted caution, vigilance, or reduced reliance on others. These findings support growing recognition that allyship is closely connected to experiences of inclusion, trust, credibility, and psychological safety within workplace relationships (Bhattacharyya et al., 2024; Creary, 2024; Knowlton et al., 2022).

The findings further demonstrate that adaptation should not be understood as disengagement or passive coping. Rather, participants actively regulated engagement through processes such as relational intensification, engagement calibration, and boundary safeguarding. These responses reflected efforts to navigate workplace relationships in ways that balanced support, vulnerability, opportunity, and self-protection. This observation contributes to relational and sensemaking perspectives by illustrating how individuals actively respond to and manage workplace relationships rather than merely reacting to them (Weick et al., 2005).

Participants rarely described allyship relationships as fixed or permanently established. Instead, new interactions frequently influenced how support was interpreted and whether engagement deepened, remained cautious, or became more limited. These observations highlight the fluid nature of allyship relationships within workplace settings and suggest that perceptions of support remain responsive to workplace experiences and changing relational conditions (Langley et al., 2013).

This understanding of allyship also helps explain why supportive actions do not uniformly produce inclusion, trust, or sustained engagement. Existing literature has often struggled to explain why allyship sometimes generates skepticism, emotional exhaustion, or withdrawal despite supportive intentions (Knowlton et al., 2022; Kutlaca & Radke, 2023). The

findings suggest that such variation emerges because allyship outcomes depend not only on actions themselves, but also on how those actions are interpreted within broader relational and organizational contexts.

Taken together, the findings suggest that allyship cannot be understood through supportive actions alone. Rather, the meaning and consequences of allyship emerge through workplace relationships, emotional experiences, and organizational contexts. This perspective helps explain why similar forms of support may be experienced differently across individuals, relationships, and situations, thereby extending existing understandings of allyship within organizations (Bhattacharyya et al., 2024; Creary, 2024; Weick et al., 2005;).

5.3 Authenticity, Power, and Risk in Allyship Evaluation

The findings further advance allyship theorizing by demonstrating that evaluations of authenticity are shaped by power, ethical alignment, and perceptions of risk. While prior allyship research has acknowledged the importance of power inequalities within systems of marginalization (Collins et al., 2021), power is often treated as contextual background rather than as an active feature of allyship evaluation. In contrast, the findings of this study suggest that authenticity and credibility are evaluated most intensely in situations where power, consequence, and vulnerability become visible within workplace interactions.

Participants consistently emphasized that allyship became most meaningful when individuals used positional influence, organizational authority, or relational capital in ways that involved potential cost, discomfort, or consequence. Consequently, authenticity judgments were not based simply on verbal expressions of support or symbolic alignment, but on whether allies remained consistent when situations involved interpersonal tension, organizational risk, or

redistribution of opportunity and protection. Moments involving advocacy, conflict, visibility, or potential backlash therefore carried heightened evaluative weight because they revealed whether allyship extended beyond low-risk affirmation into consequential relational action (Detert & Edmondson, 2011).

This finding extends prior allyship literature by suggesting that authenticity is assessed through patterns of interaction rather than through isolated supportive acts alone (Goffman, 1949; Weick et al., 2005). Participants paid particular attention to whether allies' actions aligned with stated values and whether support remained present under consequential conditions. These observations complement existing work on authenticity by highlighting how credibility is established through consistency between values and behavior (Alvesson & Einola, 2019).

The findings also reposition power as relationally evaluated rather than structurally fixed. Participants assessed not merely whether individuals possessed organizational influence, but whether they used that influence in ways that redistributed opportunity, amplified marginalized voices, provided representation, or absorbed risk within workplace contexts. Power therefore became meaningful through how it was enacted and interpreted within workplace relationships. Allies who visibly leveraged influence in support of marginalized employees were often perceived as more credible and trustworthy because their actions demonstrated alignment between values and behavior under consequential conditions.

At the same time, the findings demonstrate that power could also constrain allyship and intensify skepticism. Participants frequently described situations in which organizational hierarchies, gatekeeping, institutional silence, or risk avoidance weakened perceptions of credibility despite outward expressions of support. In these contexts, performative or inconsistent allyship frequently generated disappointment, heightened vigilance, or protective withdrawal

because marginalized employees interpreted silence or inaction as revealing the limits of allies' willingness to act when consequences became personally meaningful (Ahmed, 2012).

Importantly, the findings further suggest that ethical alignment functioned as a critical evaluative dimension through which marginalized employees distinguished between performative and credible allyship (Creary, 2024). Participants assessed whether supportive behaviors reflected broader moral commitments or merely situational positioning. Organizational inconsistencies between inclusion rhetoric and actual practices frequently intensified reflection regarding whether allyship was ethically grounded or strategically symbolic. Consequently, allyship credibility depended not only on interpersonal support, but also on whether actions aligned with broader ethical commitments across contexts and situations.

The findings additionally demonstrate that contextual conditions shaped how authenticity and credibility were interpreted across organizational environments. Supportive climates lowered thresholds for trust and engagement, whereas high-risk environments intensified scrutiny regarding whether allies would remain consistent under pressure. In this way, authenticity evaluations were shaped not only by interpersonal interactions, but also by organizational norms, power asymmetries, and perceived consequences associated with engagement (Meyerson & Scully, 1995).

Taken together, the findings position authenticity, power, and risk as closely interconnected elements of allyship evaluation. Credibility was shaped by whether allies remained ethically aligned, emotionally reliable, and behaviorally consistent under consequential conditions. These findings suggest that allyship is evaluated not simply in terms of supportive intent, but in relation to how support is enacted when meaningful consequences, power differentials, and organizational pressures are present.

5.4 Contextual and Identity-Based Modulation of Allyship

The third research question examined how identity-related experiences shaped participants' expectations, interpretations, and evaluations of allyship. The findings indicate that identity did not produce fundamentally different allyship processes; rather, it influenced the relative salience of the relational cues and evaluative criteria through which beneficiaries interpreted support.

While participants described similar patterns of Awareness, Action, Reflection, and Adaptation across workplace relationships, the criteria used to evaluate allyship varied across identities and contexts. These differences were reflected not in the process itself, but in how support was interpreted, what counted as credible allyship, and which relational signals carried the greatest evaluative weight (Crenshaw, 1989).

Across LGBTQ+, Black, and women participants, allyship was assessed through different relational concerns shaped by lived experiences of marginalization. LGBTQ+ participants more frequently emphasized symbolic visibility cues and early indicators of safety, particularly in situations involving disclosure and interpersonal uncertainty. Visible signs of inclusion, such as pride symbols or explicit statements of support, often served as important signals regarding whether engagement felt psychologically safe. Black participants more frequently emphasized whether allies acted under conditions of organizational risk, reflecting heightened attention to the credibility of support in contexts involving power, consequence, and accountability. Women participants more commonly emphasized sustained relational follow-through, reliability, and ongoing advocacy within hierarchical workplace relationships.

Importantly, these differences do not suggest separate allyship processes for different identity groups. Rather, they indicate that similar allyship behaviors may be interpreted through different evaluative lenses shaped by experiences of vulnerability, exclusion, and relational risk (Collins et al., 2021). Identity therefore influenced how participants interpreted credibility, trustworthiness, and support within the process rather than altering the process itself.

A similar pattern emerged across national contexts. Participants from both Canada and the United States described comparable patterns of allyship engagement and evaluation. However, differences emerged in the aspects of allyship that participants emphasized when assessing support. U.S. participants more frequently discussed systemic inequity, public advocacy, and support under conditions of organizational or political risk (Creary, 2024). Canadian participants more commonly emphasized interpersonal trust-building, relational continuity, reciprocity, and collaborative engagement within workplace relationships.

These findings suggest that context influences how allyship is interpreted and what forms of support are most salient within particular environments. Organizational climates, leadership signals, workplace norms, and power structures shaped whether support was experienced as legitimate, psychologically safe, or risky (Johns, 2006). As a result, similar allyship behaviors could carry different meanings depending on the surrounding organizational and social context.

Taken together, the findings indicate that variation in allyship lies less in the existence of different processes and more in the evaluative criteria through which support is interpreted. Although participants described similar patterns of engagement across identities and national contexts, the signals used to assess credibility, safety, and meaningful support varied according to identity-related experiences and contextual conditions. This perspective helps reconcile

common process patterns with differences in how allyship is experienced across workplace settings.

5.5 Conclusion

This study contributes to allyship scholarship by explaining how marginalized employees experience and interpret workplace support. The findings demonstrate that allyship cannot be understood solely through supportive actions, intentions, or identities. Rather, the meaning and consequences of allyship emerge through workplace relationships and the ways support is interpreted within organizational contexts.

By examining allyship from the perspective of marginalized employees, this study offers a process-oriented understanding of how workplace support becomes meaningful, credible, and consequential. The findings show that allyship is not uniformly experienced and that similar forms of support may be interpreted differently depending on relational experiences, organizational environments, and contextual circumstances. Together, these findings extend existing allyship research by shifting attention from ally enactment to allyship experience. In doing so, the study provides a foundation for future research examining allyship, inclusion, and workplace relationships, while offering a more nuanced understanding of how support is experienced within organizational life.

Chapter Six: Implications

6.1 Theoretical Implications

This study contributes to allyship scholarship by developing a beneficiary-centered and process-based theory explaining how allyship is interpreted, evaluated, and regulated over time. Building on emerging research that has already established the importance of beneficiaries' perspectives (Bhattacharyya et al., 2024; Tedder-King et al., 2025; Uluğ et al., 2026), the study advances this literature by theorizing how beneficiary evaluations unfold recursively across repeated workplace interactions. Specifically, the findings explain how experiences of allyship generate emotional–relational signals, inform judgments of authenticity and ethical alignment, and shape subsequent decisions to intensify, calibrate, or restrict engagement with allies.

More broadly, the findings reposition allyship as a dynamic, recursive, and context-sensitive relational process shaped through emotional–relational feedback, organizational conditions, and power dynamics. In this way, the contribution lies not in introducing beneficiary evaluation as a consideration, but in integrating beneficiary evaluation, temporal development, relational adaptation, and organizational context within a coherent process theory of workplace allyship.

6.1.1 Allyship as a Beneficiary-Centered and Evaluative Process

A central contribution of this study lies in extending emerging beneficiary-centered allyship scholarship by developing a dynamic and process-oriented explanation of beneficiary evaluation. Although substantial attention in the allyship literature has focused on allies' motivations, identities, and supportive actions (Edwards, 2006; Radke et al., 2020; Warren & Warren, 2023), a growing body of research has demonstrated the importance of examining

allyship from the perspective of those receiving support (; Bhattacharyya et al., 2024; Knowlton et al., 2022; Tedder-King et al., 2025). This scholarship demonstrates that supportive intent or visible advocacy does not necessarily translate into meaningful or beneficial experiences for marginalized individuals. The present study builds on this emerging work by explaining how beneficiary evaluations develop across repeated workplace interactions and become consequential for subsequent relational engagement.

The present findings further demonstrate that allyship is not inherently meaningful upon enactment. Rather, allyship becomes consequential through marginalized employees' ongoing evaluations of credibility, emotional safety, ethical alignment, and relational consistency over time. Participants did not passively receive allyship as supportive by default. Instead, they actively interpreted and compared allyship experiences across interactions, drawing on prior experiences, relational expectations, and contextual conditions when determining whether support was credible and meaningful.

Participants' accounts also provide insight into how allyship itself was understood from the beneficiary perspective. Their descriptions encompassed both relational and behavioral dimensions, including listening, emotional support, psychological safety, advocacy, amplification, and the willingness to use influence on behalf of marginalized colleagues. Importantly, participants did not equate the performance of these behaviors with allyship automatically. Rather, supportive actions acquired meaning through beneficiaries' evaluations of their consistency, responsiveness, genuineness, and alignment with their needs, particularly across repeated interactions and situations involving relational or professional risk. Participants' understandings therefore reflected allyship as relational, behavioral, and evaluative: it involved supportive relationships and meaningful action, but whether those actions came to be

experienced as allyship depended on how they were interpreted and evaluated within the relationship. This distinction is central to the Dynamic Allyship Process because it suggests that allyship is not constituted solely by a fixed identity or discrete set of supportive behaviors; rather, its relational meaning is continually constructed and reassessed through beneficiary experience, Importantly, participants rarely interpreted allyship through isolated supportive acts. Instead, meaning was shaped through patterns of interaction and assessments of whether values, behaviors, and relational responses remained aligned across situations. Participants paid particular attention to consistency between what allies expressed and how they responded when support became consequential.

Accordingly, the study extends existing discussions of authenticity by demonstrating that credibility was shaped through participants' interpretations of workplace interactions (Alvesson & Einola, 2019). Participants paid particular attention to whether allies remained consistent when support involved organizational visibility, interpersonal tension, or professional risk. These findings suggest that perceptions of authenticity were closely connected to consistency between expressed values and enacted support under consequential conditions.

The findings further demonstrate that trust within allyship relationships is not automatically granted through supportive interaction, but recursively constructed through ongoing evaluations of emotional safety, ethical alignment, consistency, and willingness to act under risk. This extends organizational trust scholarship (Mayer et al., 1995) by demonstrating that trust within allyship relationships is dynamic, conditional, and continuously updated through interaction rather than established through goodwill alone.

The findings further highlight the importance of emotional experiences in shaping allyship engagement. Experiences of relational safety, identity affirmation, and relational strain

influenced how participants interpreted support and responded within workplace relationships. These findings suggest that emotions are not simply outcomes of allyship, but important elements of how support is experienced and acted upon (Saab et al., 2015; Uluğ et al., 2026).

Importantly, the findings demonstrate that adaptation should not be understood as passive response or disengagement alone. Marginalized employees actively intensified, calibrated, or safeguarded engagement in response to accumulated evaluations of authenticity, emotional–relational impact, and contextual risk. This extends emotional labor scholarship (Grandey, 2000; Hochschild, 1983) by demonstrating that emotional regulation occurs not only in response to exclusion or discrimination, but also in response to uncertainty surrounding whether allyship itself can be safely trusted and sustained over time.

Taken together, these findings reposition allyship as an evolving relational process continuously negotiated through interpretation, emotional feedback, and credibility evaluation rather than as a stable set of supportive behaviors or ally characteristics. In doing so, the study advances a more processual understanding of how allyship relationships strengthen, stabilize, weaken, or fracture across workplace interactions over time.

6.1.2 Context, Power, and Conditional Credibility in Allyship

The study further advances allyship scholarship by theorizing contextual conditions and power dynamics as central to how allyship becomes credible, meaningful, and sustainable. Existing allyship literature frequently acknowledges organizational culture and structural inequality as background features of allyship (Collins et al., 2021), yet rarely explains how these conditions shape allyship evaluation itself. The present findings demonstrate that moral norms,

organizational support, leadership signaling, and power structures fundamentally shaped how allyship was interpreted across interactions and contexts.

Importantly, the findings suggest that power did not merely shape whether allyship could occur but also shaped how allyship itself was evaluated. Participants assessed allyship most critically in situations where allies possessed the capacity to absorb organizational risk, challenge inequity, or leverage institutional influence. Consequently, credibility depended not simply on supportive intent, but on whether power was used consistently and ethically under consequential conditions.

This extends relational inequality perspectives (Acker, 2006) by demonstrating that allyship evaluation is embedded within organizational systems of legitimacy, visibility, accountability, and consequences. Participants assessed not only whether allies possessed influence, but whether that influence was used in ways that supported marginalized employees under consequential conditions.

The findings further demonstrate that contextual conditions shaped how emotional–relational signals were interpreted across organizational environments. Similar allyship behaviors were evaluated differently depending on organizational climate, leadership consistency, institutional accountability, and perceived professional risk. Supportive organizational climates often lowered thresholds for trust and engagement, whereas high-risk environments intensified scrutiny regarding whether allyship could genuinely be relied upon under pressure.

Importantly, these findings suggest that allyship cannot be understood independently from the broader organizational systems within which it unfolds. Organizational climates, leadership signals, institutional accountability, and perceived professional risks shaped how

support was interpreted and whether it was experienced as credible or meaningful. In this respect, allyship evaluation was influenced by both interpersonal interactions and organizational context.

The broader sociopolitical context in which these findings emerged should also be acknowledged. Data collection coincided with heightened debate and uncertainty surrounding diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in the United States following federal executive actions in early 2025, including Executive Orders 14151 and 14173, which introduced significant changes to federal DEI policies and increased scrutiny of DEI-related practices beyond the federal government (Executive Order No. 14151, 2025; Executive Order No. 14173, 2025). Although this study was not designed to examine the effects of these political developments directly, this evolving sociopolitical climate may have heightened the salience of organizational support, power, relational risk, and the perceived authenticity of allyship, reinforcing the importance of understanding workplace allyship within its broader institutional and political context.

Viewed collectively, the findings reposition allyship as a dynamic and context-sensitive process in which authenticity, emotional safety, and credibility are continuously constructed under conditions of power, uncertainty, and relational risk. The study therefore contributes to allyship scholarship by explaining not only how allyship is enacted, but how it becomes trusted, sustained, questioned, recalibrated, or withdrawn over time.

6.2 Practical Implications

This study offers important implications for organizations seeking to develop more effective and sustainable allyship and inclusion practices. The findings suggest that organizations should move beyond awareness-based interventions and symbolic expressions of support toward

practices that foster credibility, accountability, and meaningful engagement. This may involve equipping employees and managers with practical skills to recognize and respond to exclusion, creating psychologically safe mechanisms for marginalized employees to communicate their needs and provide feedback, and establishing expectations that supportive commitments are followed by consistent action. Organizations can further reinforce credible allyship by recognizing advocacy and inclusive behavior in leadership expectations and performance practices, providing opportunities for employees to practice allyship in context-specific scenarios, and holding leaders accountable for responding when exclusion or inequity occurs. Such practices shift the emphasis from demonstrating awareness or expressing supportive intentions to creating conditions in which allyship is enacted consistently, responsively, and meaningfully over time.

6.2.1 Moving Beyond Behavior-Based Allyship

A central practical implication of the findings is that awareness alone is insufficient to produce credible allyship. Many organizational initiatives focus on bias awareness, inclusive language, or encouraging supportive behaviors. However, participants emphasized that support was evaluated not through isolated actions, but through consistency, follow-through, and responses during consequential situations. These findings suggest that organizations should move beyond symbolic allyship initiatives and instead invest in practices that reinforce accountability, credibility, and visible support when challenges arise.

From a practical perspective, leadership development and allyship training should focus not only on awareness and intention, but also on the capacity to respond effectively under conditions involving conflict, exclusion, or organizational risk. Practice-based learning approaches, such as simulations, facilitated reflection, case discussions, and scenario-based

exercises, may therefore be more effective than one-time awareness interventions in developing sustainable allyship capability.

Leadership plays a particularly important role in this process. When leaders demonstrate consistent, risk-bearing allyship, they not only build relational credibility but also signal that such behavior is institutionally expected and supported. Conversely, inconsistencies between stated organizational values and leaders' enacted behaviors may undermine trust and increase perceptions of performative allyship. The findings further suggest that organizations should embed allyship accountability into leadership evaluation, promotion, and managerial development systems. Because participants evaluated allyship most critically under consequential conditions, organizations should reinforce not only inclusive values, but also visible accountability for how leaders respond to inequity, conflict, exclusion, and relational risk in practice (Uluğ et al., 2026).

6.2.2 Emotional–Relational Safety and Hidden Labor

The findings further demonstrate that allyship relationships are shaped by emotional–relational dynamics that organizations frequently underestimate. Emotional–relational signals, including relational safety, identity affirmation, and relational strain, functioned as critical feedback mechanisms through which marginalized employees interpreted allyship and determined whether continued engagement felt safe or sustainable.

Importantly, the findings suggest that organizations frequently underestimate the emotional labor associated with navigating allyship relationships. Marginalized employees were often required to monitor credibility, regulate disclosure, assess relational safety, and determine whether engagement with allies felt worthwhile and sustainable. Consequently, allyship itself

could become a site of interpretive and emotional work rather than simply a source of support or inclusion.

This finding has important implications for organizational inclusion practices. Allyship initiatives that rely heavily on marginalized employees to educate others, validate intentions, or continually assess relational safety may unintentionally reproduce emotional strain rather than alleviate it. Organizations should therefore ensure that responsibility for relational learning, accountability, and inclusion work is not disproportionately shifted onto marginalized employees themselves.

Organizations should also treat emotional–relational climate as an important indicator of inclusion. Feedback systems, listening mechanisms, psychological safety assessments, and regular opportunities for dialogue may help identify emerging concerns before disengagement or mistrust become entrenched. Importantly, reduced engagement or guarded participation should not automatically be interpreted as resistance or lack of commitment. Rather, such responses may reflect efforts to manage uncertainty, emotional strain, or concerns about credibility within workplace relationships.

Accordingly, organizations should create opportunities not only for allyship enactment, but also for accountability, relational repair, and trust rebuilding when support is perceived as inconsistent or insufficient. This may include creating psychologically safe channels for employees to raise concerns about ineffective or harmful support, encouraging allies and leaders to acknowledge missteps rather than respond defensively, and providing structured opportunities for dialogue, feedback, and follow-up after difficult workplace interactions. Managers can support relational repair by acknowledging harm, listening to the affected employee's needs, agreeing on appropriate corrective actions, and demonstrating through subsequent behavior that

feedback has resulted in meaningful change. Organizations can further reinforce accountability by establishing clear expectations for inclusive behavior and ensuring that concerns about exclusion or failed support receive timely and consistent follow-up. Inclusion is therefore strengthened not through isolated supportive acts or expectations of perfect allyship, but through organizational and relational processes that enable accountability, learning, repair, and the rebuilding of trust over time.

6.2.3 Context, Power, and Relational Risk

The findings further demonstrate that allyship cannot be understood independently from the broader organizational and institutional contexts within which it unfolds. Organizational practices, leadership signaling, inclusion climates, and power structures shaped whether allyship was perceived as legitimate, credible, safe, or risky. Importantly, the findings suggest that organizations should understand allyship engagement as inherently shaped by relational and organizational risk. Marginalized employees continuously assessed whether speaking openly, trusting others, or engaging deeply with allies might expose them to interpersonal, emotional, reputational, or professional consequences. As a result, allyship engagement was often cautious, conditional, and context-sensitive rather than automatically open or trusting.

This implies that organizations should move beyond assuming that encouraging ally behaviors alone is sufficient to foster inclusion. Instead, organizations must create environments in which vulnerability, disclosure, dissent, and risk-bearing are meaningfully supported rather than implicitly penalized. Inclusion efforts are therefore unlikely to succeed when organizations reward symbolic support while failing to protect employees from the relational or professional consequences associated with speaking up or challenging inequity.

The findings further demonstrate that power structures shaped not only whether allyship occurred, but also how allyship itself was evaluated. Participants assessed allyship most critically in situations where allies possessed the authority, influence, or institutional access necessary to absorb risk or challenge inequity. Consequently, organizations should recognize that allyship credibility is strongly tied to how power is used in consequential situations, rather than to supportive language or symbolic gestures alone.

Finally, the study suggests that effective allyship cannot be implemented through one-size-fits-all approaches. Although the underlying allyship process appeared structurally consistent across participants, the evaluative criteria through which allyship was interpreted varied across identity groups and organizational contexts. LGBTQ+ participants more frequently emphasized visibility and relational safety, women emphasized reliability and advocacy within hierarchical interactions, and Black participants placed greater emphasis on ethical consistency and action under conditions of institutional or interpersonal risk.

Organizations should therefore avoid prescribing uniform allyship behaviors and instead support context-sensitive practices that enable credible, consistent, and locally meaningful forms of engagement. Overall, the findings suggest that organizations should move beyond treating allyship as a stand-alone initiative and instead embed it within broader leadership, inclusion, and accountability practices. Sustainable allyship requires organizational environments that support credibility, psychological safety, responsible use of power, and meaningful engagement across workplace relationships.

Chapter Seven: Limitations and Future Research

7.1 Methodological and Design Limitations

As with all qualitative, theory-building research, this study has limitations that also point to important opportunities for future inquiry. Rather than undermining the contribution of the Dynamic Allyship Process, these limitations clarify its scope and highlight avenues for theoretical refinement, empirical extension, and methodological advancement. The data for this study were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted at a single point in time. Although participants frequently reflected on prior experiences and described changes in trust, credibility, and engagement "over time," the study does not constitute a longitudinal design. As a result, the Dynamic Allyship Process captures retrospective and narrated temporality rather than observed behavioral change across multiple time points.

Future research could extend this framework using longitudinal, diary-based, or experience sampling designs to trace allyship interactions as they unfold in real time. Such approaches would allow scholars to examine how allyship relationships evolve across different situations and organizational contexts. They may also provide greater insight into how trust, engagement, and support develop, stabilize, or change across workplace relationships.

In addition, this study centers the perspectives of marginalized employees and does not include data from self-identified allies. This analytic choice was intentional and theoretically grounded, as the study aimed to foreground beneficiary evaluation in allyship research. However, the absence of ally perspectives limits the ability to examine interactional alignment or misalignment between ally intent and recipient interpretation.

Future research could build on emerging multi-perspective allyship scholarship by examining allies and beneficiaries within matched or shared relational contexts and across repeated interactions over time. Rather than examining ally and beneficiary perspectives independently, such designs could investigate how allies' intentions and interpretations correspond with beneficiaries' evaluations of the same allyship encounters, and how alignment or misalignment between these perspectives shapes subsequent relational engagement. Longitudinal research could further examine how these evaluations change as allyship relationships develop, particularly following moments of inconsistency, perceived inauthenticity, or relational harm. This approach would provide greater insight into allyship breakdown and repair processes, including when accountability and behavioral adaptation are sufficient to rebuild trust and when relational damage persists despite subsequent supportive efforts.

7.2 Contextual and Sample Limitations

The sample consisted of LGBTQ+, women, and Black professionals working primarily in North American organizational contexts. While this enabled rich cross-group comparison and insight into identity-sensitive evaluation, the findings may not fully capture how allyship is experienced in different cultural, institutional, or occupational settings.

Future research could examine how the Dynamic Allyship Process operates in non-Western contexts, organizations with alternative power structures, or sectors such as healthcare, education, or frontline work, where visibility, vulnerability, accountability, and risk may be differently configured. Comparative studies could further explore how moral norms, organizational support, leadership signaling, and power structures shape the criteria through which allyship is interpreted and evaluated across institutional environments.

Additionally, while this study identifies identity-specific emphases within a shared relational process, it does not fully explore intersectional variation across dimensions such as disability, immigration status, religion, Indigeneity, or socioeconomic class. Future research could therefore extend the framework to how multiple, intersecting forms of marginalization shape experiences of allyship across workplace relationships.

The findings also suggest opportunities for future intervention-based research. Scholars could investigate organizational practices designed to support credible allyship, including leadership accountability systems, structured reflection practices, relational feedback mechanisms, and processes for ongoing repair and trust rebuilding. Examining how such interventions influence perceptions of support, trust, credibility, and engagement would strengthen understanding of how allyship develops within organizations over time.

7.3 Theoretical Scope and Boundary Conditions

Although the framework developed in this study conceptualizes allyship as a workplace-based relational process, it does not claim universality across all relational domains. The framework is grounded specifically in organizational contexts characterized by hierarchical power, institutional structures, and workplace accountability systems. Allyship in activist, community, familial, or informal relational settings may involve different evaluative logics, forms of accountability, emotional expectations, and configurations of risk.

Importantly, the model should not be interpreted as proposing a fixed or universally sequenced pathway through Awareness, Action, Reflection, and Adaptation. Rather, the framework captures a recurring process architecture through which allyship is interpreted and regulated over time. Consistent with process theorizing approaches (Langley, 1999; Langley et

al., 2013), the present study prioritizes explanatory process architecture over predictive generalizability, emphasizing how allyship unfolds relationally across interactions and contexts rather than establishing universal causal sequencing.

Future research could further refine understanding of how perceptions of authenticity develop and change across workplace interactions, particularly in situations involving advocacy, risk, or organizational consequence. While this study conceptualizes authenticity as cumulative and conditional, it does not directly observe how such judgments form, stabilize, weaken, or shift in real time. Longitudinal and experimental research could examine how patterns of alignment across interactions, particularly consistency under conditions of risk, shape authenticity evaluations and whether specific forms of risk-bearing action exert disproportionate influence on trust, engagement, and relational durability.

Moreover, although the framework identifies emotional–relational impact as a central mechanism, it does not yet fully theorize how these relational evaluations accumulate into longer-term structural outcomes such as advancement, retention, promotion, organizational attachment, or career mobility. Future research could examine how workplace support influences longer-term outcomes such as retention, advancement, organizational commitment, and career mobility. Doing so would strengthen understanding of how interpersonal experiences of support connect to broader organizational outcomes.

The study also opens opportunities to extend the beneficiary-centered perspective advanced here to other forms of organizational support, such as mentoring, sponsorship, leadership development, or employee advocacy relationships. Doing so would contribute to a broader reconceptualization of inclusion as a relational process evaluated by those most affected rather than solely by those occupying positions of institutional power.

Finally, although this study examined identity-related variation in allyship experiences and evaluations, it was not designed to provide an exhaustive comparative or intersectional analysis of within- and between-group differences. The identity-related patterns identified in this study should therefore be understood as differences in evaluative emphasis within a shared process rather than as fixed characteristics of Black, LGBTQ+, or women participants. Future research could examine these variations more systematically within and across identity groups, particularly in relation to context-specific experiences of power, visibility, marginalization, and relational risk.

Taken together, these limitations and future directions highlight opportunities to extend understanding of how workplace support is experienced and interpreted by marginalized employees. While the present study offers a process-oriented framework grounded in participants' experiences, additional research is needed to examine allyship across different contexts, identities, organizational settings, and methodological approaches. Continued inquiry in these areas will help refine understanding of how support becomes meaningful, credible, and sustainable within workplace relationships and contribute to broader scholarship on inclusion, equity, and organizational life.

Chapter Eight: Conclusion

This dissertation examined how marginalized employees experience, interpret, evaluate, and respond to workplace allyship over time. Drawing on a constructivist grounded theory analysis of the experiences of Black, LGBTQ+, and women employees, the study conceptualizes allyship not as a discrete supportive behavior or a stable identity held by an ally, but as a dynamic relational process whose meaning is continually evaluated by beneficiaries across workplace interactions. The resulting framework demonstrates how Awareness, Action, Reflection, and Adaptation operate recursively as marginalized employees interpret support, assess its emotional and relational consequences, and determine how to engage with allyship relationships over time. These evaluations are shaped by organizational conditions, power dynamics, perceived risk, and identity-related experiences, helping explain why similar ally behaviors may be experienced as credible and meaningful in some circumstances but insufficient, performative, or even harmful in others.

By centering beneficiaries' interpretations, this dissertation extends existing allyship scholarship beyond questions of ally intention and behavior toward an understanding of how allyship acquires, maintains, or loses legitimacy in relationships over time. Across identity groups, participants described a shared relational process, while identity and context influenced the cues and evaluative criteria that became particularly salient within that process. Ultimately, the findings suggest that effective allyship is not established through a single action or claimed identity. Rather, its credibility is continually constructed through consistent, responsive, and contextually meaningful action, particularly when support involves risk, power, or consequence. Understanding allyship in this way positions marginalized employees not simply as recipients of

support, but as active interpreters whose experiences and evaluations ultimately shape whether allyship becomes trusted, sustained, and relationally meaningful.

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Appendix A

Interview Protocol

1. Can you briefly describe your current role, department, and daily responsibilities?
2. What is allyship to you? (or what is your definition of allyship?)
3. How do you recognize if someone is being an ally at work?
4. What does genuine allyship look like to you?
5. From your perspective, what are the characteristics of inauthentic allyship?

6. Can you share a time when someone showed up as an ally for you in a meaningful way?
    - What did they do?
    - How did you feel as being supported in this way?
    - What behaviors of your ally triggered your emotions?
    - What were the aspects (things that you like in this allyship) that made this experience positive?
    - What was your reaction to the allyship? (or how did your respond to the allyship?)
    - Do your responses to allyship behavior, change the way you feel about this person or team or workplace?

7. Can you share an experience where someone tried to be an ally, but it ended up being a negative experience for you?
    - What did they do?
    - How did you feel?
    - What specifically triggered your emotions?
    - What were the aspects that made this experience negative?
    - What was your reaction to the allyship? (or how did your respond to the allyship?) (whether they withdraw or not)
    - Do your responses to allyship behavior, change the way you feel about this person or team or workplace?

*If they don't have negative experience, ask whether they have witnessed it.

8. What do you expect from an ally has it changed over time?

9. As a receiver of allyship, under what conditions (when and how) do you choose to engage in and withdraw from allyship efforts?

    - If yes: Can you describe a moment when allyship was particularly effective in your workplace? What made it successful?
    - If no: Can you describe a moment when allyship was particularly ineffective in your workplace? What made it unsuccessful?

Closing (5 mins)

- What advice would you give to someone who wants to be a better ally?
- Is there anything else you'd like to share about allyship in your workplace?

Probe Questions

Clarifying probes

- Can you tell me more about that situation?
- What exactly happened in that moment?
- What did the person say or do?

Interpretation probes

- How did you interpret their actions at the time?
- What made you see that behavior as allyship (or not)?
- What made that experience feel genuine or inauthentic?

Emotional response probes

- How did that interaction make you feel?
- Did your feelings change over time?
- What part of the interaction triggered that reaction?

Relational impact probes

- Did this experience affect how you viewed that person?
- Did it change your relationship with them?
- Did it affect how you engage with others at work?

Agency / boundary probes

- Did you respond or react in any way?
- Did you choose to engage more or step back afterward?
- What influenced your decision to continue or withdraw from that interaction?

Contextual probes

- Were there organizational factors that shaped what happened?
- Did power dynamics play a role in that situation?
- Would the situation have been different in another context?

Demographic Questions

1. Gender Identity

- What is your gender identity? (Select all that apply)
    - ☐ Woman She
    - ☐ Man
    - ☐ Non-binary / Genderqueer
    - ☐ Prefer to self-describe: _____
    - ☐ Prefer not to say

2. Sexual Orientation

- How do you describe your sexual orientation?
  - ☐ Heterosexual / Straight
  - ☐ Lesbian
  - ☐ Gay (Gay)
  - ☐ Bisexual
  - ☐ Queer
  - ☐ Prefer to self-describe: _____
  - ☐ Prefer not to say

3. Racial and/or Ethnic Identity

- What is your racial or ethnic background? (Select all that apply)
  - ☐ Black / African / African American/Afro-Caribbean
  - ☐ Hispanic / Latino/a/x
  - ☐ Indigenous / First Nations / Native American
  - ☐ East Asian
  - ☐ South Asian
  - ☐ Southeast Asian (Indian)
  - ☐ Middle Eastern / North African
  - ☐ White / White
  - ☐ Multiracial or Multiethnic
  - ☐ Prefer to self-describe: _____
  - ☐ Prefer not to say

4. Disability Status

- Do you identify as a person with a disability (visible or invisible)?
  - ☐ Yes
  - ☐ No
  - ☐ Prefer not to say

5. Age Group

- What is your age range?
  - ☐ Under 25
  - ☐ 25–34
  - ☐ 35–44
  - ☐ 45–54
  - ☐ 55–64
  - ☐ 65 or over
  - ☐ Prefer not to say

6. Tenure

- How long have you been with your current organization?
  - ☐ Less than 1 year

- ☐ 1–3 years
- ☐ 4–6 years
- ☐ 7–10 years
- ☐ Over 10 year

Appendix B

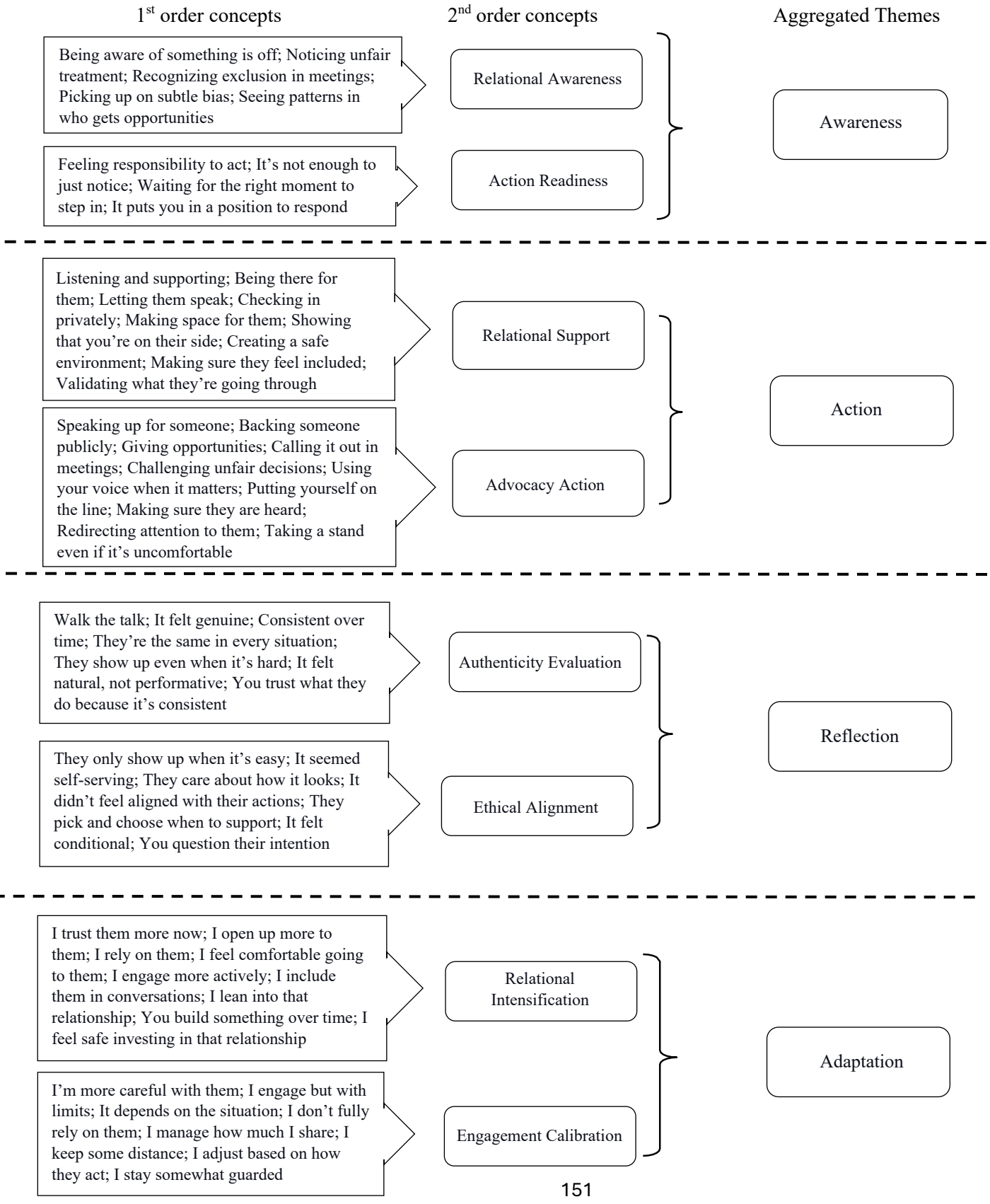
Detailed Participant Characteristics (*N* = 50)

Pseudonym	Equity Group	Country	Age	Industry	Job Function	Job Level	Ethnic Identity
OEE	Black	Canada	25–34	Manufacturing	Supply Chain	Supervisor	Black
RNN	Black	Canada	45–54	Consultancy	Consulting	Manager	Black
MOO	Black	USA	Under 25	Manufacturing	Engineering	Supervisor	Black
SL11	Black	Canada	35–44	Manufacturing	Commercial	Director	Black
UOO	Black	Canada	25–34	Oil & Gas	Commercial	Manager	Black
AH11	Black	Canada	45–54	Oil & Gas	Retail	Manager	Black
DMM	Black	Canada	35–44	Finance	Retail	Manager	Black
DHH	Black	USA	25–34	Manufacturing	Operations	Individual Contributor	Black
NEE	Black	Canada	35–44	Finance	Finance	Manager	Black
KOO	Black	Canada	25–34	Manufacturing	Operations	Supervisor	Black
AMM	Black	USA	45–54	Oil & Gas	Supply Chain	Manager	Black
MLL	Black	USA	45–54	Oil & Gas	Communication	Vice President	Black
SS11	Black	USA	45–54	Oil & Gas	Commercial	Manager	Black
TSS	Black	Canada	35–44	Manufacturing	Retail	Manager	Black
MTT	Black	Canada	45–54	Manufacturing	Retail	Manager	Black
AA11	LGBTQ+	Canada	45–54	Technology	IT	Manager	White
MAA	LGBTQ+	USA	45–54	Finance	Finance	Manager	White

Pseudonym	Equity Group	Country	Age	Industry	Job Function	Job Level	Ethnic Identity
RKK	LGBTQ+	USA	35–44	Technology	Finance	Manager	Hispanic
AA22	LGBTQ+	Canada	35–44	Manufacturing	Operations	Manager	Hispanic
RGG	LGBTQ+	Canada	35–44	Oil & Gas	HR	Individual Contributor	Hispanic
VHH	LGBTQ+	Canada	35–44	Consultancy	Consulting	Director	Hispanic
MJJ	LGBTQ+	Canada	35–44	Consultancy	Consulting	Manager	White
JUU	LGBTQ+	USA	Under 25	Oil & Gas	R&D	Individual Contributor	White
LMM	LGBTQ+	USA	35–44	Oil & Gas	HR	Individual Contributor	Hispanic
TPP	LGBTQ+	Canada	55–64	Manufacturing	Operations	Individual Contributor	White
PMM	LGBTQ+	Canada	25–34	Finance	Finance	Director	White
SHH	LGBTQ+	Canada	Under 25	Oil & Gas	Engineering	Individual Contributor	White
ECC	LGBTQ+	Canada	25–34	Oil & Gas	Engineering	Individual Contributor	White
HII	LGBTQ+	USA	25–34	Consultancy	Consulting	Individual Contributor	White
KAA	LGBTQ+	Canada	25–34	Technology	Consulting	Manager	Hispanic
MRR	Women	USA	35–44	Consultancy	Health & Safety	Manager	Hispanic
AH22	Women	Canada	55–64	Oil & Gas	HR	Vice President	Middle Eastern
ATT	Women	Canada	35–44	Technology	HR	Individual Contributor	Middle Eastern
JJJ	Women	USA	35–44	Manufacturing	Communication	Individual Contributor	White
PTT	Women	USA	55–64	Consumer Goods	Finance	Individual Contributor	White
DKK	Women	Canada	35–44	Consumer Goods	Supply Chain	Director	Middle Eastern

Pseudonym	Equity Group	Country	Age	Industry	Job Function	Job Level	Ethnic Identity
BPP	Women	Canada	45–54	Consultancy	Consulting	Director	Middle Eastern
TLMM	Women	Canada	65+	Oil & Gas	Retail	Manager	White
RLL	Women	Canada	35–44	Oil & Gas	HR	Partner	Indian
CSGG	Women	Canada	55–64	Manufacturing	HR	Partner	White
BBB	Women	Canada	25–34	Manufacturing	Engineering	Individual Contributor	White
SMM	Women	Canada	35–44	Manufacturing	HR	Partner	Hispanic
HKK	Women	Canada	25–34	Consultancy	Consulting	Individual Contributor	Indian
ARR	Women	Canada	55–64	Manufacturing	HR	Individual Contributor	White
STT	Women	USA	55–64	Consultancy	Consulting	Individual Contributor	Middle Eastern
CSS	Women	USA	35–44	Manufacturing	Engineering	Individual Contributor	White
DSS	Women	Canada	35–44	Oil & Gas	Commercial	Individual Contributor	Hispanic
SCC	Women	Canada	45–54	Oil & Gas	Supply Chain	Individual Contributor	White
MGG	Women	Canada	55–64	Finance	HR	Individual Contributor	White
SS22	Women	Canada	25–34	Technology	Finance	Individual Contributor	Indian

Figure 1. Data Structure



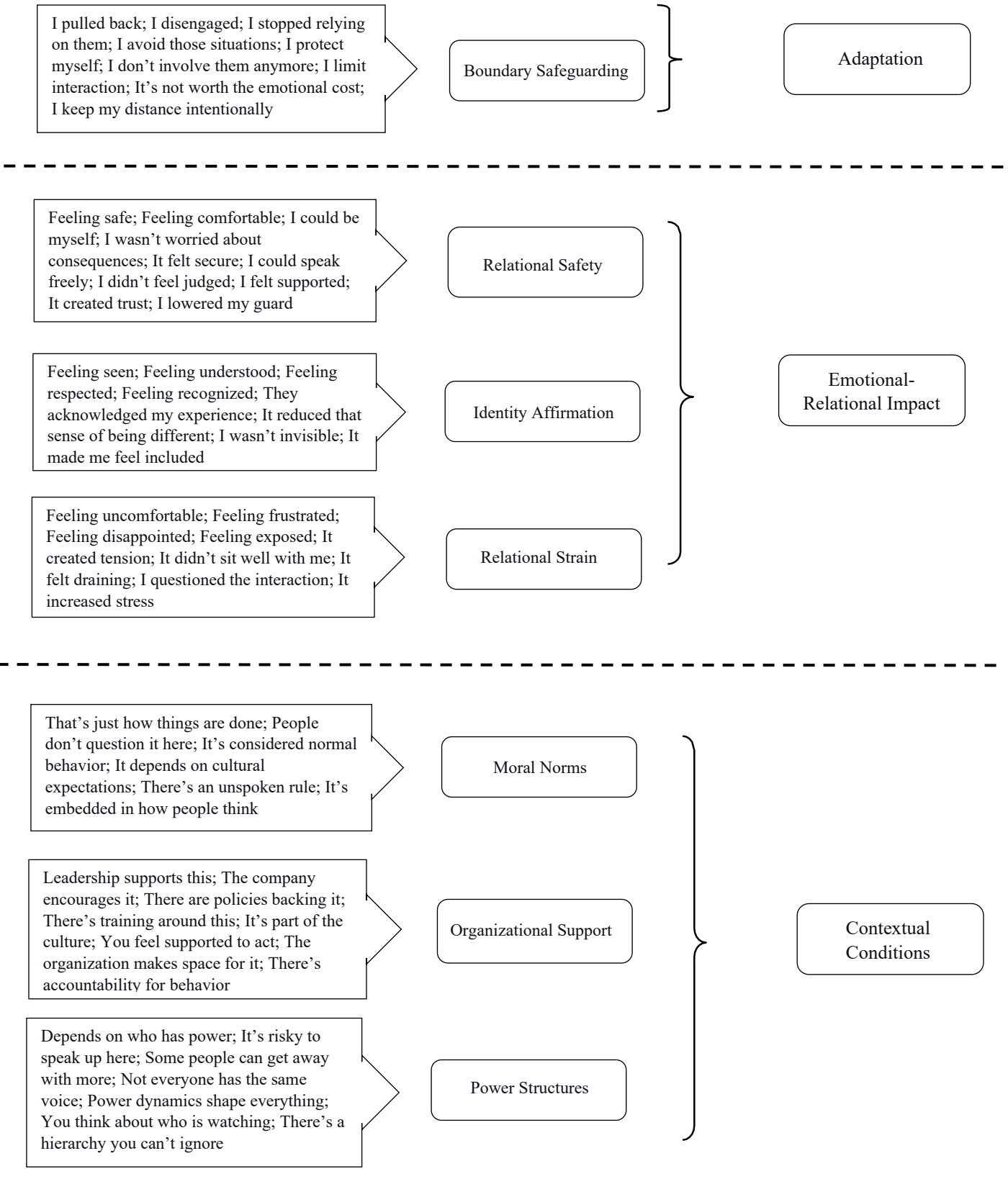

I pulled back; I disengaged; I stopped relying on them; I avoid those situations; I protect myself; I don't involve them anymore; I limit interaction; It's not worth the emotional cost; I keep my distance intentionally
Boundary Safeguarding
Adaptation
Feeling safe; Feeling comfortable; I could be myself; I wasn't worried about consequences; It felt secure; I could speak freely; I didn't feel judged; I felt supported; It created trust; I lowered my guard
Relational Safety
Feeling seen; Feeling understood; Feeling respected; Feeling recognized; They acknowledged my experience; It reduced that sense of being different; I wasn't invisible; It made me feel included
Identity Affirmation
Feeling uncomfortable; Feeling frustrated; Feeling disappointed; Feeling exposed; It created tension; It didn't sit well with me; It felt draining; I questioned the interaction; It increased stress
Relational Strain
Emotional-Relational Impact
That's just how things are done; People don't question it here; It's considered normal behavior; It depends on cultural expectations; There's an unspoken rule; It's embedded in how people think
Moral Norms
Leadership supports this; The company encourages it; There are policies backing it; There's training around this; It's part of the culture; You feel supported to act; The organization makes space for it; There's accountability for behavior
Organizational Support
Depends on who has power; It's risky to speak up here; Some people can get away with more; Not everyone has the same voice; Power dynamics shape everything; You think about who is watching; There's a hierarchy you can't ignore
Power Structures
Contextual Conditions

Figure 2. The Dynamic Allyship Process: A Beneficiary-Centered, Recursive Process Model

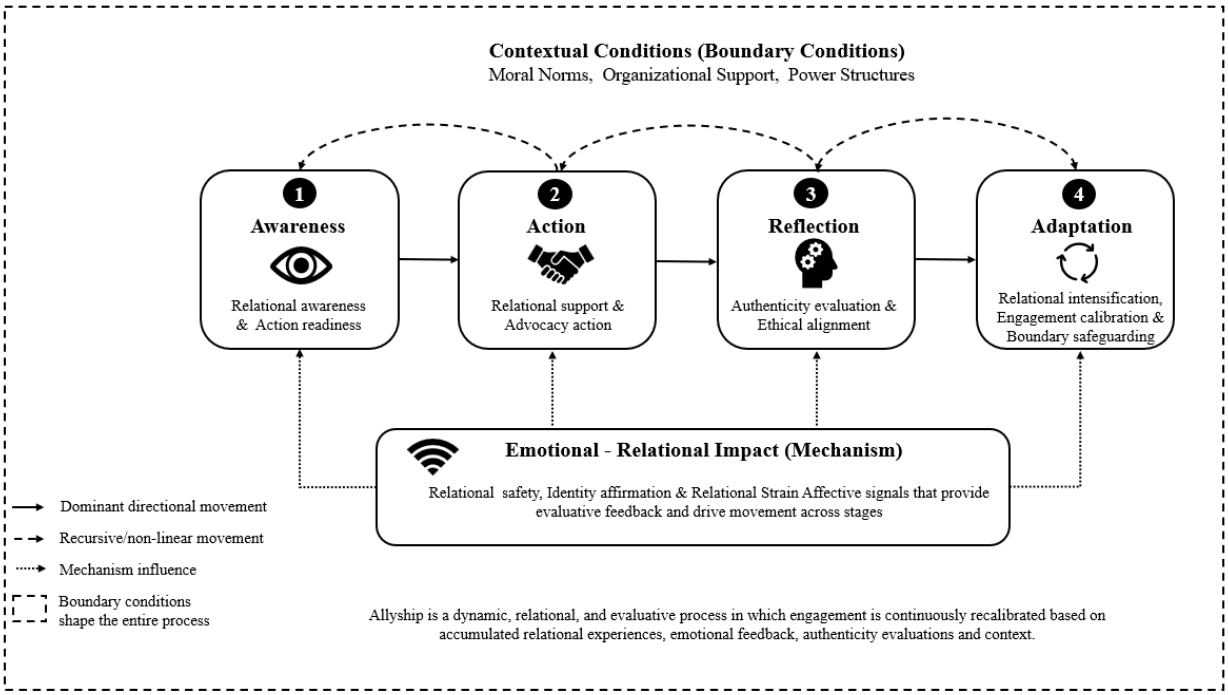


Figure 2 presents the Dynamic Allyship Process Model, conceptualizing allyship as a beneficiary-centered, dynamic, and recursive relational process unfolding across four interrelated stages: Awareness, Action, Reflection, and Adaptation.

The model depicts how marginalized employees interpret and navigate allyship over time. Reflection functions as the evaluative core, where individuals assess authenticity (as a cumulative credibility judgment) and ethical alignment based on patterns of interaction across contexts. These evaluations inform Adaptation, where engagement is regulated through relational intensification, engagement calibration, or boundary safeguarding.

At the center of the model, emotional–relational impact operates as a core generative mechanism, providing signals of relational safety, identity affirmation, and relational strain that shape interpretation and movement across stages.

Surrounding the process, contextual conditions, including moral norms, organizational support, and power structures, function as boundary conditions that influence how allyship is enacted, interpreted, and evaluated, shaping thresholds for engagement and perceived risk.

Although represented sequentially, the process is recursive rather than linear, with movement across stages shaped by evolving interactions, emotional–relational signals, and contextual constraints.

Table 1. Participant Demographics and Organizational Characteristics (*N* = 50)

Category	Subcategory	n	%
Equity-Seeking Group	Black professionals	15	30%
	LGBTQ+ professionals	15	30%
	Women professionals	20	40%
Country	Canada	35	70%
	United States	15	30%
Gender Identity	Women	32	64%
	Men	17	34%
	Transgender	1	2%
Sexual Orientation	Heterosexual	35	70%
	Gay	4	8%
	Lesbian	7	14%
	Queer	3	6%
	Transsexual	1	2%
Age Range	Under 25	3	6%
	25–34	11	22%
	35–44	16	32%

Category	Subcategory	n	%
	45–54	10	20%
	55–64	9	18%
	65+	1	2%
Industry	Oil & Gas / Energy	13	26%
	Manufacturing	11	22%
	Consultancy	9	18%
	Finance	6	12%
	Technology	4	8%
	Consumer Goods	2	4%
	Other	5	10%
Organizational Tenure	Under 5 years	12	24%
	5–10 years	17	34%
	10–20 years	12	24%
	20–30 years	9	18%
Job Level	Individual Contributor	30	60%
	Supervisor	3	6%
	Manager	10	20%

Category	Subcategory	n	%
	Director	5	10%
	Vice President	2	4%
Functional Area (Job Type)	Consulting / Advisory	8	16%
	HR / People functions	7	14%
	Engineering / Technical	6	12%
	Finance	6	12%
	Retail / Customer Services	5	10%
	Commercial / Sales	4	8%
	Supply Chain	4	8%
	Operations	3	6%
	IT / Technology	2	4%
	Communications	2	4%
	Health & Safety	1	2%
	R&D	1	2%
	Other	1	2%
Racial / Ethnic Identity	Black	15	30%
	White	17	34%

Category	Subcategory	n	%
	Hispanic	10	20%
	Indian	4	8%
	Middle Eastern	4	8%

Table 2. Definitions of Key Constructs in the Dynamic Allyship Process

Core Process

Construct	Definition
Allyship	From participants' perspectives, allyship was not simply a supportive action performed by an ally, but a relational form of support whose meaning was established through beneficiaries' experiences and evaluations over time.
Dynamic Allyship Process	A beneficiary-centered, relational process through which marginalized employees interpret, evaluate, and regulate engagement with allyship behaviors across interactions over time.
Awareness	A relational and moral orientation through which individuals become attuned to exclusion, inequity, and responsibility, encompassing recognition of relational dynamics and readiness to act.
Action	The observable enactment of allyship behaviors, including relational support and advocacy action that may influence outcomes or redistribute opportunity.
Reflection	A cumulative and iterative evaluative process through which individuals assess allyship over time, focusing on authenticity and ethical alignment across interactions.
Adaptation	The agentic regulation of relational engagement based on accumulated evaluations, through which individuals intensify, calibrate, or restrict involvement with allies.

Awareness Subthemes

Construct	Definition
Relational Awareness	Recognition of exclusion, inequity, and relational dynamics within interactions, including sensitivity to power, difference, and responsibility.
Action Readiness	Beneficiaries' assessment of whether potential allies appear willing and prepared to translate awareness and supportive intentions into meaningful action.

Action Subthemes

Construct	Definition
Relational Support	Interpersonal behaviors that enable inclusion, trust, and participation, such as listening, validating, and maintaining supportive presence.

Construct	Definition
Advocacy Action	Behaviors that influence outcomes or redistribute opportunity, including speaking up, intervening, or leveraging power in consequential situations.

Reflection Subthemes

Construct	Definition
Authenticity Evaluation	An emergent, cumulative, and conditional evaluative judgment constructed through patterns of alignment between values and behavior across interactions, with consistency under conditions of risk serving as a salient signal.
Ethical Alignment	The evaluation of whether allyship reflects genuine moral commitment, assessed through consistency, context-sensitivity, and absence of performative or self-serving motives.

Adaptation Subthemes

Construct	Definition
Relational Intensification	The expansion and deepening of engagement when allyship is experienced as credible, safe, and aligned.
Engagement Calibration	The strategic adjustment of involvement under conditions of uncertainty or mixed signals.
Boundary Safeguarding	The protective restriction or withdrawal of engagement when allyship is perceived as inconsistent, misaligned, or costly.

Mechanism

Construct	Definition
Emotional–Relational Impact	A core generative mechanism through which emotional–relational signals shape interpretation, evaluation, and engagement decisions.
Relational Safety	A positive signal reflecting trust, acceptance, and psychological security.
Identity Affirmation	A positive signal reflecting validation and reduction of stigma.
Relational Strain	A negative signal reflecting discomfort, frustration, or perceived misalignment.

Boundary Conditions

Construct	Definition
Contextual Conditions	Boundary conditions shaping how allyship is enacted, interpreted, and evaluated within organizational contexts.
Moral Norms	Normative frameworks defining what constitutes appropriate and legitimate allyship.
Organizational Support	Institutional structures and signals enabling or constraining allyship.
Power Structures	Asymmetries in authority, access, and influence shaping both the capacity to act and associated risks.