



**Vol. 8, Issue 1
January, 2015**

Animal Advocates Being Allies and in Solidarity with those with Disabilities

Name: JL Schatz, Ph.D.
Title: Lecturer, Director of Debate
Affiliation: Binghamton University
Location: Binghamton, NY, USA
Email: debate@binghamton.edu

Keywords: Ally, Ableism, Coalition, Disability, Ecoability, Solidarity

**ANIMAL ADVOCATES BEING ALLIES AND IN SOLIDARITY WITH THOSE WITH
DISABILITIES**

I was brought into the eco-ability movement and disability studies about a year and a half ago. I joined from an academic perspective after realizing the intersections between disability studies and animal liberation. One of the things that is interesting to me is that while I have become increasingly involved in conversations around eco-ability from an academic perspective, it is a movement that I have yet to join in from an activist perspective. This is interesting to me because one of the things that we talk about when we talk about animal liberation is that animal rights movements are one of the few initiatives that are led by the oppressors. As Anthony Nocella II explained at the 1st Annual Eco-Ability conference, this is an important point since, as the oppressors, we should never try to speak for the non/human animals even as we try to organize to support them. What that means to me from the context for disability studies is to realize that as I theorize about organization, that theorization should not eclipse the disability leadership and activism that's on the ground.

While clearly everyone is always already disabled to some extent in different contexts, and everyone will eventually become disabled as they age, this does not mean that everyone should just whimsically adopt the identity of disability and join the movement.

By acknowledging that we will all inevitably become vulnerable ... [theorists] maintain a rigid distinction between the (currently invulnerable) able and the vulnerable disabled. On one level, as Fiona Kumari Campbell (2009) has argued, this distinction implicitly devalues disability, even as it embraces its inevitability (p. 13). At the same time, this devaluation masks the more radical revelation that the "able" depend on the disabled for their identity as superior (Braswell 2013).

Acknowledging this does not mean we should deny the social constructions that have gone into building up concepts such as ability privilege. Nor does it mean that we should ignore the disabilities we all have to varying degrees in life. However, what it does mean is that as someone who hasn't identified as disabled for most of his life, it is important that as I learn about my own disabilities in relation to other abilities, I shouldn't co-opt that identity and claim a place of leadership within activist circles. To be an ally, I first must listen and understand. Only then can my own vulnerabilities not depend on the disabled for their identity for me to have the ability to speak.

At the same time, I feel very close and connected with people who do identity as disabled because I think that there is an importance of linking up different forms of struggle with one another and understanding how oppressions are connected. No doubt, "we can see the urgent need for a new kind of intersectional analysis to address how these categories have often formed mutually constitutive frameworks in support of-or in resistance to-dominant social, political, and economic structures of power" (Samuels 2014, 17). It is from this departure point that is the groundwork of my essay, that I begin theorizing about how to be an ally within the disability studies movement. This is a very different question than to ask what disability studies means in an academic sense or asking what we can do in order to tangibly change material practices. Instead, it's to ask what it means to be an ally and when is it time not to lead.

Being an ally is very different than being in coalition or in solidarity with someone. And while they are similar, there are important differences. When someone is in a coalition, they agree not only to work for the same ends but also agree on the tactics and the means to go about doing it. So coalitions are often temporary arrangements between different groups of people in different organizations that come together to achieve an objective through a unified means to achieve that objective. Once that objective is achieved, the coalition often begins to fracture as they begin working on other objectives that diverge. Of course, many coalitions stay together longer than realizing a single objective. However, this only occurs when they are able to continue working together for other initiatives through agreed upon tactics. This is often the case when coalitions form around objectives that aren't entirely permanent but need continual activism to not lose the gains made in a single campaign.

Distinct from coalitions, solidarity is a coalitional practice where people sign on and essentially

sacrifice their own ideas or avenues of resistance for those people they are in solidarity with. For instance, for a white person to be in solidarity with Black Power movements, it means that, regardless of one's own (white) thoughts on how race and racism should be addressed, the individual's (white) agency should be entirely sacrificed to the Black individuals who are actually organizing. To be white and to be in solidarity means not being a leader and taking over the megaphone from those I am in solidarity with since my role is to listen and follow. In short, this is very different than being in coalition where one's voice is not entirely sacrificed since everyone's ideas help create an agreed upon agenda. Put simply, "A good politics of solidarity does not assume limits or set expectations ahead of time, but only in the process of interactions. Communication is key" (Schalk 2013).

Being an ally is different than both being in coalition and standing in solidarity with someone. The reason is because being an ally means that, while the goals that should be achieved at the end are the same, the diverse ways of realizing the objectives are oftentimes distinct. People have all different agendas, different ideas in order to figure out the way in which modes of resistance should be engaged, the way that resistance should be sequenced, and the ways that activism can work. When one is an ally with someone, these things do not have to be agreed upon but rather can be pursued simultaneously in conjunction with one another since the ultimate end point of social justice and liberation is the same. In this way, diverse groups can do what works best for them in order to make advancements while not undermining other subaltern struggles that just see a different path for change.

Some people within both the animal liberation and the animal rights movement that think reformism is beneficial. Others within both those movements think that it is destructive. At the same time, both the animal liberation and animal rights movements there are disagreements over how to go about advancing tactics. This is why these two movements and the factions within them often cannot work in coalition with one another because they are diametrically opposed in how their strategies towards animal resistance should be engaged. However, they can be allies with one another because the goals of both are the same—which is to advance the cause of non/human animals in order to lessen the impact of the oppression that they face. As a result, they can be allies because they're working towards the same goal even if their tactics are often contradictory with one another. This can be productive insofar as the people within these movements continually strive to do more in their activism and relations with one another.

Bringing this back to the topic of this essay, to be an ally as someone who doesn't identify as disabled there is an importance to be able to link up the struggles I care deeply about with struggles of disability. In this sense, there is a need to figure out ways in order to challenge things like ability privilege, while at the same time not necessarily entirely sacrificing one's own thoughts about how these things should be engaged. In this instance of speciesism and ability privilege, these linkages are all but apparent. "Animals are clearly affected by the privileging of the able-bodied human ideal, which is constantly put up as the standard against which they are judged, justifying the cruelty we so often inflict on them. The abled body that ableism perpetuates and privileges is always not only nondisabled but also nonanimal" (Taylor 2013). Sadly, not all approaches to animal liberation and animal rights movements pay attention to these connections when they utilize concepts such as "healthy eating" and stereotypical models of beauty. This is not to say people should give up talking about "health" altogether when

advancing veganism. However, it is to say that people who do use such concepts must be aware of how these ideologies intersect with other constructions of ability privilege.

The question of “health” serves as a perfect example of why it is essential to advance a concept of ally versus coalition or solidarity. People within disability studies often criticize vegan and vegetarian movements precisely because of their promotion of animal-free alternatives as the choice that is correct for one’s health, and it is better for this. I’m not just thinking of things like PETA’s blatantly offensive “got autism” campaign, which is not really based in science or how autism is constructed. I’m also thinking of the way eating vegetables is intrinsically healthier than eating saturated-fats from McDonald’s. While claims like these are often scientifically sound, they still deploy normative concepts of the body that assumes a universal able-bodied individual who has equal access to healthy vegetarian and vegan alternatives.

The fact is that ethical discussions about eating animals are permeated with sexist and racist perspectives that have operated as normative. Disability and disabled people have also largely been left out of these conversations, and ableism has similarly been rendered as normative and naturalized. The disability community has had a challenging relationship to the animal rights community, as epitomized by continued debates involving philosophers like Peter Singer, whose works have denied personhood to certain groups of intellectually disabled individuals. But even in less extreme ways, disabled individuals and the various issues that affect us have largely been left out of the animal welfare and sustainability movements, whether because of the movements’ obsession with health and physical fitness or a lack of attention to who has access to different kinds of educational and activist events. (Taylor 2013)

Certainly I am not innocent of this criticism since I often utilize notions of “health” to convince people to give up eating non/human animals. At the same time, this is ground I am unwilling to cede because many of the people I engage with choose to go vegetarian or vegan because of the health benefits. To not talk about “health” because it subscribes to notions of “health” that might be normative destroys an avenue for resistance that I think is important to be able to advance forward. However, to be an ally it means that I must take seriously the criticism that people who identify with disabilities have to say about this approach.

To do so, this means that I can’t just disregard their criticism as not making sense or being irrelevant or incorrect. Rather it means that I have to take seriously their comments so that when I do talk about what it means to be healthy as a vegetarian or as a vegan, that those things aren’t forgotten about. As a result, when I have these conversations now, I recognize that there isn’t a single mode of being healthy but rather a concept that is constantly evolving and means different things for different people from different places. And so being an ally means that when engaging in conversations over health, I can adapt those tactics to the individuals I’m interacting with so that I don’t center a universal understanding of health but rather a contingent model. Thus, it becomes possible to use tactics such as “health” to advance animal liberation without perpetuating the ableism that traditionally comes along with such concepts. This best advances strategies that can be useful in certain places at certain times with particular individuals in ways where we can interlink struggles against oppression. From here we can realize how:

Eating certain food leads to better abilities, but not everyone has access to this food. Clean water leads to better abilities, but not everyone has access to it. And when some modify their bodies and add to their abilities not everyone will be able to follow suit. 'Enabling' enhancements will lead to ability inequalities for those who do not have access to them or who choose not to modify their bodies. Which ability inequality will be seen as inequitable is still debatable. As the right to water was just labeled a human right one could say that clean water access inequality is also inequitable. (Wolbring 2012)

Again, this means that we must forefront a question of tactics instead of a singular cohesive strategy in order to formulate productive concepts of being an ally with others. This also means that one does not necessarily have to give up the path that they think is important for advancing a form of agenda that they think is important as long as it doesn't undermine or get in the way of the other agendas.

To be clear, this means that when groups do things like PETA's "got autism" campaign, that does not qualify of being an ally with people within disability studies because it doesn't approach it as a tactic to be used in conjunction with fighting ability privilege. Therefore, such campaigns don't work towards the same endpoint and, in fact, actually undermine the ability for disability studies to advance. In short, as an ally, it is not an excuse to entirely disregard other movements for social justice simply because you are not in coalition or solidarity with someone. Being an ally does require compromising. However, that compromising doesn't require one to give up on the entirety of one's goals since the tactics we deploy are, after all, always already temporary.

As case in point, when it comes to language choices in relation to disability, to say "stand in solidarity" already assumes a certain ability privilege in its very terminology. There are many numbers of other examples of ableist language. Regardless of the specific example, in terms of being an ally when language choices become offensive to individuals, it is crucial to modify one's language, as opposed to being defensive or making excuses. Discourse matters. And, while it's impossible to refrain from offensive discourse in every possible situation, there is always the ability for allies to do better in promoting inclusive language. Word choices are not integral to any tactic but could hold the potential to undermine progress if those choices force others away. To be willing to change our words and not the fundamentals of our arguments is at the center of ally politics since it allows for a fluidity of exchange.

In turn, I make sure that the way I talk about health does not subscribe to a singular form of what constitutes a healthy body when promoting vegetarianism and veganism as a health-initiative. Instead, I make the pitch tailored to the individual who I am dealing with and what they would understand to be a healthy body or lifestyle. In doing so, I'm careful not to promote the ability privileges associated with BMI indexes so that I can criticize universal concepts of "health" even while advancing the argument. And so these are things that are examples of how someone can be an ally while still remaining true to one's own desire for resistance and change. In the case of discursive criticisms, it is easy to change the language one uses while keeping the tactics in the same.

In a recent example, when people criticize Weird Al's music video for using the word "spastic,"

instead of defending his language choices, which like a lot of musician artists do, he immediately apologized for it. He claimed that he didn't know that that term carried a negative connotation for people with disabilities and he subsequently disassociated from that terminology. In my mind, this is an example of where Weird Al became an ally with people within disability studies because there was an immediate awareness that because he does not identify as having a disability that he should listen and default to people who do identify that way. At the same time, he did not immediately give up on his music. Instead he performed a corrective gesture that fostered positive media attention for people to become aware of ableism within the music industry at large. Put plainly, to be an ally requires an honest effort to truly listen and understand the types of things that are being taught by people who are actually in those movements. This doesn't mean giving up those things you think are important to advance what you care deeply about; but it does mean there has to be an honest effort to listen and adapt one's campaign and language around those we desire to be allies with.

Integral to this notion of being an ally understands that all oppressions are fundamentally interconnected. As a white male, I have a lot of privileges that are associated with that. But in addition, I am what most people in society would consider fully abled-bodied, which has a whole host of other privileges that are associated with that. And with privilege comes responsibility; but also privilege means that one has an obligation to use those privileges in order to undermine the structures that are in place that enable the privileged to be privileged over other individuals. And so by understanding how oppressions are interconnected from a privileged standpoint, it's important to recognize that my own objectives or what I think is most important to be achieved is an objective or a form of achievement that comes from a privileged understanding of how the world operates.

This gets back to why it's important for people in my social location to listen in order to keep their privilege in check, but that privilege can also be used to challenge the various forms of oppression that are interconnected with one another. I don't think that animals are more important than people, but at the same time, I don't think that people are more important than non/human animals because we all are essentially animals. What is important though is that when engaging with different groups with different identities that what comes to the forefront needs to be able to adapt to the conditions, movements, and people with which I surround myself. In the end, my privileged perspective is not what exists at the forefront of what I do, but rather is a part of what I do in being an ally by listening to those others who actually participate within the struggles that I think are absolutely crucial in order to promote social justice.

And so to be an ally to people with disabilities means not only listening to what they mean or what they care about in terms of language but also what they take as productive avenues of resistance. This means taking them at their word and seriously assessing what that means to be a lifelong ally and advance a form of understanding of animal liberation that doesn't come at the expense of it. It means we must come up with campaigns that promote veganism and vegetarianism as healthy not to the detriment of people who may be "fat". Campaigns like PETA's "get rid of the blubber" is both offensive and undermines things that would actually promote a worldview that would not have a "fatness" as being an automatically negative connotation. By doing these sort of things, there could be a form of animal liberation that is

theorized that does not base itself off of ability privilege that directly undermines the struggle of those who are disabled.

References

- Braswell, H. (2011). Can there be a Disability Studies Theory of "End-of-Life Autonomy"? *Disabilities studies quarterly*, 31(4).
- Samuels, E. (2014). *Fantasies of Identification: Disability, Gender, Race*. New York: New York University Press.
- Schalk, S. (2013). Coming to Claim Crip: Disidentification with/in Disability Studies. *Disability studies quarterly*, 33:2.
- Taylor, S. (2013). Vegans, Freaks, and Animals: Toward a New Table Fellowship. *American quarterly*, 65(3): 757-764.
- Wolbring, G. (2012). Ableism, disability studies and the academy. [Online]. Retrieved from: <http://blog.fedcan.ca/2011/06/17/ableism-disability-studies-and-the-academy/>.