



Fighting racism, battling burnout: causes of activist burnout in US racial justice activists

Paul C. Gorski

To cite this article: Paul C. Gorski (2019) Fighting racism, battling burnout: causes of activist burnout in US racial justice activists, *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 42:5, 667-687, DOI: 10.1080/01419870.2018.1439981

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2018.1439981>



Published online: 20 Feb 2018.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 6334



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Citing articles: 43 View citing articles [↗](#)



Fighting racism, battling burnout: causes of activist burnout in US racial justice activists

Paul C. Gorski

School of Integrative Studies, George Mason University, Fairfax, USA

ABSTRACT

Social movement scholars have identified activist burnout – when the accumulation of stressors associated with activism become so overwhelming they compromise activists’ persistence in their activism – as a threat to movement viability. This phenomenological study on the causes of burnout among racial justice activists in the United States was designed to bolster understandings of burnout and inform strategies for sustaining racial justice movements. Thirty racial justice activists who had experienced burnout were interviewed. They described four primary burnout causes: emotional-dispositional causes, structural causes, backlash causes, and in-movement causes. Implications for activist and movement sustainability are discussed.

ARTICLE HISTORY Received 5 November 2017; Accepted 6 February 2018

KEYWORDS Burnout; activism; racism; anti-racism; racial justice; social movements

Introduction

Racial justice activists in the United States face challenges that could deteriorate their abilities to remain engaged in their activism. Some are retaliatory, like the threat or reality of state violence in response to their activism (Davenport, Soule, and Armstrong 2011). Others are internal, related to activists’ empathic tendencies (McDonald 1997) and understandings of the scope of systemic racism (Blaisdell 2016), which can render them susceptible to emotional exhaustion or hopelessness.

Although these and other challenges are not uncommon in the history of United States racial justice activism, President Trump’s association with white supremacists (Mathis-Lilley 2017), racist policy initiatives (Huber 2016), and encouragement of violence against activists (Mickey, Levitsky, and Way 2017) may have exacerbated threats to the sustainability of racial justice activists. Add efforts by corporate and government interests to criminalize racial justice activism, including the Federal Bureau of Investigation’s recent “crack-down” on what it called “Black Identity Extremists” (Beydoun and Hansford

CONTACT Paul C. Gorski  gorski@edchange.org

© 2018 Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group

2017), and the context of anti-racism activism in the United States becomes clearer. As racism grows more explicit and anti-racism progress recedes, activists may feel less protected than racism's perpetrators and less hopeful about the possibility of progress.

Although scholarship on the impact of these conditions for racial justice activists is thin (Szymanski 2012), a growing body of scholarship examines their impact for feminist (Bernal 2006), educational justice (Gorski and Chen 2015), and other activists. These studies suggest that over time these challenges can result in activist burnout (Plyler 2006; Cox 2011), a chronic condition in which activism-related stress becomes so overwhelming it debilitates activists' abilities to perform their activism effectively or to remain engaged in activism (Chen and Gorski 2015). The result can be devastating for activists, often forcing them out of movements to which they once dedicated their lives (Rettig 2006).

However, the impact does not end with individual activists. Social movement scholars have argued that activist burnout is among the most formidable barriers to sustaining social movements (Cox 2011; Pigni 2013). The lack of sustained leadership due to burnout can create fragmentation within movement organizations, impeding movement effectiveness (Plyler 2006). Burnout begets burnout. Pogrebin (1994) thusly characterized activist burnout as the deterioration of activists' emotional and physical health resulting in the deterioration of social movements.

Although scholars have studied activist burnout in other movements (Gomes 1992; Pines 1994; Gorski and Chen 2015), no published studies examine it among racial justice activists in the United States or elsewhere. This is a significant hole in activist burnout theory. It is hard to imagine a useful conceptualization of activist burnout in a United States context not informed by how it operates in racial justice movements. The present study, an examination of burnout among United States racial justice activists, is designed to strengthen conceptualizations of activist burnout by incorporating experiences of racial justice activists. Additionally, better understandings of activist burnout among racial justice activists can inform strategies to sustain racial justice activists and thus bolster the sustainability of racial justice movements.

In service to these purposes, thirty racial justice activists in the United States who have suffered activist burnout were interviewed. Of most interest was how they characterized the causes of their burnout. Through a phenomenological analysis of semi-structured interviews, this study explored the question: How do racial justice activists in the United States who have experienced activist burnout describe the conditions that caused their burnout?

In this study, and consistent with how scholars framed activism in previous activist burnout scholarship (Pines 1994; Chen and Gorski 2015), racial justice activists are people who identify racial justice activism as their central life

passion. Following Szymanski's (2012) research on racial justice engagement, activism refers to purposeful action to cultivate social or political change. This does not mean racial justice activism was each participant's source of employment. Some worked in activist organizations. Others worked in non-activist jobs but still identified activism as their central life commitment.

Literature review

The present study is the first to document causes of activist burnout among racial justice activists. It is rooted theoretically in activist burnout theory as it currently stands, built around studies of other movements. It is also informed by studies on activism engagement among racial justice activists. Following a synthesis of conceptualizations of activist burnout, the literature on causes of activist burnout is synthesized. Research on the experiences of racial justice activists is incorporated into this synthesis to bridge activist burnout theory with scholarship on racial justice activists that attends more implicitly to burnout.

Conceptualizing activist burnout

Freudenberger (1974) pioneered the study of vocational burnout, wherein people once passionate about their work grow exhausted, cynical, and detached from it. Scholars have modified conceptualizations of vocational burnout to document burnout among environmental (Kovan and Dirx 2003), feminist (Bernal 2006), and social justice education activists (Gorski and Chen 2015). These scholars documented characteristics of social justice activists that distinguish causes of their burnout from vocational burnout (Rettig 2006; Bunnage 2014), leading to the theorization of what came to be called activist burnout (Cox 2011; Chen and Gorski 2015).

For example, unlike people in most vocations, social justice activists are susceptible to state violence in response to their activism (Jones 2007; Cox 2011). Also, according to Maslach and Gomes (2006), activists' emotional connections to social causes elevate their susceptibility to burnout. The nature of activism, they explained, requires activists to sustain deep awareness of structural oppressions larger society is "unable or unwilling to face" (43). Shouldering this burden over time causes many racial justice activists to put unreasonable pressure on themselves, not just to respond to individual suffering, but to create massive structural change. This can lead to chronic frustration, exhaustion, and feelings of isolation (González 2015). For example, racial justice activists carry the burden of understanding the scope and impact, not just of interpersonal bias, but also of structural racism (Eichstedt 2001). Complicating matters, many racial justice activists of colour are targets of the injustice against which they act (Steinfeldt et al. 2012). They carry the burden of

structural understanding on top of the challenge of coping with the grind of racism in their own lives, often referred to as racial battle fatigue (Smith 2004; Amos 2015). Specifically for activists of colour, research has shown their engagement in racial justice activism often is directly associated with the accumulative trauma of the racial battle fatigue they experience; those who perceive the most traumatic accumulative experiences with racism are most likely to become activists (Szymanski 2012; Talcott 2014). This makes their context unique when compared with other contexts in which burnout is heavily studied, such as in human services professionals.

Certainly, human services professionals like social workers – common subjects of vocational burnout scholarship – can experience stressful pressures to address individual or community suffering. However, research indicates their primary sources of burnout revolve not around these pressures, but around issues like job autonomy, workload, lack of organizational funding, and workplace personnel shortages (Bakker and Costa 2014; McFadden, Campbell, and Taylor 2014). No study has identified these conditions as common causes of activist burnout.

Causes of activist burnout

Causes of activist burnout have been theorized around three themes: (1) internal causes related to activists' unique characteristics, (2) external causes related to individuals' and institutions' hostility towards activists' causes, and (3) in-movement causes related to how activists treat one another. Although burnout has not been studied in racial justice activists, scholarship on racial justice activists' dispositions and motivations suggests that many conditions underlying common causes of activist burnout in other movements exist in racial justice movements. In this section, I synthesize scholarship on causes of activist burnout in other movements, but also bridge these causes with related conditions observed within racial justice movements.

Internal causes

Activists are driven by deep senses of morality and strong emotional connections to causes (Goodwin 1997; Jasper 1998). They expend emotional labour, which Taylor and Rupp (2002) characterized as "channeling, legitimating, and managing one's own and others' emotions and expression of emotions" (142). Caring deeply about a cause presses many activists into activism (Kovan and Dirx 2003). Their intense commitment and resulting emotional labour expenditures make them uniquely susceptible to emotional exhaustion and overwork, causes of burnout (Pines 1994; Chen and Gorski 2015).

Intertwined with intense levels of passion and commitment are activists' deep understandings of structural oppression (Lowan-Trudeau 2016). As

Kovan and Dirx (2003) explained based on their study of environmental movements, activists embrace “consciousness in an unconscious world” (107), determined to redress conditions others refuse to acknowledge. Based on their study of animal rights activists in Sweden, Jacobsson and Lindblom (2013) found that participants recognized and internalized individual instances of violence and the massive accumulation of violence against animals, hastening emotional exhaustion.

The combination of structural awareness and intense commitments leads activists to apply immense pressure on themselves to produce significant change (Rodgers 2010). As a result, they often work themselves to exhaustion (Bernal 2006). They feel guilty about taking a break or experiencing joy while others are suffering (Effler 2010; Norwood 2013). As activists become more entrenched in their activism and less attentive to individual and collective well-being, the threat of burnout intensifies (Gorski 2015).

Although these conditions in racial justice activists have not been linked empirically to burnout, they are addressed in racial justice scholarship. Racial justice activists tend to have a structural orientation to racism, understanding its scope beyond interpersonal tensions (Eichstedt 2001). On average, they have deep senses of personal responsibility to eliminate structural racism (Warren 2010; Case 2012). In fact, studies show that activists of colour who have the deepest insights about structural racism based on their own experiences of racism are most likely to become anti-racist activists (Talcott 2014; Szymanski and Lewis 2015). As González (2015) explained based on her observations of the organization, United Coalition for Racial Justice, the combination of structural understanding and responsibility leads many racial justice activists to work themselves “until their bodies cave in” (16).

External causes

Activists can become targets of violence in response to their activism. They have been subject to police violence, harassment, and character assassination (Barry and Dordević 2007; Jones 2007). An experience of violence can contribute to activist burnout; however, the continuous threat of violence also can cause the emotional and physical exhaustion that precede burnout (Cox 2011). Although studies have not attached this threat among racial justice activists to burnout, studies have documented how racial justice activists often are targets of physical violence (Jacobs and Taylor 2011; Steinfeldt et al. 2012), including police violence (Davenport, Soule, and Armstrong 2011).

Notably, these threats are not equally distributed. Marginalized-identity activists are targeted at higher rates than privileged-identity activists (Bernal 2006; Norwood 2013), a condition that has been documented within the racial justice literature. For example, based on an analysis of

15,000 protests in the United States, Davenport, Soule, and Armstrong (2011) found that police officers interpreted racial justice activists of colour as more threatening than white activists. They responded with greater levels of arrest and physical violence at majority African-American protests than majority White protests.

In-movement causes

Marginalized-identity activists often are not safe from oppression even within their movements (Vaccaro and Mena 2011; Leondar-Wright 2014). Lorde (1988) explained based on her experience as a woman of colour collaborating with white feminists, “I was accused of ‘brutalizing’ the organizers by simply asking why Black women were absent” (74). This treatment can result in burnout as Gorski and Chen (2015) found in their study of educational justice activists. Nearly every activist of colour they interviewed attributed their burnout in part to racism from white activists.

Although it has not been associated specifically with burnout, studies have shown how racial justice activists of colour are subject to racism within racial justice movements, as well. Studies of white racial justice activists have revealed that they often become mired in guilt and shame involving their whiteness, constantly re-centering their needs for validation from activists of colour, draining organizational energy and disrupting movement progress (Mallett et al. 2008; Warren 2010). White activists tend to coopt racial justice movements and usurp organizational power from activists of colour (Jonsson 2016) so that activists of colour are forced to expend energy fending off these attempts (Jacobs and Taylor 2011). This can deepen their susceptibility to burnout.

Another in-movement burnout-exacerbating condition is a culture that quiets concerns about the toll activism can take on activists. Rodgers (2010) called this “the ubiquitous discourse of selflessness” wherein “displays of personal strain, sadness, or depression ... are viewed ... as unnecessary and self-indulgent” (279). Burnout is worn like a badge of honour (Pigni 2016); it is expected, a sign of commitment (Rodgers 2010). Hargons et al. (2017) pointed to similar conditions in the Black Lives Matter movement.

Notably, much of the popular activism literature spotlights internal burnout causes. Much of the popular discourse about burnout related to racial justice activism pushes “self-care” as the remedy (see Khan 2015; Ross 2017). However, research suggests in-movement causes may be more responsible for burnout than internal or external causes (Gomes 1992; Maslach and Gomes 2006; Plyler 2006). It is worth mentioning again that these findings were not based on research on burnout in racial justice movements; no such research existed prior to the current study. Only an analysis of burnout among racial justice activists can determine whether these patterns hold in racial justice movements.

Methods

Using a phenomenological approach, semi-structured interviews of thirty United States racial justice activists were analysed to answer, How do racial justice activists in the United States who have experienced burnout describe the conditions that caused their burnout? Phenomenological research is best suited to capturing the nature of a phenomenon as experienced by people who experience it (Finlay 2009). Creswell (2013) argued phenomenology is especially useful when examinations of a phenomenon can inform effective policy and practice – an important consideration given the author's interests in strengthening activist-sustaining practices in social justice movements.

Participants

Participants were selected based on three criteria. They (1) identified racial justice activism as their primary life's work, (2) engaged in their activism in the United States, and (3) had experienced activist burnout. Attempting to clarify the third criteria, recruitment messages defined activist burnout as

facing one or more of the following symptoms because of your racial justice activist work to an extent you were forced to disengage from activist activities at least temporarily: (a) emotional exhaustion, (b) physical exhaustion, or (c) cynicism or hopelessness.

Recruitment messages were emailed to the researcher's network of racial justice activists and posted on relevant social media sites. Potentially interested activists were instructed to email the researcher, who then re-inquired about the participation criteria. Eventually, thirty-eight people volunteered. Thirty were interviewed. They are summarized in [Table 1](#).

Procedure

Interviews of 60–90 minutes were audio-recorded in person or via telephone. A semi-structured interview protocol consisting of open-ended questions elicited participants' burnout stories. Items were informed by scholarship on activist burnout. Three social movement scholars provided feedback on the protocol. It was then piloted by five activists. Revisions reflected their feedback.

Following questions about the nature of participants' activism, they were asked about symptoms of their burnout (how burnout manifested in them), causes of their burnout, and their recovery from burnout. This study focused on how participants characterized causes of their burnout. Often causes and symptoms were discussed simultaneously even though the protocol included separate questions about each. All responses were considered viable data for this study. In some cases, follow-up interviews were requested to seek clarity on specific responses.

Table 1. Participant demographics.

Name	Race	Gender	Socioeconomic status	Years of activist experience	Primary focus of racial justice activism
Alejandro	Latino	Male	Middle class	13	Educational opportunity
Amy	White	Female	Middle class	25	American Indian Movement
Andrew	African-American	Male	Middle class	20	Youth justice
Anna	Latina	Female	Middle class	30	Chicanx justice
Barbara	African-American	Female	Working class	50	Foreign policy
Barry	African-American	Male	Working class	25	Community organizing in Black communities
Beverly	African-American	Female	Working class	30	Healthcare
Christopher	African-American	Male	Poor	15	Judicial system
Cristina	Latina	Female	Middle class	12	Black Lives Matter
Deborah	African-American	Female	Poor	15	Black Lives Matter
Felicia	Latina and Asian-American	Female	Middle class	31	Educational opportunity
Gerald	African-American	Male	Upper-middle class	18	Educational opportunity
Gregory	African-American	Male	Middle class	15	Police violence
Jason	White	Male	Middle class	20	Racial justice organizing in white communities
Jeff	White	Genderqueer	Middle class	51	Community education
Jonathan	African-American	Male	Middle class	16	Education
Kevin	African-American and Native-American	Male	Middle class	30	Food justice
Lila	Arab-American	Female	Poor	8	Science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) access
Linda	Latina	Female	Middle class	59	Latinx educational rights
Lisa	White	Female	Middle class	16	Racial justice organizing in the Jewish community
Meredith	White	Female	Middle class	30	Racial justice in disability rights
Nicole	African-American	Female	Working class	18	Mass incarceration
Norman	Asian-American	Male	Middle class	18	Private schools
Patricia	African-American	Female	Middle class	26	Education system
Rochelle		Female	Middle class	24	Juvenile justice

(Continued)

Table 1. Continued.

Name	Race	Gender	Socioeconomic status	Years of activist experience	Primary focus of racial justice activism
Rosa	African-American Latina	Female	Working class	15	Undocumented immigrant rights
Scott	White	Male	Working class	8	Housing
Sharon	African-American	Female	Middle class	41	Employment
Sofia	Latina and White	Female	Working class	11	Health disparities
Vince	White	Male	Working class	15	Police violence

Participants were offered the option of reading their transcripts and providing clarifications. Following this process, identifying information was wiped from the transcripts and pseudonyms were assigned.

Analysis

Following phenomenological coding practices, data were mined for what Creswell (2013) called significant statements. These included chunks of responses that illuminated causes of burnout related to participants' racial justice activism. Significant statements were organized into big themes or clusters of meaning (Creswell 2013) such as "burnout associated with conflict within activist communities". These clusters were reanalysed to uncover deeper intricacies in activists' descriptions of their burnout. Data were organized into sub-clusters through several readings and reorganizations.

Findings

Participants' burnout revolved around four cause themes: (1) emotional-dispositional, (2) backlash, (3) structural, and (4) in-movement. All participants attributed their burnout to conditions described by at least two of these categories. Most attributed it to at least three.

Emotional-dispositional causes

Of thirty participants, twenty-nine attributed their burnout to emotional-dispositional causes. They struggled with profound personal responsibility for eliminating racism, a deep emotional relationship to racial justice, and feelings of isolation.

Participants understood the scope of structural racism and felt responsible for eliminating it. Gerald (an African-American man in his forties) shared, "I

can't see myself not being involved in this work", whatever implications might come. Gregory (African-American man, forties), called his activism "a calling". Meredith (white woman, forties) explained, "There is something in me that can't let injustice live ... I was put here on this planet to do exactly what I'm doing." Their sense of responsibility led them to prioritize activism over other aspects of their lives, contributing to burnout.

Their sense of responsibility was related to intense emotional relationships with their activism. This made them susceptible to emotional exhaustion and cynicism regarding the slowness of change. It contributed to physical exhaustion from overworking. Like many participants, Barry (African-American man, forties) described how noticing conditions invisible to his peers since childhood intensified his emotional connection to anti-racism. For him these observations accumulated over time, affecting him "cognitively, physiologically" until his body shut down. Lisa (white woman, thirties) described how similar conditions affected her: "This work basically asks people to be in pain and it asks people to acknowledge the pain of others." These connections were elevated for participants of colour like Sofia (Latina and white, forties), who shared, "I grew up and lived and experienced [racism], so ... I have deep empathy for being on the other side of an oppression."

Both their sense of responsibility and emotional connections to racial justice informed participants' feelings of isolation in a society where their passion is mocked and minimized. Alejandro (Latino man, forties) attributed his burnout to "human isolation, having to be the one naming things ... carrying a lot of everybody's stuff". Participants lost friends. They watched relationships deteriorate with family members who did not understand their passion. Rochelle (African-American woman, thirties) shared, "I don't have a huge bank of people I can call on ... And even the people who love me the most, who don't want to see me suffer ... At times it is too much for them." Lila (Arab-American woman, forties) lamented, "I feel isolated. I feel like I've lost a lot of friends ... That ... physically hurts."

Participants responded by doubling down on their commitments, seeing their isolation as evidence that if they were not confronting racism, nobody would confront it. Nearly every participant linked these emotional-dispositional conditions to a tendency to drive themselves to exhaustion. Scott (white man, thirties) commented, "It doesn't matter how many things I do. There's always more that I didn't do ... And I think that in the aggregate, there is an unyielding pressure to participate in everything." Participants struggled to turn off the racial justice lens. Sofia shared,

The hardest thing for me is just to disconnect ... just going out and watching a movie with friends. I can't. I'm watching the movie and the whole time my head is going through all these things that are happening in the movie ... all these isms.

Many described similar examples of self-imposed martyrdom syndromes tied to their passion and emotional investment.

Taken together, these conditions made participants vulnerable to emotional exhaustion. They put immense pressure on themselves. They traded well-being for participation in activism, making them ripe for burnout. For participants of colour, these conditions overlapped with racial battle fatigue, the accumulative impact of experiencing racism (Smith 2004), further undermining their abilities to remain engaged and effective activists.

Backlash causes

Nineteen participants attributed their burnout to backlash from their activism. Often this backlash put their employment or bodies at risk.

Professional vulnerability was a significant stressor. Even if their job sites were not their primary activist sites, participants' commitment made it impossible to quiet their activism at work. Norman (Asian-American man, forties) shared that simply bringing up racism as a person of colour in his work place made him professionally vulnerable. Gregory described blowback from his supervisor for challenging racism at work: "I had difficult conversations with my supervisor. And then after trying to educate him, I became ... [in] his words 'an outlier, not a company man'". The inability to turn their activism off rendered many participants economically vulnerable and as a result, full of stress. Rosa (Latina woman, thirties) shared how professional vulnerability begot economic vulnerability:

I feel very vulnerable economically by choosing to do the work I do. There isn't a lot of free time. And if I'm doing [racial justice work] then I wouldn't necessarily expect to be paid to do everything that I need to do. And so I am keenly aware that if I operated in a different sector and did different work that I would do more than be able to live paycheck to paycheck.

Others carried the stress of knowing every job was "temporary" due to their outspokenness about racism.

Those whose work lives interacted more formally with their activism also felt professionally vulnerable and minimized. Alejandro, an anti-racism community educator, lamented, "When you hire somebody to fix the toilet, you trust them. But when you bring somebody to do [racial justice] work, there is no trust ... I remember being really exhausted having to talk about my credentials." Rosa shared, "The thing that causes the greatest challenge is not actually the work on the ground, but ... not hav[ing] that work be valued." Participants felt their activism was appreciated by some other activists but demonized by everyone else, contributing to emotional exhaustion and hopelessness.

Beyond professional and economic backlash, many participants felt physically vulnerable. Several attributed their burnout to physical "threats" and

“warnings” to cease their activism. Kevin (African-American and Native-American, thirties) shared,

It doesn't matter whether you're unarmed with your hands up. It doesn't matter if your back's turned. It doesn't matter if you just plain didn't hear somebody. It's their policy to execute you. So there is always that pressure ... At this next rally, at this next protest, is someone going to kill you?

Over time these stressors drove many participants to the brink of burnout.

Structural causes

“Structural causes” revolved around what participants characterized as the impossible task of creating change against unbendable white supremacy. On top of this challenge, identified by 22 participants as a cause of their burnout, participants of color attributed their burnout to everyday experiences of racism outside their activism, a condition from which white participants were protected.

Speaking to how battling unbendable racism hastened his burnout, Gregory explained his activism as:

where the unstoppable force hits an immovable object so there's just this massive neutralization that takes place. You feel like, the harder I go the harder the counter response is so ... it doesn't matter ... what you try to do, there's still going to be ... rac[ism].

Speaking to the accumulative toll of this battle, he continued, “It's a mental and emotional exercise. It gets so heavy you just want to say, ‘Today I'm not going to engage.’”

Several participants felt hopeless recognizing, in Nicole's (African-American woman, forties) words, that the “power structure” comprises people intent on protecting white supremacy. They feign interest in racial harmony, but only without racial justice, solidifying their “coalitions of power”. Sofia grew exhausted battling the dominant discourse that paints white people as victims. “That's bullshit to me”, she said. This structural resistance slows the pace of change. Participants understood the implications of this slowness. It weighed on their emotional well-being.

Equally impactful were endless interactions during their activism with white people who refused to acknowledge racism. Jonathan (African-American man, forties) described exhaustion he felt having “the same damn conversation over and over and over again” with white people who denied racism's existence. Several referred to the “All Lives Matter” movement – a response by white people intent on minimizing anti-Black racism (Carney 2016) – as an example. Andrew (African-American man, forties) shared, “Those are ... the areas that ... provide the most fatigue. Having these conversations [about Black Lives Matter] over and over again where you're justifying your perspective, and the knee-jerk resistance.”

Several participants specified a particularly disappointing cause of their burnout as “white liberals”. These were people – non-activists – participants identified as embracing a celebrating diversity orientation towards race, but who ultimately protected their privilege by balking at more serious considerations for racial justice. Vince (white man, thirties) explained, “The people who have been most difficult to deal with are [white] people who say that they’re liberal ...” Participants described “white liberals” derailing conversations about racism, lobbying activists to “soften” their anti-racism goals, and prioritizing their comfort over racial justice progress.

On top of these burnout sources, most participants of colour referred to everyday experiences with structural racism as contributing to their burnout. Unlike white participants, participants of colour coped with racial battle fatigue (Smith 2004), the accumulative impact of structural racism on their lives inside and outside activism. Although this study focused on burnout causes related to racial justice activism, participants of colour struggled to distinguish stressors created by structural racism in their everyday lives from stressors associated with their activism. They recounted many stories about this racism. Andrew shared,

I’ve been stopped on my street ... saving my neighbor who was choking ... The people who called the police saw me and know me ... They are literally my next-door neighbors. But they saw me giving our other next-door neighbor the Heimlich maneuver ... and they called the police.

This is an example of how white supremacy operates even in the context of racial justice activism, elevating the threat of burnout for activists of colour. Unfortunately, activist burnout theory has yet to account for this complexity.

In-movement causes

All thirty participants attributed their burnout to how activists treat one another. Many became worn down attempting to navigate activist communities in which in-fighting and ego clashes were commonplace. They entered racial justice movements to work with like-minded people, but found movements full of competition, not cooperation. Anna (Latina woman, thirties), shared,

The competition is ridiculous. And it’s tiring. And it takes energy to deal with some of that. So we do have a lot of people in this town who stay away from working with community organizations for that very reason ... That has led to burnout.

Participants described competition related to who had “street cred”, who adopted the most radical language, and who withstood the most oppression. The result, according to Amy, was that “people who should be allies often-times were hurting each other ... That for me really led to this feeling of

almost being paralyzed". Lisa described the in-fighting as "devastating ... exhausting ... suffocating". Participants grew disillusioned watching fellow activists jockey for attention and undermining movement initiatives. Alejandro shared,

There was this activist who would always smile at me and undermine what I wanted to do. He was not even passive-aggressive, not even that veiled ... He had been at the [organization] for 32 years. He had a lot of power, but pretended not to have a lot of power. I was undermined by this white dude.

Barbara (African-American woman, sixties) similarly shared how her burnout resulted from activists "cutting each other off at the knees".

Particularly troubling, fourteen of twenty-two participants of colour attributed their burnout to racism they experienced from white racial justice activists. Unlike the general frustration with non-activist "white liberals", this source of burnout was related to fellow activists, white activists, many of whom also adopted a white liberal stance and impeded movement progress. Gerald shared, "I got burned from so-called white ... allies who were on board until it meant they needed to do self-reflection." In several cases, participants of colour expressed more intense exasperation describing treatment by white activists than any other source of burnout. Andrew described "being shut down consistently by ... well-intentioned, progressive, [white] people who think they are lovers of justice".

Similarly, several participants experienced sexism, heterosexism, and class bias from other activists, igniting burnout. Eight women participants described sexually harassment or assault by male activists. Felicia (Asian-American and Latina woman, thirties), described "sexual objectification" she experienced from male activists while Meredith was exhausted by "male dominance" in activist communities. Jeff (white genderqueer person, fifties) burned out working with a racial justice organization "because of their heterosexism, ableism, and sexism".

Overall, participants were drained of energy and hope knowing they were not safe from oppression and ego clashes within communities of activists. They entered movements hoping for meaningful collaboration. Once in movements, they often felt beaten down by how they were treated by other activists, leading to burnout.

Discussion

In some ways, activist burnout causes uncovered in this study supported existing understandings of burnout. Participants had emotional ties and deep commitments to racial justice (Jacobsson and Lindblom 2013; Chen and Gorski 2015), coped with in-fighting within activist communities (Barry and Dordević 2007), and they were injured by the threat or reality of retaliation

for activism (Cox 2011). As in studies of burnout among peace activists (Pines 1994), feminist activists (Bernal 2006), and educational justice activists (Gorski and Chen 2015), causes to which participants attributed their burnout could be categorized as internal, external, and in-movement causes.

In terms of big-level understandings of burnout causes, the findings complicate “external causes”. Participants attributed their burnout to emotional-dispositional causes, backlash causes, structural causes, and in-movement causes. Although “backlash causes” and “structural causes” both might be understood as external causes, participants characterized them differently. Backlash causes related more to cumulative stress as activism rendered participants physically, economically, or vocationally vulnerable. Participants associated structural causes with exhaustion and hopelessness regarding the tenuousness of racial justice movements and frustration over what they characterized as the impossibility of significant change in the face of structural racism. Their attribution of burnout to structural causes was closely connected with internal causes – what I renamed emotional-dispositional causes because it felt more descriptive – such as intense commitments to racial justice. They experienced emotional exhaustion due to these commitments and physical exhaustion when these commitments led them to work themselves to exhaustion. When that did not produce evidence of more justice, they experienced hopelessness and cynicism, completing the burnout recipe.

Furthermore, as suggested in theoretical work about activist burnout (Maslach and Gomes 2006; Plyler 2006), the findings support the often-positated but rarely empirically evidenced notion that the most impactful burnout causes revolve around how activists treat one another. Participants spoke about emotional-dispositional, backlash, and structural causes as though they were expected. They expected backlash. They recognized their propensities for working to exhaustion. These were predictable burnout sources.

On average, participants spoke most incredulously about in-movement burnout causes – in-fighting, undermining, and oppression among activists. This is not quantifiable using qualitative data, but traces of evidence can be observed in participants’ words. Gerald felt “blindsided” by how fellow activists treated him. Deborah, undermined by white activists who refused to take direction from activists of colour, shared, “Clearly there’s tons of freaking white people who don’t get it.” They expected resistance from structures of power, but their responses to fellow activists’ behaviour were more specific and personal, characterized by words like “narcissistic” and “passive-aggressive”. Participants expected – or desperately wanted – activist communities to be safe from the oppression they experienced elsewhere. They found oppression reproduced with great precision in their movements.

This finding is particularly important considering the popularity of “self-care” as a burnout remedy. Further study should examine whether this

individualistic approach to burnout might reflect the competitive, uncooperative conditions within movements to which many participants attributed their burnout. Some scholars and activists have advocated shifting from a self-care to a community-care burnout orientation. Referring to racial justice activists, González (2015) urged a shift from self-care to community-building and the cultivation of “collective strength, wisdom, and beauty” (16) among activists. It is not just a matter of activists attending to their individual needs, but rather of movement leaders attending to the activist community’s needs. It is not just about activists reflecting on their own martyr syndromes, but also about reflecting on how they and their organizations contribute to a martyr syndrome epidemic. The shift starts with examining cultures within racial justice activist spaces, attending to the threat of burnout as part of activism rather than as something activists pursue outside activism (Perry 2014), as Hargons et al. (2017) argued in relation to Black Lives Matter. Findings of this study add credence to these shifts.

The findings also add nuance to understandings about how burnout might manifest differently in marginalized-identity activists – in this case, racial justice activists of colour – than in dominant-identity activists. With few exceptions, activist burnout scholarship has been silent on this matter. Those exceptions involve studies of or commentaries on burnout among activists in which scholars briefly mentioned ways marginalized-identity activists contend with burnout-inducing conditions from which dominant-identity activists are protected (Barry and Dordević 2007; Vaccaro and Mena 2011). For example, Cox (2011) suggested that marginalized-identity activists are more likely to experience police violence and physical attacks, elevating their burnout risk. Studies confirm his assertion: racial justice activists of colour in the United States are more likely than white activists to face police violence (Steinfeldt et al. 2012).

Others are related to in-movement causes. Mirroring findings of the present study, Gorski and Chen (2015) found that education activists of colour often identified racism from white activists as among the biggest causes of their burnout. Other previous studies, although not linking it to burnout, have detailed ways white activists assert their whiteness within racial justice movements, harming activists of colour and weakening movements’ effectiveness (Jacobs and Taylor 2011; Case 2012). Future research should examine these dynamics and their relationship with burnout more centrally.

Another important finding complicating understandings of activist burnout was that many participants of colour attributed their burnout, not just to conditions related to their activism, but also to racial battle fatigue (Smith 2004; Amos 2015): the accumulative effect of racism people of colour experience in their everyday lives. Activist burnout theory, built on examinations of activists’ experiences during their activism, has not been framed to consider how activists’ lives outside their activism interact with

their activist lives, despite research showing that activist persistence is related to the extent to which activists understand their everyday lives as interrelated with their activist lives (Rettig 2006) and despite research showing a correlation between high levels of perceived experiences with racism and anti-racism engagement (Szymanski and Lewis 2015). Considering this reality, activist burnout theory must evolve to consider how burnout in racial justice activists of colour is informed more generally by racism's impact on their lives.

The present study focused on racial justice activists in the United States, so the findings are not directly applicable to activists in other regional contexts. However, the findings can inform movement leaders in other contexts about the kinds of conditions that may perpetuate burnout. It is worth noting again how fashionable it has become for bloggers and journalists to write about self-care as a cure for burnout (e.g. Adams 2013; Obear 2017) while only rarely addressing how activists treat one another or differentiating the experiences of activists of colour from white activists (e.g. Corvid 2017). In every context in which structural racism persists, movement leaders should attend to its implications within racial justice movements. Similarly, everywhere activists of colour are still subject to racism outside their activism, racial battle fatigue will impact their activism. Even if specific dynamics related to causes of activist burnout differ across regional contexts, these broader conditions will persist.

Conclusion

Although this study was the first to examine causes of activist burnout among racial justice activists, scholars who have studied burnout in other movements have described it as a formidable barrier to movement sustainability. With activist burnout theory still evolving, one purpose of this study was to complement understandings of burnout causes by examining them within racial justice activists. Findings uncovered patterns of burnout causes found in other social justice movements, but also complicated those patterns by distinguishing two types of external burnout causes: backlash causes and structural causes. Findings also advanced calls for evolving conceptualizations of activist burnout to consider ways it operates differently in activists of colour and white activists.

Some limitations should be noted. Although this study's sample size was substantial according to phenomenological research standards (Creswell 2013), it is not large enough to generalize racial justice activists' burnout. Further study could use quantitative methods to reach broader understandings of the scope of activist burnout and allow for comparisons by identity and other factors. Additionally, findings of this study should be understood as reflecting a moment in time. Although racism always is rampant in the

United States, President Trump's incitation of violence against racial justice activists may have informed some participants' characterizations of causes for their burnout.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

References

- Adams, C. 2013. "Activist Burn-out Is Real." *Bluestockings Magazine Online*, July 16. <http://bluestockingsmag.com/2013/07/16/activist-burn-out-is-real/>.
- Amos, Y. 2015. "'Alien' Troublemakers and Nonthreatening Pets at a Predominantly White University." In *Racial Battle Fatigue: Insights From the Front Lines of Social Justice Advocacy*, edited by Jennifer Martin, 67–79. Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger.
- Bakker, A. B., and P. L. Costa. 2014. "Chronic Job Burnout and Daily Functioning: A Theoretical Analysis." *Burnout Research* 1 (3): 112–119.
- Barry, J., and J. Dordević. 2007. *What's the Point of Revolution if We Can't Dance?* Boulder, CO: Urgent Action Fund for Women's Rights.
- Bernal, M. 2006. *Self-care and Self-Defense Manual for Feminist Activists*. New Delhi: CREA.
- Beydoun, K., and J. Hansford. 2017. "The F.B.I.'s Dangerous Crackdown on 'Black Identity Extremists.'" *New York Times Online*, November 15. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/15/opinion/black-identity-extremism-fbi-trump.html>.
- Blaisdell, B. 2016. "Schools as Racial Spaces: Understanding and Resisting Structural Racism." *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 29 (2): 248–272. doi:10.1080/009518398.2015.1023228.
- Bunnage, L. A. 2014. "Social Movement Engagement Over the Long Haul: Understanding Activist Retention." *Sociology Compass* 8 (4): 433–445. doi:10.1111/soc4.12141.
- Carney, N. 2016. "All Lives Matter, But So Does Race." *Humanity and Society* 40 (2): 180–199. doi:10.1177/0160597616643868.
- Case, K. A. 2012. "Discovering the Privilege of Whiteness: White Women's Reflections on Anti-Racist Identity and Ally Behavior." *Journal of Social Issues* 68 (1): 78–96.
- Chen, C. W., and P. C. Gorski. 2015. "Burnout in Social Justice and Human Rights Activists: Symptoms, Causes, and Implications." *Journal of Human Rights Practice* 7 (3): 366–390.
- Corvid, M. 2017. "I Am Critiquing Your Protesting Because I Don't Want You to Burn Out." *The Establishment*, January 23. <https://theestablishment.co/why-i-will-not-wear-a-pussy-hat-7a75560004e>.
- Cox, L. 2011. *How Do We Keep Going? Activist Burnout and Sustainability in Social Movements*. Helsinki: Into-ebooks.
- Creswell, J. W. 2013. *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches*. Los Angeles, CA: Sage.
- Davenport, C., S. A. Soule, and D. A. Armstrong. 2011. "Protesting While Black?." *American Sociological Review* 76 (1): 152–178. doi:10.1177/0003122410395370.
- Effler, E. S. 2010. *Laughing Saints and Righteous Heroes: Emotional Rhythms in Social Movement Groups*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Eichstedt, J. L. 2001. "Problematic White Identities and a Search for Racial Justice." *Sociological Forum* 16 (3): 445–470.

- Finlay, L. 2009. "Debating Phenomenological Research." *Phenomenology and Practice* 3 (1): 6–25. doi:10.1007/978-94-6091-834-6_2.
- Freudenberger, H. J. 1974. "Staff Burnout." *Journal of Social Issues* 30: 159–165. doi:10.1111/j.1540-4560.1974.tb00706.x.
- Gomes, M. 1992. "The Rewards and Stresses of Social Change." *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* 32 (4): 138–146. doi:10.1777/0022167892324008.
- González, J. A. 2015. "Anti-Racist Activism and Community Self-Care at the University of Michigan." *Souls* 17 (1–2): 11–19.
- Goodwin, J. 1997. "The Libidinal Constitution of a High-Risk Social Movement: Affectual Ties and Solidarity in the Huk Rebellion, 1946 to 1954." *American Sociological Review* 62: 53–69.
- Gorski, P. C. 2015. "Relieving Burnout and the 'Martyr Syndrome' Among Social Justice Education Activists: The Implications and Effects of Mindfulness." *The Urban Review* 47: 696–716.
- Gorski, P. C., and C. W. Chen. 2015. "'Frayed All Over:' The Causes and Consequences of Activist Burnout Among Social Justice Education Activists." *Educational Studies* 51 (5): 385–405.
- Hargons, C., D. Mosley, J. Falconer, R. Faloughi, A. Singh, D. Stevens-Watkins, and K. Cokley. 2017. "Black Lives Matter: A Call to Action for Counseling Psychology Leaders." *The Counseling Psychologist* 45 (6): 873–901. doi:10.1177/0011000017733048.
- Huber, L. P. 2016. "'Make America Great Again!': Donald Trump, Racist Nativism and the Virulent Adherence to White Supremacy Amid US Demographic Change." *Charleston Law Review* 10: 215–249.
- Jacobs, M. R., and T. Taylor. 2011. "Challenges of Multiracial Antiracist Activism: Racial Consciousness and Chief Wahoo." *Critical Sociology* 38 (5): 687–706.
- Jacobsson, K., and J. Lindblom. 2013. "Emotion Work in Animal Rights Activism." *Acta Sociologica* 56 (1): 55–68. doi:10.1177/0001699312466180.
- Jasper, J. M. 1998. "The Emotions of Protest: Affective and Reactive Emotions In and Around Social Movements." *Sociological Forum* 13: 397–424. doi:10.1023/A:1022175308081.
- Jones, P. 2007. *Aftershock: Confronting Trauma in a Violent World: A Guide for Activists and Their Allies*. New York: Lantern Books.
- Jonsson, T. 2016. "The Narrative Reproduction of White Feminist Racism." *Feminist Review* 113 (1): 50–67. doi:10.1057/fr.2016.2.
- Khan, A. 2015. "Activist Burnout Is Real – And You Probably Need to Read These 4 Ways to Manage It." *Everyday Feminism*, May 27. <http://everydayfeminism.com/2015/05/dealing-with-activist-burnout/>.
- Kovan, J. T., and J. M. Dirkx. 2003. "'Being Called Awake': The Role of Transformative Learning in the Lives of Environmental Activists." *Adult Education Quarterly* 53 (2): 99–118. doi:10.1177/0741713602238906.
- Leondar-Wright, B. 2014. *Missing Class: Strengthening Social Movement Groups by Seeing Class Cultures*. Ithaca, NY: ILR Press.
- Lorde, A. 1988. *A Burst of Light*. Ithaca, NY: Firebrand Books.
- Lowan-Trudeau, G. 2016. "A Rose by Any Other Name: Repressive Tolerance, Burnout and Hope in the New West." *Canadian Journal of Environmental Education* 21: 57–71.
- Mallett, R. K., J. R. Huntsinger, S. Sinclair, and J. K. Swim. 2008. "Seeing Through Their Eyes: When Majority Group Members Take Collective Action on Behalf of an Outgroup." *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations* 11 (4): 451–470.

- Maslach, C., and M. E. Gomes. 2006. "Overcoming Burnout." In *Working for Peace: A Handbook of Practical Psychology*, edited by R. MacNair, 100–113. San Luis Obispo, CA: Impact.
- Mathis-Lilley, B. 2017. "How Trump Has Cultivated the White Supremacist Alt-Right for Years." *Slate Online*, August 14. http://www.slate.com/blogs/the_slatest/2017/08/14/donald_trump_s_ties_to_alt_right_white_supremacists_are_extensive.html.
- McDonald, K. B. 1997. "Black Activist Mothering: A Historical Intersection of Race, Gender, and Class." *Gender and Society* 11: 773–795.
- McFadden, P., A. Campbell, and B. Taylor. 2014. "Resilience and Burnout in Child Protection Social Work: Individual and Organisational Themes from a Systematic Literature Review." *British Journal of Social Work* 45 (5): 1546–1563.
- Mickey, R., S. Levitsky, and L. A. Way. 2017. "Is America Still Safe for Democracy? Why the United States Is in Danger of Backsliding." *Foreign Affairs* 96: 29.
- Norwood, G. 2013. *Promoting Self Care and Well-Being Among Feminist Activists and Women's Rights Defenders: Reflections from Burma and Palestine*. Santa Fe, NM: Upaya Zen Center.
- Obear, K. 2017. "5 Practical Strategies to Overcome Burnout When You're a Change Agent." *Alliance for Change Website*, October 3. <https://drkathyobear.com/life-lessons/change-agent-self-care/>.
- Perry, B. D. 2014. *The Cost of Caring: Secondary Traumatic Stress and the Impact of Working with High-Risk Children and Families*. Houston, TX: ChildTrauma Academy.
- Pigni, A. 2013. "Practising Mindfulness at the Checkpoint." *Open Democracy*, July 17. <http://www.opendemocracy.net/transformation/alessandra-pigni/practising-mindfulness-at-checkpoint>.
- Pigni, A. 2016. *The Idealist's Survival Kit: 75 Simple Ways to Avoid Burnout*. Berkeley, CA: Parralax Press.
- Pines, A. M. 1994. "Burnout in Political Activism: An Existential Perspective." *Journal of Health and Human Resources Administration* 16 (4): 381–394.
- Plyler, J. 2006. "How to Keep on Keeping on: Sustaining Ourselves in Community Organizing and Social Justice Struggles." *Upping the Anti* 3: 123–134.
- Pogrebin, L. C. 1994. "Staying Fired Up: Antidotes for Activist Burnout." *Tikkun* 9: 35–38.
- Rettig, H. 2006. *The Lifelong Activist: How to Change the World Without Losing Your Way*. New York: Lantern Books.
- Rodgers, K. 2010. "'Anger Is Why We're All Here': Mobilizing and Managing Emotions in a Professional Activist Organization." *Social Movement Studies* 9: 273–291. doi:10.1080/14742837.2010.493660.
- Ross, R. 2017. "Avoid Activism Fatigue and Burnout in General." *HuffPost*, March 21. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/avoid-activism-fatigue-and-burnout-in-general_us_58cf0744e4b07112b6472f18.
- Smith, W. A. 2004. "Black Faculty Coping with Racial Battle Fatigue: The Campus Racial Climate in a Post-Civil Rights Era." In *A Long Way to Go: Conversations About Race by African American Faculty and Graduate Students at Predominantly White Institutions*, edited by D. Cleveland, 171–190. New York: Peter Lang.
- Steinfeldt, J. A., B. D. Foltz, J. R. LaFollette, M. R. White, Y. J. Wong, and M. C. Steinfeldt. 2012. "Perspectives of Social Justice Activists: Advocating Against Native-Themed Mascots, Nicknames, and Logos." *The Counseling Psychologist* 40 (3): 326–362.
- Szymanski, D. M. 2012. "Racist Events and Individual Coping Styles as Predictors of African American Activism." *Journal of Black Psychology* 38: 342–367. doi:10.1177/0095798411424744.

- Szymanski, D. M., and J. A. Lewis. 2015. "Race-related Stress and Racial Identity as Predictors of African American Activism." *Journal of Black Psychology* 41 (2): 170–191. doi:10.1177/0095798414520707.
- Talcott, M. 2014. "Together We Have Power: Personal Traumas and Political Responses Among Activist Oaxaqueñas." *Latin American Perspectives* 41 (1): 72–88. doi:10.1177/0094582X13492142.
- Taylor, V., and L. Rupp. 2002. "Loving Internationalism: The Emotion Culture of Transnational Women's Organizations." *Mobilization* 7 (2): 141–158.
- Vaccaro, A., and J. Mena. 2011. "It's Not Burnout, It's More: Queer College Activists of Color and Mental Health." *Journal of Gay and Lesbian Mental Health* 15 (4): 339–367. doi:10.1080/19359705.2011.600656.
- Warren, M. R. 2010. *Fire in the Heart: How White Activists Embrace Racial Justice*. New York: Oxford University Press.