



## “Nobody’s paying me to cry”: the causes of activist burnout in United States animal rights activists

Paul Gorski, Stacy Lopresti-Goodman & Dallas Rising

To cite this article: Paul Gorski, Stacy Lopresti-Goodman & Dallas Rising (2019) “Nobody’s paying me to cry”: the causes of activist burnout in United States animal rights activists, *Social Movement Studies*, 18:3, 364-380, DOI: [10.1080/14742837.2018.1561260](https://doi.org/10.1080/14742837.2018.1561260)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14742837.2018.1561260>



Published online: 25 Dec 2018.



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



Article views: 73



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



## “Nobody’s paying me to cry”: the causes of activist burnout in United States animal rights activists

Paul Gorski <sup>a</sup>, Stacy Lopresti-Goodman <sup>b</sup> and Dallas Rising<sup>c</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Equity Literacy Institute, Asheville, NC, USA; <sup>b</sup>Psychology, Marymount University, Arlington, VA, USA;

<sup>c</sup>Independent Researcher, Minneapolis, MN, USA

### ABSTRACT

We examine the causes of activist burnout – a condition in which the accumulative stress associated with activism becomes so debilitating that once-committed activists are forced to scale back on or disengage from their activism – in 17 United States animal rights activists. Following a phenomenological qualitative approach, analysis of interview data revealed three primary categories of burnout causes: 1) intrinsic motivational and psychological factors, 2) organizational and movement culture, and 3) within-movement in-fighting and marginalization. Implications for understandings of activist burnout and the AR movement are discussed.

### ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 2 March 2018

Accepted 13 December 2018

### KEYWORDS

Animal rights; burnout; activism; activists; social movements

Animal rights (AR) activists face a variety of challenges that could affect their abilities to engage in activism effectively and long-term (Gaarder, 2008; Pallotta, 2008). Some scholars have documented emotional or psychological challenges, such as deep emotional investments in AR issues and profound senses of responsibility to eliminate animal oppression, making activists vulnerable to self-blame and hopelessness when change is slow (Bryant, 2006; Jamison, Wenk, & Parker, 2000). Others have identified challenges associated with contesting corporate and legislative powers, including public ridicule or criminalization (Hansson & Jacobsson, 2014). Still others have tracked troublesome conditions within AR organizations, including in-fighting between movement factions (Greenebaum, 2009; Wrenn, 2012) and the reproduction of racism, sexism, and other oppressions within AR spaces (Drew, 2010; Gaarder, 2011a; Wrenn, 2015).

Although it has not previously been documented empirically among AR activists, studies of racial justice (Gorski, 2018a), feminist (Bernal, 2006), and peace (Gomes, 1992) activists have shown that the accumulative stress related to these challenges can cause *activist burnout* (Cox, 2011). More than temporary frustration or occasional weariness, activist burnout is the long-term, accumulative, and debilitating impact of activism-related stress (Chen & Gorski, 2015; Maslach & Gomes, 2006). It can have deleterious effects on individual activists, deteriorating their emotional and physical well-being until they are forced to disengage from social movements (Rettig, 2006). It also can have detrimental effects on the sustainability of social justice movements, as once-dedicated individuals leave their activism, disrupting movement consistency (Plyler, 2006). The

disruptive nature of activist burnout has led some scholars to argue that it is among the biggest threats to social movement stability (Pigni, 2016; Pogrebin, 1994).

Despite the absence of studies centrally examining burnout among AR activists, parts of the AR community have begun to acknowledge its harmful effects. Evidence of this is found in books in which AR insiders describe movement conditions and activist dispositions that lend themselves to burnout (e.g. Rettig, 2006). It is also found in AR organizations' initiatives to help activists 'beat burnout,' including the In Defense of Animals Sustainable Activism network and a growing number of blog posts about activist self-care (e.g. Orde, 2015; Schweizer, 2016).

These efforts to combat burnout demonstrate growing awareness of the problem. This study, a phenomenological exploration of burnout causes as characterized by AR activists in the United States, was designed to help strengthen these efforts and to inform movement leaders and activists about conditions commonly leading to burnout. It also was intended to contribute to the emergent knowledge base about activist burnout by examining how it operates within the United States AR movement.

## Literature review

This study is, to our knowledge, the first to document causes of burnout as described by AR activists. It is grounded in activist burnout scholarship, which includes observational insights on burnout from animal rights activists (Jones, 2007; Rettig, 2006), but is built largely on studies of other movements (e.g. Gomes, 1992; Gorski, 2018b, Gorski & Chen, 2015; Plyler, 2006). We synthesize these below to ground this study in existing understandings of activist burnout and its causes.

We synthesize this scholarship understanding that findings of existing studies and our study likely are influenced to some extent by conditions specific to activist contexts. For example, Meyer (2006) described how activists often strategically claim credit for movement gains to serve their own or their organizations' goals – increasing membership, for example – as they compete with other activists and organizations. Although there is no explicit evidence in any study or personal narrative cited here (or in our study) that any particular activist was posturing in this way, it is important to acknowledge that activists may have a variety of motivations for shaping their narratives the way they shape them (Meyer, 2006).

## Conceptualizing activist burnout

Responding to high rates of turnover in social movements (Nandram & Klandersman, 1993; Rodgers, 2010), scholars began applying vocational burnout theory (Freudenberger, 1974) to activists' experiences. This research birthed the concept of *activist burnout* (Cox, 2011; Plyler, 2006). Activist burnout has been defined as when long-term activism-related stressors deteriorate activists' physical or emotional health or sense of connectedness to their movements, impacting their effectiveness or abilities to remain engaged (Gorski, 2015; Maslach & Gomes, 2006). Activists enter and leave activism for many reasons. Activist burnout refers to what happens when people once deeply embedded in movements – people who intended to remain engaged – are forced to disengage due to the stress impacts of participation. Emphasizing the significance of

the impact of activist burnout, Rettig (2006) characterized it as ‘the act of *involuntarily* leaving activism, or reducing one’s level of activism’ (p. 16).

Activist burnout can result in high turnover rates within movements (Pogrebin, 1994). For example, during her yearlong study of international human rights activists, Rodgers (2010) found that one-third of organizational staff left, which she associated with conditions that fed burnout, while many who stayed continued suffering the threat of burnout. In their study of Dutch trade union activists, Nandram and Klandersman (1993) found that 47.5% experienced symptoms related to burnout. Plyler (2006), who studied social justice activists in Toronto, found that high burnout rates caused movements to lose institutional expertise, leading to a constant process of wheel-reinventing.

Making matters worse, burnout begets burnout, as movement work is taken up by fewer people, who begin to burn out, engage less effectively, and take out their hopelessness on fellow activists. Pogrebin (1994) explained,

Before long one individual after another becomes exhausted or disillusioned, then one group after another shrinks...and finally, what was a movement dissipates into separate people nursing their separate dreams and disappointments, their energy lost to the [activist] community... (p. 36)

As Rettig (2006) and Jones (2007) observed, activist burnout results from and reproduces toxic movement conditions. Pogrebin (1994) thusly characterized it as the deterioration of activists’ well-being resulting in the deterioration of social movements’ viability.

### ***Causes of activist burnout***

Causes of activist burnout generally have been synthesized into three categories: (1) *internal causes* related to activists’ unique characteristics, (2) *external causes* related to the overwhelming scope of injustice and to retaliation for activism, and (3) *within-movement causes* related to toxic movement and organizational cultures and how activists treat one another (Chen & Gorski, 2015). Scholarship exploring AR activist ideologies, dispositions, and engagement (e.g. Jacobsson & Lindblom, 2013; Wrenn, 2015), and observations from AR insiders (e.g. Bekoff, 2010), suggest that many conditions causing burnout in other movements are present in AR spaces even if they have not been linked empirically to burnout.

#### ***Internal causes***

Activists involved in social justice causes have deep emotional investments in their activism and profound senses of responsibility to create change (Barry & Dordević, 2007; Effler, 2010). Their sense of responsibility is linked, not just to understandings of individual instances of individual suffering, but also to mass-scale suffering and structural oppression (Barr, 1984; Weber & Messias, 2012). For example, racial justice activists may feel outrage about interpersonal racism, but also carry the emotional weight of understanding systemic racism (Gorski, 2018a) – a level of oppression most people are ‘unable or unwilling to face’ (Maslach & Gomes, 2006, p. 43). This emotional weight makes activists uniquely susceptible to emotional exhaustion and hopelessness, precursors to burnout (Pines, 1994).

Researchers also have found these conditions in studies about AR activist dispositions, attitudes, and motivations. AR activists feel a deep sense of responsibility (Jamison et al., 2000) and empathy (Pallotta, 2008) for suffering animals. They are hyper-aware and profoundly impacted by instances of violence and by structural oppression against animals (Bryant, 2006). They see animal abuse everywhere (Gaarder, 2008) and carry the emotional weight of internalizing the violence other people ignore (Herzog, 1993; Pallotta, 2008). As a result, they are susceptible to feelings of guilt for not doing more (Jacobsson & Lindblom, 2013) and frustration about the slowness of change (Jamison et al., 2000). These findings, although not linked explicitly to burnout, mirror internal or dispositional conditions associated with burnout in other movements.

### ***External causes***

A second category of burnout causes involves stress related to challenging powerful corporate and legislative powers. This can result in the threat or reality of retaliatory actions from organizations displeased by movement objectives. For example, burnout has been tracked to state actions meant to quell activism such as police violence, surveillance, or murder (Barry & Dordević, 2007; Cox, 2011). It also has been attributed to retaliatory actions from non-state actors ranging from public criticism to violent attacks (Bernal, 2006; Jones, 2007). Additionally, researchers have associated activist burnout in part with professional and financial vulnerability, especially for activists who are vocal in non-activist workplaces (Gorski, 2018b). Even if none of these forms of retaliation materializes, the ongoing threat of retaliation can undermine activists' emotional wellbeing (Cox, 2011).

Although it has not been linked empirically to burnout, the most well-documented threat of retaliation endured by AR activists over the past decade is legislation criminalizing their activism (Gazzolla, 2015; Shea, 2015; Walby & Monaghan, 2011). AR activists also endure demonization and threats of violence from individuals and organizations hostile to their causes (Drew, 2010; Francione & Garner, 2010). Additionally, they often are dismissed as irrational and over-emotional (Bryant, 2006), a reality Gaarder (2011a) associates with sexism and the predominance of women in AR movements.

### ***Within-movement causes***

Researchers also have associated activist burnout with infighting and ego clashes (Barry & Dordević, 2007; Gomes, 1992) and other hostilities between activists (Norwood, 2013). Based on her study of activists in Toronto, Plyler (2006) concluded that the biggest cause of their burnout was how activists treated one another. Her finding was supported by Gomes's (1992) study of peace activists and Gorski's (2018a) study of racial justice activists.

Similarly, unhealthy movement and organizational cultures elevate burnout (Nair, 2004; Pigni, 2016) – most specifically, how activists police one another's commitments to their causes. Rodgers (2010) and Chen and Gorski (2015) described a culture of martyrdom in activist organizations wherein burnout was deemed a marker of commitment. Their conceptualization of this culture reflects Rooks's (2003) analyses of the 'cowboy mentality' among United States labor organizers. She found that organizers often enter the movement

with romanticized perceptions of organizing. Many quickly realize that their job is not as glamorous as they imagined once they face long work hours, social isolation, and other draining conditions, and leave. Those who stay, Rooks (2003) found, survive in part by adopting a ‘cowboy mentality,’ holding tight to romanticized perceptions of their work, sometimes to the point of disparaging other people’s roles in their organizations. While some appeared to derive benefits from this mentality, others – particularly new organizers and women organizers – tended to experience them as exclusive and alienating.

Burnout studies similarly suggest that burnout causes related to organizational and movement culture are not distributed equally. For example, women activists and activists of color cope with the same stressors as their male and white colleagues, but also endure sexism and racism within activist spaces, hastening the threat of burnout (Gorski, 2018a; Norwood, 2013). The persistence of sexism, racism, and other oppressions is well-documented both in studies of AR activist experiences (e.g. Gaarder, 2011a, 2011b; Herzog, 2007; Wrenn, 2015) and in narrative essays by marginalized-identity AR activists (e.g. Drew, 2010; Dunham, 2010; Ortega, 2017). For example, given patterns of sexual harassment by male leadership at one of the most prominent animal welfare organizations in the United States, movement insiders have published several popular press articles focusing on sexism (Berger, 2018), allegations of sexual harassment (Gunther, 2018a) and gender bias (Gunther, 2018) within the movement.

Scholars also have highlighted infighting and intra-movement judgmentalism among AR activists, particularly between organizations with more incremental welfarist and more liberationist approaches (Goodman & Sanders, 2011; Greenebaum, 2009). The result, according to Wrenn (2012), is factionalism within the movement. Although these scholars do not connect these conditions explicitly to burnout, what they describe reflects conditions associated with burnout in other movements.

## Method

Creswell (2013) argued that a phenomenological approach to qualitative research is especially useful when deeper understandings of a phenomenon can inform effective policy and practice. This argument, along with Finlay’s (2009) contention that phenomenology is well-suited for capturing the essence of phenomena in people’s lived experiences, compelled us to adopt phenomenology as our research framework. We conducted semi-structured interviews with 17 AR activists who had experienced burnout. We analyzed data from these interviews to answer, *How do activists who have experienced burnout as a result of AR activism describe its causes?*

## Participants

The activists interviewed for this study define their primary lifework around AR activism. Some are financially-compensated employees at AR organizations; others engage in activism outside their work hours.

Participants were recruited via snowball sampling. Invitations to participate were extended at gatherings of activists, through social media, and in emails. Invitees were encouraged to share the request with others who might be interested. Following

common conceptualizations of activist burnout (Chen & Gorski, 2015; Maslach & Gomes, 2006), participation criteria included (1) identifying as an AR activist, (2) having experienced long-term physical exhaustion, emotional exhaustion, or hopelessness related to the stressors of AR activism, and (3) having experienced those conditions severely enough that the ability to perform activism effectively or remain engaged in activism was compromised, resulting in scaling back or disengaging at least temporarily. Based on these criteria, 17 activists were interviewed.

They ranged in age (31–66) and years of AR activism (five to 40). They were diverse in terms of race, gender, and social class. (See Table 1.) Their activism also was diverse. They advocated against the use of animals in entertainment and research and for farmed animal protection, animal rescue and adoption, and legal protections for animals in captivity. Ten held paid jobs in AR organizations and seven did not work in the movement.

### Data collection

The researchers conducted a 60–75 minute telephone or in-person interview with each activist. Interviews were semi-structured, allowing the activists to share insights about which we might not have thought to ask. The interview protocol included questions about perceived causes of activists' burnout as well as the symptoms, consequences, and implications of their burnout. These questions were modified from previously developed, expert-reviewed, and piloted interview protocols designed to assess burnout in racial justice activists (Gorski, 2018a). The modified protocol was pilot-tested and adjusted based on that process.

Interviews were audio-recorded. Participants were given the option of reviewing their transcriptions prior to analysis. They were then assigned pseudonyms to ensure anonymity and confidentiality.

**Table 1.** Participant demographics.

Characteristic	<i>n</i>	%
Gender Identity		
Female	13	76.47
Male	4	23.53
Race		
People of Color	5	29.41
White	12	70.59
Class		
Middle or Working Class	16	94.12
In Poverty	1	5.88
Activist Status		
Professional	10	58.82
Volunteer	7	41.18

Participants answered open-ended questions about their gender identity, race, and class, and self-identified as fitting within the categories listed above. Individuals who were compensated for their activism, or who were employed full-time by AR organizations, were identified as professional activists, while those who were not compensated, or did not work full-time for an AR organization, were identified as volunteers. We chose not to further disclose racial identities beyond 'People of Color,' concerned that doing so could potentially compromise participants' anonymity.

## **Analysis**

Consistent with coding practices in phenomenological research, each researcher analyzed data in search of significant statements (Creswell, 2013), portions of participant responses that spoke to causes of their burnout. These responses were organized into what Creswell (2013) called clusters of meaning: big-level themes such as ‘burnout caused by activists’ and ‘profound understanding of the scope of animal suffering.’ These were discussed among the researchers until a consensus was reached about the major themes – the categories of burnout causes discussed below. Next, we analyzed the data to identify sub-themes through repeated reexamination, synthesis, and reorganization until we agreed with the sub-theme into which each cluster of meaning best fit.

It is important to note that we analyzed conditions to which the activists attributed their burnout. Although all participants saw their activism as a central life commitment, activism does not happen in a vacuum, separate from other aspects of activists’ lives. It is impossible to know the extent to which these other dimensions – their spiritual or family lives, for example – also made them susceptible to burnout. It is, however, possible to know what activists believe are the causes of their burnout, which is what we documented.

## **Results**

We found three primary categories of burnout causes – causes to which the activists attributed their burnout: 1) intrinsic motivational and psychological factors, 2) organizational and movement culture, and 3) in-fighting and marginalization among AR activists.

### ***Motivational and psychological factors***

All 17 participants attributed their burnout in part to motivational and psychological factors. These factors included strong emotional connections to AR issues, deep senses of personal responsibility to end animal suffering, and profound understandings of the scope of structural animal violence.

The deep emotional connection to their activism contributed to their burnout. Several explicitly described AR activism as, in Kate’s words, their ‘core purpose in life.’ They felt so passionate about AR work that it ‘consumed’ their lives or made them emotionally ‘vulnerable.’ Ella captured this vulnerability: ‘I care too much... And I wish I didn’t sometimes because it makes life very hard... But I can’t turn it off.’

Due to this emotional connection to AR activism, many felt that their sense of personal responsibility to work tirelessly on behalf of animals contributed to their burnout. Laura shared how she experienced, not just a sense of ‘urgency, but a sense of duty.’ The activists often blamed themselves for their burnout because they chose to ‘overwork’ for the good of the cause or to say ‘yes’ to everything if they thought it would help animals. Alex shared, ‘There are animals dying every single second all around the world, and it’s hard to feel like you can just step away...’

Beyond a profound sense of responsibility for helping animals, the activists had deep understandings of large-scale animal suffering, contributing to emotional exhaustion. Several mentioned ‘seeing’ suffering and violence in everyday life where others do not see it. Others mentioned viewing violent imagery or working directly with abused

animals as contributing to their burnout. Connor summarized these burnout causes: '[T]here is a certain type of personality that is drawn ... to animal rights activism. I mean these are people who are overly empathetic, and I say "overly" not in a bad sense... They ...have their hearts permanently wide open and everything is flooding there: all the suffering...'

The activists generally felt overwhelmed by the scope of animal suffering, feeding a lack of optimism about their abilities to affect change. Sam described the scope of suffering as 'disheartening.' She shared how understanding the enormity of systemic animal oppression contributed to her burnout: '[I knew] that just a couple hours before I was standing in one of the worst places on earth, and those worst places on earth are all over the planet.' Anna explained, 'I feel like I'm shoveling the sidewalk during a blizzard.'

### ***Organizational and movement culture***

All of the activists attributed their burnout in part to negative organizational and movement cultures. For example, they contended with a culture of martyrdom within the movement that limited their abilities to perform their work in a healthy manner. As described above, this martyrdom was reported by some participants as internally imposed – in this sense it overlaps with the motivational and psychological causes of burnout described earlier – while for others, it was imposed by organizations with which they engaged in their activism. Regardless of the locus of the cause, the common theme underlying the martyrdom was the message that non-human animals' suffering must be prioritized above even the most basic needs of human animals. Speaking to how this mentality is embedded in movement culture, Connor observed, 'There is a mentality that you just have to push through it and no matter what you are experiencing, the animals are experiencing worse.' He continued, 'That's what I think is most disturbing about all of this, is that on a cultural level we can see the [challenges experienced by other activists]. [And we] look the other way or say that they just need to work harder.'

Extending Connor's point, Hannah described the activist community as an 'ecosystem...of anti-compassion.' Melodie explained that when she worked at a large AR organization and a colleague mentioned she needed time off, a group of fellow activists discussing her concerns felt that 'Animals are dying and suffering, how can you take time off?' Notably, this experience was not reserved for people with paid AR jobs – both paid and unpaid activists felt the sting of this culture of martyrdom.

Another condition contributing to the activists' burnout, especially for those who worked in AR organizations, was that discussions relating to burnout were discouraged and silenced. If activists were exhausted from activism, they were considered weak. Laura, who worked at a large AR organization, explained the mentality: 'Nobody's paying me to cry, so soldier on.' Steven, an employee at the same organization, summarized the organizational culture as "'Fuck your health and fuck your sanity".'

As Connor explained, the martyrdom culture encourages activists' tendencies to impose unrealistic expectations on themselves, then to blame themselves when they prove incapable of meeting them:

[T]here is a shame to it... [M]y friends... are finding ways to push through it... They are doing horrible and difficult work also and yet I was just kind of falling apart... Makes me wonder if there is something chemically or biologically wrong with me that made me more susceptible to that type of depression – I had really severe depression – or if I just wasn't being tough enough.

Further compounding the feelings of martyrdom, the activists who were employed in the movement felt overworked while also coping with financial vulnerability related to being underpaid, particularly at organizations where leadership expected them to work to exhaustion. Supervisors treated them as though they were lucky to have jobs in the movement, as though they should be happy to have that opportunity. Gail shared, 'They know you love [working for animals] and they use it against you.' Steven similarly described this sentiment in the organization in which he worked: 'Animals need you and you're going to do this work, and we know you're going to do it. If you don't like it, then leave.'

The pressure to work nonstop did not affect only paid activists at big AR organizations. It was perpetuated among activists outside AR organizations, where it operated somewhat differently. Many of the non-paid activists had networks of friends consisting entirely of activists with few non-activism interests. This normalized the martyrdom culture, feeding their burnout. Alex shared, 'If your friend is like, "Hey... do you want to do extra leafletting or something with me?" then it doesn't just feel like you're saying no to the cause, you're also saying no to one of your friends.' Even if their jobs are not at risk if they decline, they felt as though their self-images and support systems could be.

On the one hand, the activists felt they needed to comply with these dynamics to demonstrate their commitments. On the other hand, they could feel their physical and emotional health deteriorating. The fact that most needed to burn out in order to dislodge themselves from what they came to see as harmful aspects of movement or organizational culture, and that most had to seek support outside the movement to recover from their burnout, illustrated the danger of burnout, not just for the sustainability of individual activists, but also for the viability of the movement itself.

### ***In-fighting and marginalization within the AR movement***

The activists also attributed their burnout to how they were treated by other activists. For many, interpersonal tension, hostility, and in-fighting ignited their burnout. Similarly, many grew exhausted and hopeless coping with oppression and bias within the movement.

Karyn explained how sexism within the movement fed her burnout: '[W]ith the movement being made up of primarily women... it's weird to feel excluded when you are in the majority and when men will mostly get leadership positions.' Some women experienced this exclusion explicitly. Sam stated she 'was treated kind of like a charming but benign presence' who was often 'spoken over' while male activists took credit for her ideas. For others the sexism was more implicit and arose, in Karyn's words, out of a 'boy's club,' where men instituted a 'bro culture' built around language that 'does not translate at all to women.'

This experience of gender bias and sexism relates in part to the previously discussed culture of martyrdom and how it might operate differently for dominant-identity activists (like men) as compared with other activists. Whereas male activists must

cope with how the movement prioritizes animals' needs over their basic needs, many female activists coped with that prioritization on top of the ways movement culture is constructed around the identities, language, and culture of their cisgender male peers. Women who have experienced sexism and harassment and who are determined to challenge these conditions in the movement are starting to come forward to talk publicly about their experiences despite pressure from some male movement leaders who try to silence them (Gunther, 2018). Rose described being stalked and harassed by a male activist, which resulted in her disengaging from a local AR group. She suffered burnout. The organization and the movement suffered the loss of a committed activist. In total, eight of the 13 women activists we interviewed attributed their burnout in part to sexism they experienced from men in the AR movement.

For activists of color racial discrimination and bias were, in Laura's words, 'a huge problem.' All attributed their burnout in part to experiencing or witnessing racism within the movement. Kate called racism 'a primary cause of my burnout' and described the emotional price she paid as a woman of color in the movement. In one incident, she had to expend energy challenging an AR organization after it hired a white woman who 'had been taking a racist position on the Black Lives Matter movement' as a speaker for an event. In addition to her activism, she felt responsible for educating white activists about racism – a task that 'comes at [the] cost' of making her doubly vulnerable as an activist and an activist of color; triply when considering gender.

The activists of color were demoralized by the failure of movement leadership to reflect the racial composition of movement activists. Alex explained, 'It's generally ... a pretty white movement, especially in terms of who gets visibility.' Although not all of the activists of color experienced blatant forms of racism, the slow grind of implicit racial bias and erasure elevated their burnout.

Another condition commonly contributing to the activists' burnout revolved around inter-organizational tensions and the lack of cooperation among AR organizations. Alex observed,

Part of [my burnout] might have been infighting, because ... you have to already defend and explain animal rights issues to people who are not within the larger movement. If you also have to defend the tactics or things the organization is doing within the movement, then that ends up being an issue.

Similarly, like several activists, Michelle attributed her burnout in part to managing competition between organizations. 'Instead of combining forces,' she explained, 'they just fight. And they try to destroy each other.' This source of burnout appeared to especially impact the activists employed by large AR organizations.

## Discussion

In some ways this study's findings support existing understandings of activist burnout. Mirroring examinations of burnout in racial justice (Gorski, 2018a), educational justice (Gorski & Chen, 2015), and feminist (Barry & Dordević, 2007) activists, motivational and psychological factors associated with a profound sense of responsibility for eliminating structural violence and deep connections with AR causes contributed to participants' emotional exhaustion and hopelessness. Similarly, participants' attribution of

their burnout to within-movement causes, such as in-fighting, reflected studies in other movements (Chen & Gorski, 2015; Pines, 1994 ; Plyler, 2006). The conditions underlying these burnout causes – tensions between movement organizations (Goodman & Sanders, 2011; Greenebaum, 2009), activist dispositions characterized by intense empathy for suffering animals (Gaarder, 2008; Jacobsson & Lindblom, 2013), and the persistence of racism and sexism within the AR movement (Drew, 2010; Wrenn, 2015), for example – have been well-documented in scholarship about the experiences of AR activists.

Other findings differ from or complicate understandings of activist burnout causes or demonstrate nuances in how burnout might operate differently for AR activists than for other activists, sometimes in ways could also reflect national contexts. For example, studies on activist burnout in the United States (e.g. Gorski, 2018a) and scholarship based on activists' experiences in United States social movements (e.g. Jones, 2007; Rettig, 2006) often have attributed burnout to external causes such as repercussions leveled against activists by state and corporate actors threatened by social activist causes. Similarly, scholarship on AR activism in various regional contexts reveals how activists are subject to deleterious state actions related to surveillance, criminalization, and demonization by state and corporate actors (Gazzolla, 2015; Shea, 2015; Wrenn, 2012). However, the activists interviewed for this study did not attribute their burnout to these conditions. One possible explanation for this discrepancy, drawn from experiences described by two of the activists interviewed for this study, could be that activists understand retaliation risks when they enter the AR movement, so that they see such repercussions as expected consequences of their activism. Burnout-inducing conditions they find *within* the movement, on the other hand, might be unexpected and, as a result, harder to grapple with. Additionally, whereas United States based AR activists increasingly face criminalization and the risk of arrest, a history of scholarship on activist experiences suggests that they are less likely to face the sorts of consequences that activists in more repressive political contexts risk facing, such as torture, rape, and murder (Bernal, 2006; Grimm, 2015).

Inversely, the finding of the prevalence of within-movement burnout causes, including in-fighting, racism, sexism, and the ways activists police one another's commitments, mirrors scholarship on burnout (Gorski, 2018a; Gorski & Chen, 2015; Norwood, 2013; Plyler, 2006), the culture of selflessness or martyrdom (Rodgers, 2010), and the 'cowboy mentality' (Rooks, 2003) in other movements. These conditions refer primarily to how activists relate to one another and how structural oppressions outside the AR movement are replicated within it. However, in contrast to previous scholarship, the findings revealed how activists – especially those working for big AR organizations – attributed their burnout, not just to interpersonal tensions and oppression within movements, but also to other aspects of destructive organizational and movement cultures. (Volunteer activists who have less day-to-day interaction with these organizations appear to be comparatively protected from some destructive aspects of these cultures.) The conditions underlying this portion of participants' burnout were related to how activists were treated by AR organizations, often their workplaces – how they felt underpaid, underappreciated, and expected to prioritize organizational goals at the cost of personal well-being. These conditions have been documented in AR activism literature (Jones, 2007; Rettig, 2006). Notably, no other study on the causes of activist burnout has identified them as even tangential burnout causes.

Whereas this finding is inconsistent with previous activist burnout research – none of which has focused on AR activism – it is consistent with research on vocational burnout. Following a couple early studies of activist burnout (Gomes, 1992; Pines, 1994), social movement scholars deserted vocational burnout theory as a viable tool for examining activist burnout. The former, it has been argued (Gorski, 2018a), is not adaptable to the unique characteristics of activists and contexts of activism. Maslach and Gomes (2006) – pioneers of vocational burnout theory (see Gomes, 1992; Maslach & Pines, 1977) – first made this distinction, explaining how, unlike people doing other labor, activists tend to have deep levels of awareness about structural oppression and large-scale suffering. Others have noted additional aspects of activists' uniqueness that are unaccounted for in vocational burnout research, such as their susceptibility to state retaliation (Bernal, 2006; Cox, 2011). Common causes of activist burnout revolve largely around stressors associated with those characteristics, such as oppressive movement conditions and a deep sense of responsibility for creating large-scale change (Gorski & Chen, 2015; Pines, 1994; Plyler, 2006). Common causes of vocational burnout revolve around workplace issues such as workload, job autonomy, and personnel turnover (Ben-Avi, Toker, & Heller, 2018; McFadden, Campbell, & Taylor, 2014). Until this study, no study of activist burnout has identified workplace conditions and organizational treatment as prevalent burnout causes. Many participants of our study who worked paid jobs in AR organizations did point to workplace conditions and organizational treatment – namely, feeling overworked, underpaid, and undervalued – as a primary source of their burnout.

This finding complicates previous understandings of 'within-movement' activist burnout causes, but it also provides the beginnings of a potential bridge between theoretical constructions of activist burnout and the literature on activist retention. Scholars studying activist retention or persistence – the conditions and dispositions that keep activists engaged in their activism (Bunnage, 2014; Mannarini & Talò, 2011) – often have attributed retention in part to how activists are treated by the organizations for which they work. It has been somewhat of a mystery, then, why studies of activist burnout had not identified workplace conditions as a common burnout cause. As noted earlier, activists interviewed for this study who experienced these burnout causes typically worked for AR organizations – they were, in Cox's (2009) words, *professional or full-time* activists. They differed from other participants in the sense that their vocational and activist lives were entangled. Whereas about half of the activists interviewed for this study worked for an AR organization, a closer look at previous burnout studies reveals how they were based largely on samples of activists who were employed outside the movements in which they were involved – what Cox (2009) called *leisure* activists. For example, of the 30 participants in Gorski's (2018a) burnout study of racial justice activists, only two were employed in racial justice organizations.

This may speak to the need for a more flexible theoretical framework for activist burnout that differentiates between activists whose workplaces also are their activist organizations and those whose work lives are separate from their activist lives. Cox (2009), in his exploration of activist sustainability, provided a useful point of departure by distinguishing four activism situations, including the aforementioned professional or full-time activism and leisure activism as well as workplace-based and community-based activism. Inspired by Cox's (2009) recommendations for better understanding activist sustainability, we recommend that future burnout scholarship attend more

closely to 'how movement participation is articulated with daily life' (p. 58), both for activists for whom activism is their primary life commitment (as was the case for this study) and for those who engage in less consuming ways.

The findings also speak to the importance of differentiating understandings of burnout based on unique regional and movement contexts. Consider differences in the racial justice and AR movements in the United States. Although there are significant grassroots AR efforts, the movement revolves largely around nonprofit organizations with paid staff. There are influential racial justice organizations with paid staff, like the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). However, many influential racial justice organizations or networks, such as Black Lives Matter and the American Indian Movement, have been comprised of volunteers. In the United States there is no AR network of volunteer activists that approaches the influence of Black Lives Matter. Again, future research could look at these differences more closely and how or whether they inform burnout. Overall, with the exception of these couple examples, major burnout causes described by the activists in our study were consistent whether they were professional or leisure activists.

Findings of this study also support Gorski's (2018a) contention that activist burnout theory must evolve to consider how marginalized-identity AR activists, such as activists of color in the United States, may face elevated threats of burnout when compared with privileged-identity activists, such as white activists. Mirroring previous scholarship about the persistence of racism, sexism, and other oppressions within the AR movement (e.g. Drew, 2010; Ortega, 2017; Wrenn, 2015) and other movements (Cox, 2009, 2011; Srivastava, 2006), every activist of color interviewed for this study mentioned racism as a cause of their burnout; a majority of women cited sexism as a cause of their burnout. Activist burnout theory to date has failed to account for how causes of burnout differ for people who are subject to racism, sexism, and other oppressions within movements. It also has failed to account for how the overall grind of these oppressions experienced in the everyday lives of marginalized-identity activists inside and outside their activism inform their susceptibility to burnout (Gorski, 2018b). This demonstrates how privilege and erasure can operate even in the theorization of phenomena related to movements supposedly critical of privilege and erasure (Au, 2016).

Finally, scholars (e.g. Pigni, 2016; Rodgers, 2010) have described what Chen and Gorski (2015) called a *culture of martyrdom* among activists that associates activist commitment with a willingness to work to exhaustion. To date most burnout scholarship has associated this culture primarily with within-movement conditions and how activists police one another's commitments (Plyler, 2006; Rodgers, 2010). Mirroring this association, participants in this study spoke widely about pressure from within the movement to prioritize activism over their well-being and about how conversations about activist well-being are silenced. Unlike previous studies, they also linked their participation in this culture, not just to within-movement pressures, but also to the psychological and emotional causes of their burnout: their emotional connection to AR work and their sense of responsibility to affect mass-scale change. Because this martyrdom phenomenon has been identified consistently as a cause of activist burnout (Bernal, 2006; Chen & Gorski, 2015; Gorski & Chen, 2015; Rodgers, 2010) across movements and regional contexts, more concerted analysis of its nature, including how it is sustained through interactions of individual activist dispositions and broader movement culture, could provide deeper insights into an important aspect of activist burnout in AR and other movements. Existing theoretical frameworks that draw on research about

emotion in activism, such as *emotional labor* – what Taylor and Rupp (2002) described as ‘channeling, legitimating, and managing one’s own and others’ emotions and expression of emotions in order to cultivate and nurture the social networks that are the building blocks of social movements’ (p. 142) – can be useful in this regard.

## Conclusion

This study was the first to empirically identify causes of activist burnout in AR activists which may cause them to engage less effectively or to disengage from their activism altogether, potentially destabilizing the AR movement. We found vulnerability associated with intrinsic motivational and psychological factors, negative movement and organizational cultures, and in-fighting and marginalization among activists to be participants’ primary causes of burnout. Results suggested that some burnout-causing dynamics in the AR movement might differ from those found in other movements. It is our hope that these findings inform emerging understandings of activist burnout among AR activists and activists more broadly.

Because burnout has been described as a significant impediment to social movement effectiveness, we encourage organizational and movement leaders to consider these findings in a collective commitment to the longevity of activists’ engagement and movement sustainability. We urge AR organizations to offer supports for combating burnout and movement leaders to prioritize leading against burnout. The common approach – workshops on how individuals can cope with burnout through self-care – is insufficient when causes of burnout include how activists treat one another, racism and sexism in the movement, how AR organizations treat employees, and how individuals are recognized and compensated for their work. No amount of self-care can counteract these burnout causes.

Future research should examine each cause category of burnout more closely, perhaps also parsing out how they operate differently in paid or ‘staff’ activists and volunteer activists. Given ongoing revelations about sexism and racism in the movement, the relationship between within-movement oppression and burnout seems an important place to start. Another prime area for exploration might be the *consequences* of burnout for the AR movement.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

## Notes on contributors

*Paul Gorski* is the founder of the Equity Literacy Institute and EdChange. He is a lifelong activist spanning many social justice issues and conducts research on social justice education and activist burnout.

*Stacy Lopresti-Goodman* is an Associate Professor of Psychology and the Director of the Honors Program at Marymount University. Her research focuses on understanding the enduring impact that confinement, social isolation, and physical abuse have on the psychological well-being of nonhuman animals rescued from laboratories. She also studies alternatives to the use of animals in psychology education.

*Dallas Rising* is a long-time ally of other species with experience in anti-speciesism education, direct intervention, policy, and strategy relating to animal liberation. After experiencing burnout herself, she stepped away from direct activism and is currently teaching yoga and mindfulness with an emphasis on equity and inclusion.

## ORCID

Paul Gorski  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-9082-8885>

Stacy Lopresti-Goodman  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0855-3083>

## References

- Au, W. (2016). Meritocracy 2.0: High-stakes standardized testing as a project of neoliberal multiculturalism. *Educational Policy*, 30(1), 39–62.
- Barr, D. (1984). Burnout as a political issue. *Catalyst*, 16, 68–75.
- Barry, J., & Dordević, J. (2007). *What's the point of revolution if we can't dance?* Boulder: Urgent Action Fund for Women's Rights.
- Bekoff, M. (2010). Animals, social justice, and activism: Maintaining hope and keeping our dreams alive in difficult times. *ENCOUNTER: Educating for Meaning and Social Justice*, 23(1), 55–57.
- Ben-Avi, N., Toker, S., & Heller, D. (2018). 'If stress is good for me, it's probably good for you too': Stress mindset and judgment of others' strain. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 74, 98–110.
- Berger, J. (2018, January 18). "Hey man": Language and bro culture in the animal protection movement: How subtle gendered language holds many advocates back. *Upfront Project*. Retrieved from <https://medium.com/upfront-project/hey-man-language-and-bro-culture-in-the-animal-protection-movement-efd775461fde>
- Bernal, M. (2006). *Self-care and self-defense manual for feminist activists*. New Delhi: CREA.
- Bryant, T. L. (2006). Trauma, law, and advocacy for animals. *Journal of Animal Law and Ethics*, 1, 63–138.
- Bunnage, L. A. (2014). Social movement engagement over the long haul: Understanding activist retention. *Sociology Compass*, 8(4), 433–445.
- Chen, C., & Gorski, P. (2015). Burnout in social justice and human rights activists: Symptoms, causes, and implications. *Journal of Human Rights Practice*, 7(3), 366–390.
- Cox, L. (2009). 'Hearts with one purpose alone?' Thinking personal sustainability in social movements. *Emotion, Space and Society*, 2, 52–61.
- Cox, L. (2011). *How do we keep going? Activist burnout and sustainability in social movements*. Helsinki: Into-ebooks.
- Creswell, J. W. (2013). *Qualitative inquiry & research design: Choosing among five approaches*. Los Angeles: Sage.
- Drew, A. (2010). Being a sistah at PETA. In A. B. Harper (Ed.), *Sistah vegan: Black female vegans speak on food, identity, health, and society* (pp. 61–64z). Brooklyn, NY: Lantern Books.
- Dunham, D. (2010). On being black and vegan. In A. B. Harper (Ed.), *Sistah vegan: Black female vegans speak on food, identity, health, and society* (pp. 42–46). Brooklyn, NY: Lantern Books.
- Effler, E. S. (2010). *Laughing saints and righteous heroes: Emotional rhythms in social movement groups*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Finlay, L. (2009). Debating phenomenological research. *Phenomenology & Practice*, 3(1), 6–25.
- Francione, G., & Garner, R. (2010). *The animal rights debate: Abolition or regulation?* New York, NY: Columbia University Press.
- Freudenberger, H. J. (1974). Staff burnout. *Journal of Social Issues*, 30, 159–165.
- Gaarder, E. (2008). Risk & reward: The impact of animal rights activism on women. *Society & Animals*, 16, 1–22.

- Gaarder, E. (2011a). *Women and the animal rights movement*. Piscataway, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Gaarder, E. (2011b). Where the boys aren't: The predominance of women in animal rights activism. *Feminist Formations*, 23(2), 54–76.
- Gazzolla, L. (2015). Bad things happened: Metaphorical fingerprints, constellations of evidence, and 'guilt for association. *Vermont Law Review*, 40, 813–920.
- Gomes, M. (1992). The rewards and stresses of social change: A qualitative study of peace activists. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, 32(4), 138–146.
- Goodman, J. R., & Sanders, C. R. (2011). In favor of tipping the balance: Animal rights activists in defense of residential picketing. *Society & Animals*, 19, 137–155.
- Gorski, P. (2015). Relieving burnout and the 'martyr syndrome' among social justice education activists: The implications and effects of mindfulness. *Urban Review*, 47, 696–716.
- Gorski, P. (2018a). Fighting racism, battling burnout: Causes of activist burnout in US racial justice activists. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*. Advance online publication. doi:10.1080/01419870.2018.1439981
- Gorski, P. (2018b). Racial battle fatigue and activist burnout in racial justice activists of color at predominately white colleges and universities. *Race, Ethnicity and Education*. Advance online publication. doi:10.1080/13613324.2018.1497966
- Gorski, P., & Chen, C. (2015). 'Frayed all over': The causes and consequences of activist burnout among social justice education activists. *Educational Studies*, 51(5), 385–405.
- Greenebaum, J. (2009). 'I'm not an activist!': Animal rights vs. animal welfare in the purebred dog rescue movement. *Society & Animals*, 17, 289–304.
- Grimm, J. (2015). *Repressing Egypt's civil society: State violence, restriction in the public sphere, and extrajudicial persecution*. Berlin: Deutsches Institut für Internationale Politik und Sicherheit.
- Gunther, M. (2018, January 25). Humane society CEO under investigation for sexual relationship with employee. *The Chronicle of Philanthropy*. Retrieved from [https://www.philanthropy.com/article/Humane-Society-CEO-Under/242342?cid=cpfd\\_home](https://www.philanthropy.com/article/Humane-Society-CEO-Under/242342?cid=cpfd_home)
- Gunther, M. (2018a, January 26). The animal welfare movement's #MeToo problem. *Nonprofit Chronicles*. Retrieved from <https://nonprofitchronicles.com/2018/01/26/the-animal-welfare-movements-metoo-problem/>
- Hansson, N., & Jacobsson, K. (2014). Learning to be affected: Subjectivity, sense, and sensibility in animal rights activism. *Society & Animals*, 22(3), 262–288. doi:10.1163/15685306-12341327
- Herzog, H. A. (1993). 'The movement is my life': The psychology of animal rights activism. *Journal of Social Issues*, 49(1), 103–119.
- Herzog, H. A. (2007). Gender differences in human-animal interactions: A review. *Anthrozoös*, 20(1), 7–21.
- Jacobsson, K., & Lindblom, J. (2013). Emotion work in animal rights activism: A moral-sociological perspective. *Acta sociologica*, 56(1), 55–68.
- Jamison, W. V., Wenk, C., & Parker, J. V. (2000). Every sparrow that falls: Understanding animal rights activism as functional religion. *Society & Animals*, 8(3), 305–330.
- Jones, P. (2007). *Aftershock: Confronting trauma in a violent world*. New York: Lantern.
- Mannarini, T., & Talò, C. (2011). When commitment is not enough: How stress and individual-organization interface affect activists' persistence. *Psychology*, 2(5), 450–455.
- Maslach, C., & Gomes, M. E. (2006). Overcoming burnout. In R. M. MacNair (Ed.), *Working for peace: A handbook of practical psychology* (2nd ed.) (pp. 43–49). San Luis Obispo, CA: Impact Publishers.
- Maslach, C., & Pines, A. (1977). The burn-out syndrome in the day care setting. *Child Care Quarterly*, 6, 100–113.
- McFadden, P., Campbell, A., & Taylor, B. (2014). Resilience and burnout in child protection social work: Individual and organizational themes from a systematic literature review. *British Journal of Social Work*, 45(5), 1546–1563.
- Meyer, D. (2006). Claiming credit: Stories of movement influence as outcomes. *Mobilization*, 11(3), 281–298.

- Nair, N. (2004). On 'being' and 'becoming': The many faces of an activist. *Agenda*, 60, 28–32.
- Nandram, S. S., & Klandersman, B. (1993). Stress experienced by active members of trade unions. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 14, 415–431.
- 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.
- Orde, E. (2015, October 9). Self-care as a vegan activist. *The Vegan Society*. Retrieved from <https://www.vegansociety.com/whats-new/blog/self-care-vegan-activist>
- Ortega, K. (2017, August 15). One person of color's experience at the 2017 national animal rights conference. *Encompass* [online]. Retrieved from <http://encompassmovement.org/one-person-of-colors-experience-at-the-2017-national-animal-rights-conference/>
- Pallotta, N. (2008). Origin of adult animal rights lifestyle in childhood responsiveness to animal suffering. *Society & Animals*, 16, 149–170.
- 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), 80.
- Rettig, H. (2006). *The lifelong activist: How to change the world without losing your way*. New York, NY: 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.
- Rooks, D. (2003). The cowboy mentality: Organizers and occupational commitment in the new labor movement. *Labor Studies Journal*, 28(3), 33–62.
- Schweizer, S. (2016, July 7). 5 self-care essentials for animal rights activists. *Peaceful Dumpling*. Retrieved from <https://www.peacefuldumpling.com/5-self-care-essentials-for-animal-rights-activists>
- Shea, M. (2015). Punishing animal rights activists for animal abuse: Rapid reporting and the new wave of ag-gag laws. *Columbia Journal of Law and Social Problems*, 48(3), 337–371.
- Srivastava, S. (2006). Tears, fears and careers: Anti-racism and emotion in social movement organizations. *The Canadian Journal of Sociology*, 31(1), 55–90.
- Taylor, V., & Rupp, L. (2002). Loving internationalism: The emotion culture of transnational women's organizations, 188–1945. *Mobilization*, 7(2), 141–158.
- Walby, K., & Monaghan, J. (2011). Private eyes and public order: Policing and surveillance in the suppression of animal rights activists in Canada. *Social Movement Studies*, 10(1), 21–37.
- Weber, L., & Messias, D. K. H. (2012). Mississippi front-line recovery work after Hurricane Katrina: An analysis of the intersections of gender, race, and class in advocacy, power relations, and health. *Social Science & Medicine*, 74, 1833–1841.
- Wrenn, C. L. (2012). Applying social movement theory to nonhuman rights mobilization and the importance of faction hierarchies. *Peace Studies Journal*, 5(3), 27–44.
- Wrenn, C. L. (2015). The role of professionalization regarding female exploitation in the nonhuman animal rights movement. *Journal of Gender Studies*, 24(2), 131–146.