

Racism, whiteness, and burnout in antiracism movements: How white racial justice activists elevate burnout in racial justice activists of color in the United States

Ethnicities

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journals.sagepub.com/home/etn**Paul C Gorski**

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Fairfax, VA, USA**Abstract**

Social movement scholars have described activist burnout—when the stressors of activism become so overwhelming they debilitate activists' abilities to remain engaged—as a formidable threat to the sustainability of social movements. However, studies designed to map the causes of burnout have failed to account for ways burnout might operate differently for privileged-identity activists such as white antiracism activists and marginalized-identity activists such as antiracism activists of color. Building on previous studies of activist burnout in racial justice activists and examinations of the roles of white activists in antiracism movements, this study represents one attempt to fill this gap. We analyzed data from interviews with racial justice activists of color in the United States who have experienced burnout to identify the ways they attributed their burnout to the attitudes and behaviors—the *racism*—of white activists. These included (1) harboring unevolved or racist views, (2) undermining or invalidating the racial justice work of activists of color, (3) being unwilling to step up and take action when needed,

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(4) exhibiting white fragility, and (5) taking credit for participants' racial justice work and ideas. Implications for racial justice movements and the participation of white activists are discussed.

Keywords

Racism, whiteness, activism, burnout, racial justice, social movements

Introduction

Racial justice activists endure a variety of stressors that could impact their abilities to remain engaged and effective in their activism. Some face violence, or threats of violence, from institutions or individuals hostile to their activism, including law enforcement officers (Davenport et al., 2011). Some experience economic vulnerability, especially if they bring their activist commitments into non-activist workplaces (Gorski, 2018b). Many struggle to cope emotionally with profound levels of awareness of structural racism and its implications for communities of color (Blaisdell, 2016). Others are worn down by judgmentalism and in-fighting within activist communities (Plyler, 2006).

Social movement scholars have used the term *activist burnout* to describe when stress associated with these conditions wreaks so much havoc on activists' emotional or physical health that their abilities to remain effective and engaged in their activism are compromised (Chen and Gorski, 2015; Cox, 2011). More than nagging frustration or temporary weariness, activist burnout is a long-term and accumulative condition that can be mentally and physically debilitating (Maslach and Gomes, 2006). It can have dire consequences for individual activists, often forcing them to disengage from movements in which they had invested considerable portions of their lives. Equally important, it can destabilize movements, creating high rates of turnover (Rodgers, 2010) and deteriorating interactivist relationships (Plyler, 2006). Pogrebin (1994) thusly characterized activist burnout as the deterioration of the well-being of activists resulting in the deterioration of social justice movements. He and several other social movement scholars have described activist burnout as among the most formidable barriers to movement persistence and success (Cox, 2011; Pigni, 2016).

Any activist can be susceptible to activism-associated stressors and, as a result, to activist burnout. However, studies on activist burnout and persistence have begun to show that their impact is not distributed equally. For example, research has shown that women activists face intensified levels of public ridicule and invalidation when compared with their male colleagues (Bernal, 2006; Norwood, 2013). Similarly, activists of color cope with intensified hostilities in response to their activism when compared with white activists, including higher levels of criminalization (Davenport et al., 2011) and general violence in response to their activism

(Jacobs and Taylor, 2011). In the United States, racial justice activists of color contend with the stressors to which all activists are susceptible while also coping with the impact of structural racism in their lives and in their activism (Gorski, 2018a)—an impact from which white racial justice activists are protected.

In two recent studies on the causes of activist burnout in US racial justice activists, Gorski (2018a, 2018b) began to uncover a distinction in how activists of color and white activists characterized causes of their burnout. In those studies, based on interviews with racial justice activists who had experienced burnout, participants of color identified among many sources of burnout the way they were treated by white racial justice activists within their movements—not white people in general, but white *activists*—as one primary cause. They shared how they grew emotionally and physically exhausted coping with the ways white activists carried their privilege and entitlement into racial justice movements—how it deteriorated their well-being, contributing to their burnout.

Although some racial justice scholars have described ways white antiracism activists can undermine activists of color and racial justice movements in general (e.g. Jonsson, 2016; Mallett et al., 2008)—we synthesize this scholarship in the literature review—activist burnout scholars have been slow to incorporate these conditions into their scholarship. Causes of activist burnout generally have been described without consideration for how racism, sexism, and other forms of oppression operate within anti-oppression movements. In order to begin to unpack these conditions, we reexamined interviews with the 22 activists of color in the United States interviewed for Gorski's (2018a, 2018b) previous studies—activists of color who have experienced activist burnout—in order to capture in greater detail how they described the role white racial justice activists played in causing their burnout. Although drawing from the same interview data, this study differs from the previous two in that (a) it focuses specifically on how activists of color attribute their burnout to the behaviors and attitudes of white activists rather than focusing, as in Gorski's (2018a) first study, on the full spectrum of burnout causes across a sample of both white activists and activists of color, and (b) it focuses on activists of color whose racial justice work spans a wide variety of contexts rather than focusing, as in Gorski's (2018b) second study, specifically on those based at institutions of higher education.

This study is contextualized in the existing literature on activist burnout—the process, according to Maslach and Gomes (2006), by which the stressors of activism become so chronic and overwhelming that “the initial ‘fire’ of enthusiasm, dedication, and commitment...‘burn out’, leaving behind the smoldering embers of exhaustion, cynicism, and ineffectiveness” (p. 43). More specifically, it emerges from the body of activist burnout scholarship in which scholars detail common burnout causes. Research on burnout in racial justice activists is thin. However, the causes of burnout identified through that research have been largely consistent with causes identified in studies of peace (Pines, 1994), feminist (Barry and Dordević, 2007), educational justice (Gorski and Chen, 2015), and other social justice activists. These causes generally revolve around three burnout cause

categories: (1) internal causes associated with the pressure activists put on themselves due to deep levels of commitment to social causes (Lowan-Trudeau, 2016; Pines, 1994), (2) external causes associated with retaliatory repercussions of challenging institutionalized power and structural injustice (Jones, 2007; Pigni, 2013), and (3) within-movement causes associated with how activists treat one another and how activists are treated by social movement organizations (Plyler, 2006; Rettig, 2006). Unfortunately, as stated earlier, activist burnout scholarship has failed to account for what Gorski's (2018a, 2018b) previous studies began to show constitute one cause of burnout in racial justice activists of color: coping with the attitudes and behaviors of white racial justice activists. As such, we adopted a grounded theory approach. We examined interview data gathered from activists of color who have experienced burnout in order to develop new insights, through their stories, about the nature of activist burnout.

Embracing conceptualizations of "activists" used in previous activist burnout studies (Gorski and Chen, 2015; Pines, 1994), "racial justice activists" and "antiracism activists" in this study are people who identify antiracism activism as their primary lifework. Following Szymanski's (2012) study on the experiences of racial justice activists, "activism" is action taken to effect social or political change. Although a small number of participants worked full time for racial justice organizations, most participated in their activism outside their non-activist jobs (see Table 1 for a summary of participant identities and areas of activist focus).

Researcher positionalities

Paul is a white, cisgender, heterosexual, middle-class man who has been a racial and economic justice activist for nearly 25 years. He has never experienced full-fledged activist burnout, but he has experienced and observed conditions that often are associated with it. He feels particularly connected to this issue due to his role as a mentor to young activists, predominantly women of color—a role he has played as a professor teaching social justice-oriented courses and as a community activist. He recognizes that his privileged identities can make it difficult for him to recognize and understand the nuances described by participants of this study.

Noura is a Palestinian-American, cisgender, middle-class woman, with the benefit of higher education and fluency in two languages. She has been active in social justice movements in the United States and the Middle East for two decades in her capacity as a student activist, a community organizer, an employee of a national advocacy organization, and a human rights attorney. Most recently, her move to the academy has given her a comfortable distance from which to observe movement work and become involved in her capacity as a scholar-activist. She has experienced activist burnout at least three times over the course of her involvement in movement work. She is aware of her privileges as well as the risk of over-identifying with the participants and projecting her experiences onto their narratives.

Table 1. Participant demographics.

Participant pseudonyms	Race	Gender	Socioeconomic status	Years of activist experience	Primary focus of racial justice activism
Alejandro	Latino	Male	Middle class	13	Educational opportunity
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
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 access
Nicole	African American	Female	Working class	18	Mass incarceration
Norman	Asian American	Male	Middle class	18	Private schools
Rochelle	African American	Female	Middle class	24	Juvenile justice
Rosa	Latina	Female	Working class	15	Undocumented immigrant rights

Literature review

This study is situated at the nexus of two primary knowledge bases. The first, drawn from the larger literature on activist burnout, is scholarship on its causes—especially the within-movement causes related to how activists treat one another. The second is the thin, but growing, scholarship on the attitudes and behaviors of white racial justice activists and their implications for activists of color.

Within-movement causes of activist burnout

Rettig (2006) described activist burnout as when activists are forced to disengage involuntarily from their activism due to the accumulative effects of

activism-related stressors. Scholars have begun to identify the primary causes of activist burnout, mapping the conditions that most often contribute to these stressors. As mentioned earlier, these conditions generally have been synthesized into three categories: internal, external, and within-movement causes (Gorski and Chen, 2015). Although most studies on activist burnout have focused on peace, feminist, educational justice, and other movements (see, e.g. Pines, 1994), the couple of studies on burnout in racial justice activism (Gorski, 2018a, 2018b) drawn from the same data as the current study, confirmed the relevance of these three cause categories when it comes to patterns of burnout in racial justice activists.

For example, activists attribute their burnout to in-fighting, ego-clashes, and judgmentalism within their movements (Nair, 2004; Norwood, 2013). They grow frustrated, then exhausted, enduring intergenerational tensions among activists, and movement cultures that foster competition rather than cooperation (Gomes, 1992; Maslach and Gomes, 2006). Activists even point to the reproduction of the conditions they joined movements to fight—racism, sexism, and heterosexism, for example—within their movements as a significant cause of their burnout (Finn, 1990; Gorski, 2018a).

The present study was compelled, in part, by one notable difference between the findings from the aforementioned studies on the causes of burnout in racial justice activists and those from studies on burnout in other activists. In every case, within-movement conditions proved in previous studies to be a major burnout cause (e.g. Plyler, 2006; Vaccaro and Mena, 2011). In Gorski's (2018a, 2018b) studies of racial justice activists, however, activists' attributions of their burnout to within-movement conditions appeared intensified relative to their discussion of internal or external causes. Based on interviews with 30 racial justice activists who had experienced burnout—the larger sample, which included both white activists and activists of color, from which the present study's participants were pulled—Gorski (2018a) concluded that participants described internal and external burnout causes as though they were predictable costs of activism: "They expected backlash. They recognized their propensities for working to exhaustion. These were predictable burnout sources" (p. 15). Participants described within-movement causes with elevated incredulity, often saying explicitly they were the primary causes of their burnout. Many participants described it as especially devastating when they found the tensions, judgments, and ego clashes they experienced from non-activists reproduced within activist spaces. No previous study has specifically and deeply examined the impact of these sorts of within-movement tensions on activist burnout. This finding was our impetus to look more closely at these tensions within the stories of the participants of color from that previous study. They became the sample for the current study.

White activists and the burnout of activists of color

A small subset of scholarship on racial justice activism examines the ways white racial justice activists carry privilege and entitlement into racial justice movements.

Although white racial justice activists tend to philosophically embrace a critical consciousness regarding their whiteness and racial positionalities (Eichstedt, 2001; Warren, 2010), many struggle to apply that consciousness in antiracist practice (Case, 2012; Jacobs and Taylor, 2011). As a result, they risk undermining movement initiatives and impeding movement progress.

For example, Jonsson (2016) described how white racial justice activists tend to appropriate antiracist organizations by usurping power from activists of color. In their study of a racial justice grassroots organization, Jacobs and Taylor (2011) found that white activists wanted activists of color to assume leadership, but that this was less about a desire to be in service to leaders of color than a desire to relinquish responsibility for engaging deeply in the organization's work. In her study of white racial justice activists, Case (2012) determined that, despite dedication to racial justice ideals, many struggled to recognize manifestations of racism that were obvious to activists of color. A study by Warren (2010) showed that white activists tended to carry defensiveness, a symptom of white guilt, into their movements, potentially undermining the possibility of effective and efficient collective action. The scholars who conducted these studies did not connect their findings explicitly to burnout in activists of color. However, they described conditions that could exacerbate the threat of burnout for activists of color by reproducing racism within antiracism movements.

A couple of essays about activist burnout and persistence have alluded to ways that sexism could exacerbate burnout in women feminist activists (Barry and Dordević, 2007; Bernal, 2006), but these studies referred to how women activists were treated by forces outside their movements. Scholarship on activist burnout has only recently considered how these sorts of oppressive conditions within social movements—conditions dominant-identity activists (such as white racial justice activists) cause for marginalized-identity activists (such as racial justice activists of color)—differently inform their burnout experiences. Based on the aforementioned previous studies of burnout causes in racial justice activists, Gorski (2018a, 2018b) reported that, among other within-movement causes, activists of color commonly attributed their burnout to racism they experienced from white racial justice activists, white “allies,” who undermined their work, refused to accept leadership from activists of color, and took credit for their ideas.

Those previous studies focused *broadly* on burnout causes in racial justice movements—internal, external, and within-movement causes. Given this breadth and the need to describe findings from a variety of burnout causes, they did not deeply or specifically explicate the relationship between burnout in activists of color and the behaviors and attitudes of white activists—the objective of this study. In fact, previous to this study, no study has focused specifically and deeply on how the behaviors and attitudes of white racial justice activists contribute to burnout in racial justice activists of color. The only study we could find that began to address these conditions was Vaccaro and Mena's (2011) study of the mental health implications of activist engagement for queer college activists of color. They described how, among other stressors, participants experienced racial alienation within

majority-white queer justice organizations. Although they did not provide much detail about the behaviors and attitudes among white queer justice activists that alienated the activists who participated in their study, Vaccaro and Mena (2011) appear to be the first scholars to at least allude to this sort of tension in a study related to activist burnout.

Methodology

Due to the thinness of existing scholarship on the impact for activists of color of white activists' engagement in racial justice movements, and the near-absence in this scholarship of analyses regarding the relationship between this impact and activist burnout, we opted to embrace a grounded theory approach. Charmaz (2013) argued that grounded theory offers flexibility to produce fresh analyses, especially when studying social justice related phenomena largely unexplored in existing scholarship. Due to our interests in racial justice and with the sustainability of fellow activists and racial justice movements, we embraced Charmaz's (2008) framing of constructivist grounded theory, understanding that the research process is interactive and informed by the researchers' positionalities—that data are, in essence, co-constructed by researchers and participants. Our hope was to begin to develop an understanding of the relationship between burnout in the racial justice activists of color we interviewed and the challenges they face coping with the behaviors and attitudes of white activists.

Participants

The focus of our analysis was a series of 22 semi-structured interviews of racial justice activists of color in the United States who had experienced activist burnout. These interviews were drawn from a larger sample of 30 interviews with racial justice activists—both of color and white—who had experienced burnout and comprised the data for Gorski's (2018a, 2018b) previous studies of burnout in racial justice activists. They met two criteria. They (a) identified racial justice activism as their primary lifework and (b) reported experiencing burnout from their engagement in racial justice activism. In order to avoid confusion about popular uses of burnout, prospective participants were provided a description of activist burnout based on existing social movement scholarship as synthesized earlier (Maslach and Gomes, 2006; Rettig, 2006) and chosen only after confirming they had experienced burnout according to that description. Due to our specific interest in how activists of color characterized the roles of white activist allies in their burnout, we excluded white participants and included all participants of color from the original sample.

Participants in that original sample were identified through snowball sampling. Social media posts were used to recruit activists interested in participating. Sites used by antiracism activists, such as the Facebook page of the White Privilege

Conference, were targeted. We invited potential participants reached in this manner to send the request to others potentially interested in participating.

Participants were diverse identity-wise and in terms of the racial justice issues they addressed in their activism. We assigned each a pseudonym and avoided using potentially identifying institution or place names to protect their anonymity. Table 1 provides an overview of participants' identities and activist foci.

Data collection

The interview protocol, which was crafted based on understandings of activist burnout gleaned from existing burnout theory (Cox, 2011; Maslach and Gomes, 2006) and from previous studies on the causes of activist burnout in social justice activists (Chen and Gorski, 2015; Plyler, 2006), contained 12 open-ended items constructed to elicit participants' stories about the symptoms, causes, and consequences of their burnout. When it came to the causes of their burnout, participants were asked to identify the primary causes, the extent to which they attributed their burnout to conditions inside and outside their organizations or movements, and how they would describe those conditions. Participants were not asked specifically about their experiences with white activists or any other specific potential cause of burnout.

Social movement scholars who would have been eligible to participate were invited to review and share feedback on the instrument. The final protocol reflected their feedback.

We focused in the present study on burnout causes and particularly on those related to engagement with white racial justice activists. However, due to the open-ended nature of the interviews, participants often described burnout symptoms, causes, and consequences simultaneously. As a result, all data in the 22 interviews were examined in an attempt to understand how participants characterized the impact of white activists on their burnout.

Interviews, conducted in person or via telephone or teleconference, lasted 60–90 minutes. In several cases, we requested follow-up interviews to clarify participant responses.

Analysis

We analyzed data using Strauss and Corbin's (1990) three-tiered coding approach. First, using open coding, we arranged data by general themes. For example, a theme that emerged early in the analysis was that participants did not feel they could trust the intentions of white activists. Then, we reexamined data organized by these big themes, looking for patterns and relationships in order to delineate more specific subthemes—a process called axial coding by Strauss and Corbin (1990). We found, for example, that participants characterized the relationship between their distrust for white activists and their burnout more specifically around ways they felt undermined by white activists who softened the politics of

racial justice work and ways they felt white activists failed to prepare themselves with sufficient understandings of structural racism. The researchers engaged in open and axial coding separately, then met to compare and discuss what we found until we reached consensus on major themes and subthemes. Lastly, we collaboratively used Strauss and Corbin's (1990) collective coding to revisit these subthemes with the goal of identifying each one's intricacies and relationships with the others. These became our primary findings.

Quality and trustworthiness

We took several actions to attend to quality and trustworthiness, starting with participant selection and data collection. In an effort to strengthen credibility, we used a form of member checking (Lincoln and Guba, 1985), inviting participants to review transcripts and notes from their interviews. Additionally, we practiced triangulation, incorporating both analyst triangulation (using both researchers to examine data and findings separately) and theory triangulation (examining data both through activist burnout theory and elements of critical race theory) into our analysis process (Creswell, 2007).

For the purposes of conformability, we reflected constantly on our positionalities as researchers and how they might influence our data collection and analysis. Specifically, we followed two suggested processes for reflexivity (Merriam, 2009). First, we engaged in ongoing dialogue throughout our collaboration as co-researchers coming from very different perspectives and identities, allowing us to question and reflect on our own and one another's biases and presumptions related to the research process and findings. Second, we crafted researcher positionality statements in order to help readers understand our potential subjectivities.

Findings

Overall, of the 22 racial justice activists in our sample, 18 (82%) identified the behaviors and attitudes of white racial justice activists as a major source of their burnout. This finding is notable, again, in light of the fact that participants were not asked specifically about white activists. They were asked open-ended questions about, for example, the extent to which their activist burnout could be attributed to "conditions within racial justice organizations and movements."

In this section, we report findings from an analysis of how those 18 activists of color characterized the ways white activists contributed to their burnout. Analysis resulted in five cause themes: (a) harboring unevolved or racist views, (b) undermining or invalidating participants' racial justice work, (c) being unwilling to step up and take action when needed, (d) exhibiting white fragility, and (e) taking credit for participants' racial justice work and ideas. Although some of these themes overlap—participants described individual experiences that could fit into more than one theme—we distinguished them in order to delineate the variety of ways

white activist engagement in racial justice activism can be associated with burnout among activists of color.

Harboring unevolved or racist views

Thirteen participants (72.2%) attributed their burnout, in part, to unevolved or racist views among white activists. They described activists who failed to enter movements with the depth of understanding necessary to contribute to movement goals or who failed to engage without unleashing their privilege and entitlement onto activists of color. Participants felt disappointed and emotionally exhausted regularly encountering white people within their movements who espoused racist views. As Gerald emphasized, his frustration with white people who self-identify as activists is “more challenging if it’s [somebody] you’ve been partnering with” who is espousing racist views, such as by “say[ing] something from a very cultural deficit perspective.” White activists’ lack of understanding of racism and habit of carrying racist views into racial justice spaces imposed a burden on activists of color. They were forced to expend activist energies teaching white “allies” about racism and withstanding pushback from white activists who refused to scrutinize themselves, hastening their burnout.

Rosa captured many participants’ disappointment with the lack of preparation of white activists and with having to shoulder the burden of educating them, often in the face of resistance. Her burnout was exacerbated when she learned over and over that:

...my [white] allies aren’t really the allies I thought they were...As an educator I know everyone is developing from wherever they are...But I feel like if we’re colleagues you should at the very least listen to what I’m saying. At least try to understand where I’m coming from. So my burnout comes from being everyone’s teacher, including people I think should know better.

Several participants attributed their burnout, in part, to white activists who were resistant to learning from activists of color and who often perceived themselves as more racially conscious than they actually were. Anna’s burnout was elevated by “white males who...think they know it all and have never researched [racism], have never talked to other people about it; they just ‘know’. And they act on what they know and...there you go.” Coping with this attitude among white activists and its implications exacerbated burnout-inducing stress for participants, whose understandings and commitments were based, not only on trainings and literature but also on lived experiences they could not escape. In this spirit, Nicole grew exhausted coping with the lack of lived knowledge among white activists, especially when mixed with delusional perceptions of expertise. She shared:

It’s just crazy to me. How can you represent a community that you don’t derive from or have done some extensive work in—fieldwork, on the ground grassroots work?

I don't understand it . . . They just read a couple books and did a couple of workshops and it validates their expertise. That's crazy to me.

Reflecting Warren's (2010) description of white activist defensiveness, participants also attributed their burnout to instances when white racial justice colleagues took instructive critique personally. As Jonathan explained, when he tries to point out a white activist's privilege, "all hell breaks loose." Deborah described the stress she endures explaining to white activists that racial justice work is not about "targeting an entire race. We are targeting the system." It is racial privilege, she pointed out, "that allows . . . [white activists] to [not understand] the complications of this systemic racism." Even when participants endured the stress of spending their activist energy explaining racism to white activists—activists who, in their view, demonstrated entitlement simply by entering movements without the basic understandings necessary to engage effectively—they often were met with stress-inducing defensiveness. (We discuss this defensiveness and its relationship to white fragility in more detail later.)

Participants attributed their burnout to a variety of other manifestations of white activists' shallow understandings of racism. One highlighted a white activist referring to an acquaintance as a "black friend" and using a racial slur to describe that friend. Another described a white activist saying, "I hate the Confederate flag" to earn social affirmation from activists of color while harboring significant misunderstandings about the historical significance of Confederate symbols. In other cases white activists' racial justice vocabulary and theoretical knowledge masked deeper, unexamined, racism. Rochelle shared how she initially was drawn to a white activist who had well-cultivated racial justice vocabulary and theoretical knowledge, but eventually learned in practice that "she was often the bigot and the racist in a group."

Encounters with white activists' racist views were not only stressful but, over time, affected how participants saw themselves as people and activists. Mirroring the stories of several participants, Nicole explained that the inability or unwillingness of white activists to understand how whiteness is socially constructed to reify and justify racism frustrated her to such an extent it deteriorated her effectiveness as an activist—a key sign of burnout. "Anger wouldn't allow me to tap into my higher self," she shared.

Undermining or invalidating racial justice work

Eight participants (44.4%) attributed their burnout in part to white activists undermining their racial justice efforts and invalidating their perspectives as activists of color. In the worst cases, white "allies" attempted to sabotage them and disrupt racial justice initiatives. These experiences exacerbated a sense of frustration and mistrust within the organizations in which participants were involved.

The frustration stemmed, in part, from an expectation among participants that their lived experiences in marginalized communities should afford them some authority in racial justice movements. Capturing many participants' feelings, Deborah explained, "White allies need to understand that . . . [they] need to take directions from us." Many participants described specific experiences in which

white activists instead minimized or silenced their expertise. For example, Nicole shared how a white activist asked her to collaborate on a racial justice initiative in a Black community, then ignored her advice. Like other participants, the way she was treated by her white activist colleague made her feel invisible even though, as an African American woman, she felt she had more expertise and experience than him. Andrew recounted witnessing white male activists speaking excessively in meetings, marginalizing women of color. He described this as a “double whammy”: “They are getting hit from all sides and their voices often...are never heard.” Like many participants, Andrew’s intersectional consciousness as an activist of color heightened his sensitivity to micro- and macro-aggressions, intensifying the impact of his frustration with white activists. These experiences led him and other participants to distrust white activists, making collaboration inefficient and mentally exhausting.

Participants also attributed their burnout to white activists asking them to temper their emotions. Notably, research on racial justice activist engagement shows that individuals’ experiences with structural racism is an important predictor of engagement—the more individuals perceive they are impacted by structural racism, the more likely they are to engage in antiracism activism (Szymanski, 2012; Szymanski and Lewis, 2015). So it became an additional stressor when white activists asked participants to swallow their emotions; it felt like a rejection of the activists themselves and a dismissal of their experiences withstanding racism. Andrew described how, despite demands from white activists, he could not curb his emotional response to injustice: “This [victim of racism] could have been me; this could have been my kid.” He lamented how “tiring” it becomes when “well-intentioned, progressive [white] people who think they are lovers of justice” consistently marginalize his emotional responses to racism.

In the worst cases, activists of color described explicit attempts by white activists to undermine them, igniting their burnout. Capturing the experiences of many participants, Alejandro shared a story about a white colleague who identified as an activist while regularly undercutting Alejandro’s antiracism efforts:

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

This white “ally” not only undermined Alejandro, but failed to own his institutional power, exacerbating Alejandro’s stress, eventually feeding his burnout. Gerald described an incident in which a white activist who worked for the same organization for which he worked falsely accused him of a crime for attending a preconference session held the day before a racial justice conference:

[I] got accused of embezzlement once because I attended [a racial justice conference]...I was going with a white ally who was also an administrator [in my

organization] . . . I signed up for a [preconference] institute and I went a day early [to attend the preconference session the day before the conference began]. I returned and [my supervisor] said, "I'm concerned that you are misappropriating funds. I looked online. The conference didn't begin until Thursday, yet you flew down Tuesday evening . . ." And I'm thinking, *where are you getting this information?* . . . Later I find out that my white ally . . . who came down two days later, had provided her with this information.

Gerald perceived the white ally's false accusation as betrayal, especially because the ally presumed he was doing something wrong without asking him, elevating his distrust of white activists. Like many of the participants, he grew emotionally exhausted managing ways white activists forced him to expend activist energy dealing with exertions of white dominance within a racial justice context.

Being unwilling to step up to take action when needed

Nine participants (50%) attributed their burnout to the strain caused when white activists are unwilling to "step up" and take action to advance movement goals. Capturing a sentiment shared by many participants, Alejandro shared his frustration with being in spaces dedicated to racial justice activism where white activists were slow to engage beyond conversation. They mistook cross-racial dialogue and conversations about racism as activism, rarely getting around to acting on what they learned. He explained, "It was more a case of [white activists] wanting to talk about things but do nothing . . . Being aware is one thing, but what is going to be different? . . . What are the outcomes to this awareness?"

The tendency among white racial justice activists to refuse to make themselves vulnerable for the cause when activists of color were vulnerable simply by virtue of being activists of color was particularly troubling for participants. Cristina attributed her burnout in part to seeing "[white] people who actually have the power to create systemic change" but are not willing to take a risk to achieve that change. Nicole felt worn down by not being able to escape her vulnerability as a Black woman. That vulnerability, in her words, "creat[es] a different kind of dynamic when you're doing the work." The unwillingness of white activists to bear part of the burden of her vulnerability exacerbated her stress. She asked, "How do you deal with that without losing your mind? How do you deal with that without resigning or becoming the angry Black woman?"

Many participants highlighted how vulnerability for white activists is always a choice. In some cases, participants shared, white activists were choosing not to engage fully because it would require deep self-reflection. Gerald offered an indicative experience:

I got burned from so-called white liberal progressive allies who were on board until it meant that they needed to do self-reflection, until it meant that they needed to learn

about themselves and this wasn't about learning about... the poor black kid from the Bronx...

Others grew frustrated over time as white activists justified their unwillingness to take significant action by fretting over others' potential discomfort. Andrew explained:

A lot of white folks want to benefit from [identifying with racial justice]... But they don't want to call [racism] out because they don't want to hurt anyone's feelings. They don't want to press it. It's like, well what about those people who deal with it? I have to deal with it... That's been a huge source of stress and burnout.

In their efforts to avoid discomfort, participants explained, white activists intensified it among activists of color, contributing to burnout.

Participants also had to manage the damage done by white activists who were willing to engage but only on their own terms. Rochelle shared a story about working with a white activist who wanted to focus on "self-healing." This white activist aligned herself with racial justice groups and engaged intellectually but never took action when movement toward racial justice was "at stake." Like other participants, Rochelle had to expend emotional energy assessing whether she felt "safe" around white activists who seem unwilling to step up or who appear to engage only for self-serving reasons.

Exhibiting white fragility

Eight participants (44.4%) attributed their burnout in part to white fragility—defined by DiAngelo (2011) as an expectation among white people that they will be insulated from race-based stress. This expectation creates an intolerance in white people for discussions about race, often leading to defensive outbursts. Notably, although white fragility has been associated with white people in general (DiAngelo, 2011; Hines, 2017), it has not to our knowledge been associated specifically with white racial justice activists. According to participants, white activists regularly exhibited this fragility, draining energy from activists of color and undermining organizational conversations about eliminating racism.

Felicia described an instance when she tried to explain to a white activist how the activist was exhibiting racism. She explained, "When I told her about [how she was exhibiting racism], she went back to [her] whiteness and said, 'Well you're just going to oppress me and call me some colonialist.'" In addition to rebuffing Felicia's intervention, the white activist also framed herself as a victim, accusing Felicia of oppressing her.

Two participants, both women, described how merely being themselves—agentic, outspoken, and passionate—triggered defensive responses from white activists. Beverly described how her assertiveness was perceived as aggressive, leading white activists to question her ability to facilitate group conversations. They feared that she was "angry all the time" and framed her as an "angry Black woman."

This put her in a position of having to defend herself not just from racism outside her movement but also from white activists in her movement, exacerbating the threat of burnout. Rosa had a similar experience:

I have been . . . told that people don't like my attitude, that I'm too aggressive . . . Right now stating something clearly in a declarative way would be perceived [by white activists] as aggressive. So not only do I have to try to tell the truth about injustice in the world and the injustice in which we operate as an institution, but I also have to make other people feel good about it.

Rosa's experience illustrated how, in order for some white activists to "hear" activists of color, activists of color have to spend energy navigating white activists' fragility; participants felt they had to take a "feel good" approach to these interactions even as they bore the emotional burden of racism. Ultimately, Rosa explained, "It was the defensive response of [white] people who I call friends and who I respected [that] burned me out."

Taking credit for the work and ideas of activists of color

According to Barry, "For whatever reason, [white activists] feel like they need the spotlight." Their need for the spotlight led some to exploit activists of color either to acquire benefits—leadership positions or speaking invitations, for example—or to win validation from activists of color. In either case, nine (50%) participants described how white activists' habit of taking credit for their work or of exploiting them in other ways contributed to their burnout.

These participants attributed their burnout in part to white activists, in Deborah's language, "coopting" their activist work for self-benefit. Rosa shared how white activists take credit for ideas they previously dismissed from her:

If we are sitting around the table . . . and I have a suggestion . . . and I've been thinking about it, I've been sharing it, and it's gone and ignored. And then a white colleague of mine will say the same thing, but then it's *hers*.

Felicia, an activist-educator, shared how white colleagues who do racial justice work attempt to exploit her expertise:

You know that whole dynamic of, "I need a black best friend." Now for academics, they need [to be] published with a person of color who could teach whiteness so that they end up [looking] like a racially just worker . . . So these are [white] people who just want to get their name published with someone who is recognized for doing racial justice.

In these cases, white activists accept benefits, such as credit and recognition, for ideas and work produced by activists of color.

Due to their need for attention and validation, participants explained, white activists speak over them, speak for them, or find other ways to assert the expertise that already exists among activists of color. Jonathan described how a white activist “who wants to be seen” as a racial justice expert contributed to his burnout by consuming space in his organization while failing to demonstrate humility. Rosa shared that she works with white activists who will “offer to speak for me.” She described how this undermines her contributions.

In the most egregious cases, participants bemoaned white activists who outrightly appropriated their work to advance themselves. Anna, a Chicana and immigrant rights activist, described these activists as “white knights” who will take the work developed by marginalized people and “put their name on it.” Felicia explained, “I have white racial justice workers who . . . even record me or photograph something I post and use it as if it’s theirs, without giving me credit . . . as they coopt it and reappropriate it in a way that is dangerous.” For this reason, while she thinks white allies are “great,” on the whole they cause her more stress than relief.

Discussion

The findings of this study support and complicate existing scholarship both on the impact of white activists on United States racial justice movements and on activist burnout. For example, existing social movement scholarship demonstrates how white activists take fewer risks than activists of color, lack racial justice consciousness despite having antiracist convictions, and carry insecurities about their whiteness into their activism while seeking validation from activists of color (Case, 2012; Eichstedt, 2001; Warren, 2010). The current study’s participants described conditions within their racial justice organizations and movements that support this scholarship.

Similarly, this study built on glimpses provided by previous studies into how these conditions—results of the attitudes and behaviors of white activists—exacerbate the threat of burnout for marginalized-identity activists, including antiracism activists of color (Srivastava, 2006; Vaccaro and Mena, 2011). This study appears to be the first focused exclusively on the relationship between white activists in racial justice movements and burnout among activists of color, explicating ways activists of color attribute their burnout to the attitudes and behaviors of white activists. These include patterns of (a) embracing unevolved or racist views, (b) undermining or invalidating the work or racial justice activists of color, (c) showing a lack of willingness to step up and take action when needed, (d) exhibiting white fragility in activist spaces, and (e) taking credit for the work and ideas of activists of color. Notably, unlike previous scholarship exploring the power and limitations of white activists through the experiences of white activists (e.g. Case, 2012; Warren, 2010), this study also appears to be the first to explore it through the experiences of activists of color and their struggle to sustain their activism. In addition to demonstrating troubling attitudes and behaviors, it

associated those attitudes and behaviors with feelings of marginalization, emotional exhaustion, and eventually burnout among activists of color—an outcome that could undermine the effectiveness of racial justice movements (Maslach and Gomes, 2006; Pogrebin, 1994).

Complicating theoretical constructions of activist burnout

Most specifically, we explicated a specific way burnout can operate differently for activists of color than for white activists. Activists of all racial identities contend with stressors commonly associated with burnout, such as resistance (Cox, 2011) or activist in-fighting (Norwood, 2013). Although social movement scholars have shown that activists of color shoulder a greater load from some of these stressors, such as the threat or reality of police violence (Davenport et al., 2011), any activist, to some extent, can feel their effects.

However, participants of this study, racial justice activists of color, also contended with stressors associated with racist attitudes and behaviors from white activists. White activists, by virtue of their whiteness, are protected from these stressors. The activist burnout literature to date largely has been silent on this matter, describing burnout causes without distinguishing between privileged-identity and marginalized-identity activists and their interactions within social movements (Gorski, 2018a). A more useful theoretical framework for activist burnout must consider these distinctions more thoroughly.

The findings provide another crucial insight that complicates understandings of activist burnout and white activists' roles in racial justice movements. The racism that propelled participants into racial justice movements was reproduced within those movements. For many participants, this was a particularly disappointing and stress-inducing condition because they had entered movements hoping for a reprieve from the racism with which they coped outside their movements. In some ways, other causes of their burnout were predictable. As scholars studying activists' experiences have documented (e.g. Potter, 2011; Rettig, 2006), activists expect, for example, that they will encounter resistance from individuals hostile to their movements. But they may not similarly anticipate this resistance from activists within their movements—people, in Rosa's words, who "should know better." The strain of coping with racism within movements created to battle racism became a significant contributor to participants' burnout.

Critical race theorists have used the concept, *the permanence of racism*, to emphasize that racism is woven systemically and permanently into the history and present of all aspects of society (e.g. Bell, 1992; Bonilla-Silva, 2014; Milner, 2017). It is not merely transactional, solvable by responding strategically to individual racist interactions. The findings support this notion—racism is so permanent, so insidious, that activists of color interviewed for this study are not immune from it, even within racial justice movements. This includes explicit, purposeful forms of racism—being silenced and actively marginalized by white activists—as well as the more subtle, implicit forms of what Essed (1991) called *everyday racism*.

Notably, participants did not distinguish the relative impact of subtle or explicit, micro-aggressive or macro-aggressive, and unintentional or purposeful racism they experienced from white activists. Instead, the accumulative impact of this racism in all its forms contributed to their burnout. They were worn down by the ways their activist spaces became sites of the racism they hoped to destroy.

This reality is virtually unaccounted for in existing theoretical constructions of activist burnout. Other than an occasional brief mention (e.g. Cox, 2011) or calls for scholars to consider within-movement oppression in future studies (e.g. Gorski, 2018a), scholars have described symptoms and causes of burnout without distinguishing how they might appear differently for privileged-identity and marginalized-identity activists. More concerted efforts to study these distinctions are needed to develop more accurate and meaningful constructions of, and responses to, activist burnout.

The roles and impacts of white activists in racial justice movements

In order to broaden understandings of the roles and impacts of white activists in racial justice organizations, it is important to note, first of all, that white people who become involved in activism derive benefits from that involvement (Warren, 2010). For example, activist spaces give white activists whose antiracist views leave them feeling alienated from their families and communities important points of interpersonal and political connection (Case, 2012). As several respondents highlighted, often white activists limited their involvement to a praxis of educating themselves within the movement, what Tuck and Yang (2012) might describe as “conscientization,” as a way to benefit themselves without necessarily combating racism. They characterize settler-colonial practices of becoming more conscious and aware without contending with the settler-colonial structure mediating their relationship to the land and Native nations, as a “move to innocence.” This benefits the settler who might feel like a change-maker while also facilitating their ongoing colonizer role. While we did not specifically examine indigenous movement spaces, Tuck and Yang’s (2012) notion of moving to innocence through awareness raising is apt. From the perspectives of this study’s participants, white activists derived benefits from their involvement in racial justice activism at the expense of activists of color who, in turn, were silenced, undermined, disrespected, and eventually burned out.

For example, multiple respondents highlighted how their movement contributions were initially dismissed only to be celebrated when repeated by white activists. In other instances, participants felt tokenized by white activists who collaborated with them on a superficial level in order to attend to their own interests. Moreover, participants felt that white activists often derived these benefits without making themselves as vulnerable as activists of color; without a willingness to act when movement goals required them to do so. In fact, participants viewed this hesitation among white activists as an indication of their ability to escape risk, a choice not available to activists of color.

In other words, in participants' experiences, white activists derived benefit at least partially through exertions of racial privilege. These conditions harken to what critical race theorists and whiteness studies scholars have described as *whiteness as property* (Harris, 1993; Lipsitz, 2006). The social construction of race in the United States has imbued whiteness with a significant "property" value through exclusion and preferential treatment in immigration, housing, employment, criminal justice, and other systems. This condition appears to be replicated in participants' activist experiences. White activists who participate in racial justice activism gain benefits, including growing their consciousness and finding community (Loewen, 2015), while also bearing less risk than activists of color, without having to divest their whiteness. Meanwhile they may be oppressing activists of color whose contributions are devalued, marginalized—sometimes even criminalized.

This can be particularly exacerbating for activists of color who see themselves as having specialized racial justice knowledge because they endure racism's primary impact. In fact, as we mentioned earlier, one predictor of activism engagement for activists of color is the extent to which individuals perceive themselves as targets of structural racism (Szymanski and Lewis, 2015). This makes their activism, in part, a pursuit of self-determination. For this reason, even unconsciously demeaning acts by white activists can be deeply triggering, hastening burnout. Moreover, based on the disproportionate distribution of harm associated with racism, activists of color sought spaces where they could assume leadership positions and where white activists would be willing to support their leadership. They expected, in Deborah's words, white activists to "take directions from [activists of color]." In contrast to these expectations, white activists failed to understand or consider these dynamics. Instead, they enjoyed connection and growth while activists of color coped with burnout. Notable, again, is the fact that activist burnout scholarship has been near silent on these conditions; even conceptualizations of activist burnout have been framed in a way that privileges privileged-identity activists while obscuring a cause of burnout among activists of color.

An important point of clarification is that participants tended to share stories about specific white activists or particular types of white activists who exacerbated their burnout; none referred to "all white activists." Many were appreciative of white activists' willingness to engage but, in the end, found that the behaviors and attitudes of many white activists created more stress than benefit for activists of color and the antiracism goals of their movements. But presuming—as previous scholarship provides evidence to do (Eichstedt, 2001; Warren, 2010)—that all white activists to some extent carry the implications of their whiteness into racial justice movements, there seemed to be a broad desire for more mindful engagement among white activists in participants' movements. As Jacobs and Taylor (2011) explained, based on their examination of white activists' engagement in a racial justice movement, the "need for white participation is equal to the fear of white 'takeover' of the organization" (p. 699). White activists had an important

role to play, they argued, but often in the course of playing that role they made the work of activists of color more emotionally and physically draining.

In this spirit, participants' insights could be seen as points for conversation within racial justice organizations regarding white activists' responsibility to engage in ways that potentially contribute to the *sustainability* rather than the *burnout* of activists of color and, as a result, to the sustainability of racial justice movements. These responsibilities, gleaned from participants' insights, might include:

1. doing deeper self-work by examining their privilege, their fragility, and the gaps in their misunderstandings of structural racism more thoroughly before entering racial justice movements;
2. being willing to defer to activists of color and movement leaders of color, especially when the lived experience of being targeted by racism is central to the cultivation of movement strategies and goals;
3. prioritizing movement goals over their needs for recognition and validation;
4. policing one another around concerns related to credit- and spotlight-grabbing behaviors (such as coopting the ideas of activists of color) so activists of color do not need to expend energy doing so; and
5. stepping up and making themselves vulnerable to the cause, rather than behaving as though just being present at meetings and awareness-raising opportunities is "activism," remembering that activists of color are vulnerable simply by virtue of being activists of color.

Future research could examine attitudes and behaviors among white activists that lend themselves to movement stability rather than burnout.

Despite having, perhaps, a philosophical commitment, white activists unwilling to respond to these challenges could be bigger threats than assets to racial justice movements. As social movement scholars (Pogrebin, 1994; Rettig, 2006) have pointed out, burnout's impact on individual activists affects not only those activists but also the viability of social movements. From this perspective, participants were providing insights not only on white activists' contributions to their burnout, but also on the potential toll white activists take on the effectiveness of racial justice movements. For example, several participants described needing to calm their emotionality in order not to be perceived by white activists as "angry." Individually, they were impacted within their movements by the same silencing dynamics that exist outside their movements. In addition to contributing to their individual bouts of burnout, this silencing also could cheat their movements out of the full expression and engagement of knowledgeable activists of color.

Future research should attend more specifically to this issue. If, as the results of this study indicate and as other scholarship (Case, 2012; Jacobs and Taylor, 2011) suggests, at least some proportion of white activists are creating additional strain on activists of color, scholars should explore within-movement strategies for responding to the attitudes and behaviors of white activists. They also should

explore strategies for attending to activists of color who should not bear the burden white activists' troubling attitudes and behaviors. To date, much of the popular discourse about activist burnout focuses on self-care as the key strategy for sustaining activists (e.g. Gorski, 2015; Khan, 2015; Ross, 2017). The trouble is, no amount of self-care can curb the portion of burnout activists of color attribute to racism from white activists.

Conclusion

Activist burnout and social movement scholars have suggested that burnout is among the most formidable barriers to the sustainability of social movements (Maslach and Gomes, 2006; Pogrebin, 1994). In order to maximize the effectiveness of strategies for responding to burnout and its impact on individual activists and social movements, we should begin with as intricate an understanding as possible of the causes of burnout. Theoretical constructions of activist burnout must do a better job accounting for how white activists and activists of color experience burnout differently, including how white activists contribute to the burnout of activists of color. Existing theoretical concepts like racial battle fatigue, white fragility, the permanence of racism, and whiteness as property can help. Additionally, continued research on how white activists engage in racial justice movements and organizations will help. This study was one step toward filling this gap in the literature, beginning to bridge understandings of activist burnout with the role of white activists in racial justice organizations and movements.

Limitations

One benefit of qualitative studies is the analytical depth they offer when examining participants' lived experiences. The trade-off for this depth, due to relatively low sample sizes (in this case, 22) is a lack of broad applicability. As qualitative understandings of activist burnout in racial justice and other activists grows, an important next step could be to use the emerging knowledge base to design bigger quantitative studies in order to examine not only the causes of activist burnout but also rates of burnout and its common symptoms. Additionally, as mentioned earlier, we did not ask participants in this study specifically about white activists. A study in which interviews or other collected data focused solely on this issue likely would reveal additional, or more detailed, examples of how these conditions impact activists of color. Future studies could focus more intently and purposefully on this issue rather than examining it alongside many other burnout causes. Another possible limitation is that we focused specifically on how white activists' attitudes and behaviors informed burnout in activists of color, potentially limiting the scope of what we could learn about how white privilege, micro-aggressions, and other conditions affect activists of color, including those who never have burned out. Future research could expand beyond the activist burnout frame to

look more closely at how some of the concerns raised in this study affect all activists of color and racial justice movements more broadly.

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Ethical approval

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