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Racial battle fatigue and activist burnout in racial justice activists of color at predominately white colleges and universities

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ABSTRACT

Activist burnout scholarship has inadequately considered challenges marginalized-identity activists, such as racial justice activists of color, experience in the course of their activism – challenges from which privileged identity activists, such as white racial justice activists, are protected. This article attempts to address this gap through a phenomenological study examining activist burnout in racial justice activists of color whose primary sites of activism are predominantly white colleges and universities in the United States at which they work. In order to stretch activist burnout theory to differentiate unique marginalized-identity activists' burnout causes from general causes that do not consider specific activist identities, the lens of racial battle fatigue is employed. Findings show that, although participants shared many causes of burnout that are consistent with general non-identity-specific causes described in existing literature, racial battle fatigue hastened their burnout while their activist commitments elevated their battle fatigue.

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Introduction

Activist burnout has been studied in several movements, including labor rights (Klandermans 2003), women's rights (Bernal 2006), and social justice education (Gorski 2015). These studies examine how once-dedicated activists, in Pines's (1994) words, 'lose their spirit' (381) and disengage due to the physical and emotional tolls activism can take on them. Some scholars have argued that activist burnout is among the most formidable threats to the sustainability of social movements because it wreaks havoc, not just on activists but also on movement stability (Plyler 2006; Rodgers 2010).

Based on findings from their study of activist burnout among social justice education activists in the United States, Gorski and Chen (2015) urged further examination of a gap in activist burnout scholarship. Nearly all the activists of color they interviewed identified racism endured during their activism as a primary cause of their burnout. For some, this racism was backlash from state and corporate actors intent on interrupting their activism; others were targeted with racism by white activists within their movements. To date, excepting a few descriptions of sexism women face in response to feminist activism (Bernal 2006; Fisher 1986; Proffitt 2008), the activist burnout

literature has not adequately accounted for ways marginalized-identity activists (such as racial justice activists of color) experience burnout differently from privileged-identity activists (such as white racial justice activists).

I pursued the present study to help fill this gap. Using activist burnout as an organizing framework, I analyzed in-depth interviews with 10 racial justice activists of color who have experienced burnout and whose activism is located at predominantly white institutions of higher education (PWI). All participants were faculty or staff who identified racial justice activism as their primary lifework. Then, I reconsidered these data in light of participants' experiences specifically as racial justice *activists of color*. In order to do so, I used the conceptual lens of racial battle fatigue, a framework explicating the 'physiological and psychological strain exacted on racially marginalized groups and the amount of energy spent dedicated to coping with racial microaggressions and racism' (Smith, Allen, and Danley 2007, 555). Whereas activist burnout is conceptualized around the accumulation of long-term stressors related to participation in activism (which any activist can experience), racial battle fatigue is conceptualized around the accumulation of long-term stressors associated with being a target of racism as a person of color (Arnold, Crawford, and Khalifa 2016; Smith 2004). As such, racial battle fatigue as a lens helped uncover distinguishing characteristics of activist burnout as experienced by racial justice activists of color at PWIs – characteristics not shared by white activists whose whiteness protects them from racial battle fatigue.

Two questions drove this study. The first elicited a baseline understanding of participants' experiences with burnout: *How do faculty and staff racial justice activists of color who have experienced activist burnout due to their racial justice activism in US PWIs describe the causes of their burnout?* The second question considered the resulting analysis through the lens of racial battle fatigue: *How are these activists' burnout experiences informed by racial battle fatigue?*

Following previous studies of activist experiences, 'racial justice activists' in this study are people who identify racial justice activism as their primary life's work (Chen and Gorski 2015; Pines 1994). Although participants did not work as paid employees for racial justice organizations, they prioritized activism as their central avocation and identified PWIs as the primary sites of their activism. Similarly, following previous studies of racial justice activists (Szymanski 2012), 'activism' in this study refers to purposeful action to cultivate social or political change.

Literature review

This study is situated at the nexus of activist burnout (Chen and Gorski 2015) and racial battle fatigue (Smith 2004). In this section, I contextualize the study within the existing literatures of these concepts. In doing so, I also draw on the literature on faculty activism as it pertains to matters related to burnout and racial battle fatigue.

Activist burnout

Activist burnout has been conceptualized as both a process and the interlocking implications of that process. First, it is conceptualized as the process by which the accumulative stressors associated with activism wear away activists' physical and emotional well-being

and sense of hope until they are forced to disengage from their activism at least temporarily (Rettig 2006). Unlike popular uses of ‘burnout’, which might refer to temporary sleepiness or frustration due to work stressors, activist burnout happens over time as tensions within movements, threats of retaliation, and other conditions undermine activists’ health and hopefulness (Maslach and Gomes 2006).

Often, as in the present study, this process is characterized primarily in terms of burnout causes – the experiences and conditions that underlie burnout. For example, based on her study of social justice activists in Toronto, Plyler (2006) found that participants’ burnout resulted mostly from how activists treated one another: backbiting, infighting, and ego clashes. Her findings supported an earlier study on burnout in peace activists (Gomes 1992) and were in turn supported by studies on social justice (Chen and Gorski 2015) and educational justice (Gorski and Chen 2015) activists in the United States. This and other causes of burnout as uncovered by previous studies are synthesized below.

Second, activist burnout has been conceptualized around the implications of the process by which activists’ well-being and hope are so diminished that they no longer are able to participate in their activism effectively. For example, Maslach and Gomes (2006) described activist burnout as when the “fire” of enthusiasm, dedication, and commitment to the cause has “burned out,” leaving behind the smoldering embers of exhaustion, cynicism, and ineffectiveness’ (43). These smoldering embers deteriorate activists’ abilities to remain engaged in their activism (Chen and Gorski 2015). For example, following Rettig’s (2006) conceptualization of burnout as involuntarily leaving or scaling back on activism due to the impact of activism stressors, Chen and Gorski (2015) interviewed 22 social justice activists who had experienced burnout. All but one were forced to disengage from their activism due to symptoms they attributed to burnout, including depression, chronic headaches, and insomnia.

The key to understanding activist burnout is recognizing how its impact does not end with individual activists. Turnover within social justice movements and organizations due to burnout intensifies stressors for remaining activists, as the work is performed by fewer people (Plyler 2006). Activists who stay in their movements and organizations despite burnout often take their frustrations out on one another, creating unhealthy conditions within movement organizations and hastening burnout for other activists (Gorski 2015). 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 which is only as strong and vibrant as its rank and file. (36)

Pogrebin (1994) thus characterized activist burnout as the deterioration of activists’ well-being resulting in the deterioration of social movements’ viability. Considering activist burnout as both a process and the implications of that process, several scholars have argued that it is among the most formidable threats to the persistence of social movements because of the instability it creates within them (Plyler 2006; Rodgers 2010).

Because activists’ contexts vary – some work for activist organizations, some have non-activist jobs and do activism off work hours, some (including participants of this study) do activist work within non-activist organizations – scholars have identified a

wide range of causes for activist burnout. These causes have been synthesized into three cause categories: (1) unique characteristics of social justice activists, (2) conflict and unhealthy conditions within activist communities, and (3) external stressors from individual and systemic resistance to activism (Gorski and Chen 2015).

Unique characteristics of activists

According to Maslach and Gomes (2006), social justice activists have an ‘awareness of large and overwhelming social problems’ that leaves them ‘carrying a burden of knowledge that society as a whole is unable or unwilling to face’ (43). Because long-term activists tend to understand the structural, mass-scale implications of injustice, they often self-inflict pressure to expend as much time and energy as possible on their activism, sacrificing their own well-being and hastening burnout (Barry and Dordević 2007; Weber and Messias 2012). Their labor is both physical and emotional and their identities are tightly bound to issues most people never acknowledge (Goodwin and Pfaff 2001).

Given their sense of urgency to eliminate injustice, activists often struggle to cope with the slowness of change (Bernal 2006; Nair 2004). Others, especially those not working in activist organizations, can feel isolated (Kovan and Dirkx 2003; Rettig 2006) – a phenomenon well documented among scholar-activists of color at PWIs (Alexander and Moore 2008; Patton 2004; Wilson 2012). Feelings of isolation could be especially pertinent in the present study, as racial justice activists of color in PWIs might feel isolated both as activists in institutions hostile to their activism and as employees in institutions hostile to their racial identities (Jacob 2012).

Conflicts and unhealthy conditions within activist communities

Another category of activist burnout causes involves stress-inducing conditions within movements. Scholars have cited infighting among activists as a leading cause of burnout (Norwood 2013; Porgrebin 1994). Others have described a culture of martyrdom (Chen and Gorski 2015) in activist organizations, where activists are expected to forego their well-being and work to exhaustion. According to Rodgers (2010), who studied activists in an international organization, ‘emotional distress is viewed as a sacrifice for the cause’ (279).

The culture of martyrdom silences conversations about these stressors in activist spaces (Plyler 2006). In fact, in their study of 22 social justice activists, Chen and Gorski (2015) found that only one had received in-movement mentoring on how to cope with the stressors of activism. Others had to burn out and leave their movements to find coping support.

External stressors from resistance to activism

The third category consists of external conditions that intensify activists’ stress, particularly resistance and retribution leveled by people and institutions threatened by activists’ causes. The threat or reality of resistance or reprisals has been shown to contribute to activist burnout (Cox 2011). Reprisals can include police brutality, sexual assault, arrest, online harassment, or even murder.

Any activist can experience some form of reprisal. However, reprisals are not equally distributed among activists (Bernal 2006; Norwood 2013). For example, upon examining police responses to 15,000 protests in the United States, Davenport, Soule, and

Armstrong (2011) concluded that activists of color were subject to much harsher treatment, including greater levels of arrest and physical violence, than white activists. Proffitt (2008) and Barry and Dordević (2007) have similarly noted that women activists battling sexism experience the additional burden of being targets of sexism, contributing to burnout. However, the activist burnout scholarship remains silent on how activists' racial identities inform burnout.

Racial battle fatigue and faculty of color

Smith, Yosso, and Solórzano (2006) characterized racial battle fatigue as the accumulative effects of coping with everyday racism. The concept's history is linked to Pierce's (1974) examinations of what he called the mundane extreme environment in which African-Americans live. Whereas many people think of racism as explicit and obvious, Pierce described how, in addition to coping with explicit and obvious racism, African-Americans endure constant, ubiquitous, and mundane racism. Extending Pierce's (1974) scholarship, Carroll (1998) used the term *MEES* to refer to the *mundane, extreme, environmental stress* African-Americans endure due to this form of racism. Racial battle fatigue refers to the implications of this physical and emotional stress – of coping with a constant stream of microaggressions – for people of color (Arnold, Crawford, and Khalifa 2016; Smith 2004). Just as activism can have negative well-being consequences for activists (Chen and Gorski 2015), racial battle fatigue, in Smith, Yosso, and Solórzano (2006) words, can 'become lethal when the accumulation of physiological symptoms ... are untreated, unnoticed, or personally dismissed' (301).

Scholars have studied racial battle fatigue most fervently in US PWIs. They have examined how manifestations of racism endured by people of color in PWIs combine with racism in their broader lives, reifying structural disadvantage and exacting a physical and emotional toll. For example, faculty and staff of color face racist assumptions about their intellectual abilities (Ford 2011; Griffin, Ward, and Phillips 2014; Griffin et al. 2011; Pittman 2010a). Their academic credentials (Griffin et al. 2011; Pittman 2010b) and scholarship (Amos 2015; Arnold, Crawford, and Khalifa 2016) are often minimized and devalued. They face hiring and promotion discrimination (Alexander and Moore 2008; Stockdill and Danico 2012). Faculty of color often cope with bullying by colleagues and students (Marshall 2015; Misawa 2013). They also cope with expectations to commit uncompensated time as de facto mentors for students of color (Griffin, Ward, and Phillips 2014; Ruff 2016). These conditions may be intensified for women of color (Ford 2011; Niemann 2012) and lesbian or gay people of color (Misawa 2013). Any manifestation of racism can do harm to individuals' well-being. However, racial battle fatigue considers the impact of the *accumulation* of these experiences on people of color, which can range from depression to physical illness (Harley 2008; Smith, Yosso, and Solórzano 2006).

The present study differs from the existing literature on racial battle fatigue in that it focuses on faculty or staff who engage in explicit racial justice activism on campus. That is, participants identify publicly as racial justice activists and publicly organize against and take action on racist policies and practices. Previous studies on racial battle fatigue do not centrally consider how doing so informs how people of color at PWIs experience it. However, narratives by campus-based scholar-activists

shed light on the stressors people of color who play explicit racial justice roles experience on top of those endured by other colleagues of color. For example, compared with other faculty of color, whose epistemologies and scholarship often are minimized even if they are not explicitly about race, faculty who adopt an explicit racial justice stance in their scholarship experience elevated invalidation and minimization (Amos 2015; Patton 2004; Stanley 2006). Marshall (2015) reported that she often is undercut by advisors who encourage students to avoid her classes. Faculty taking explicit racial justice perspectives in their campus roles often face retaliation from colleagues and administrators who are uneasy with their politics (Essed 2013), including denial of tenure and promotion (Amos 2015).

Methods

A phenomenological design was used to capture the experience of 10 faculty or staff of color who suffered activist burnout through racial justice activism at PWIs. Creswell (2013) argued that phenomenology is especially useful when an examination of a phenomenon can inform shifts in policy and practice that have deep impacts on people. This was an important consideration given the author's interests in supporting practices within racial justice movements that sustain activist engagement.

In fact, this study represents a two-layered phenomenological approach. It began with an attempt to understand the phenomenon of activist burnout among racial justice activists of color at PWIs. Layered onto this analysis was an examination of how participants' experiences of racial battle fatigue informed their burnout. The purpose of this layering was to arrive at a description of the *essence* (Moustakas 1994) of activist burnout in a PWI context as experienced by activists of color who, unlike white activists, endure racial battle fatigue in addition to the threat of burnout. No previous study has centrally addressed this layered experience.

Participants

According to Creswell (2013), sample sizes in phenomenological studies range from 3 to 15. For this study, in-depth interview data from the 10 participants were drawn from a larger set of interviews with racial justice activists who had experienced burnout, scaled back on or disengaged from their activism, and then recovered and fully reengaged. The original sample met two criteria. Participants (1) identified racial justice activism in the United States as their primary life work, and (2) reported having experienced and then recovered from activist burnout. Preempting potential confusion regarding popular usages of the term *burnout*, prospective participants were provided a description of activist burnout based on existing activist burnout scholarship and interviewed only if they confirmed that they experienced burnout as reflected in that description.

Participants were recruited through electronic snowball sampling. E-mail and social media posts were used to reach racial justice activists with requests for participants. Requests were posted at sites commonly visited by US racial justice activists, such as the Facebook page of the White Privilege Conference. Activists reached in this manner were asked to forward the request to other activists who might want to participate.

In addition to the aforementioned criteria, participants extracted from the bigger sample for this study identified PWIs as the primary sites of their racial justice activism. Six of the 10 participants were tenured faculty members, 2 were untenured, and 2 were mid-level administrators. Their activism varied. Some organized against racist institutional policy, such as racially tinged tenure review processes. Others fought for the rights of students of color. Many taught racial justice courses and did racial justice scholarship, defining these activities as part of their activism. Table 1 provides an overview of participant demographics.

It is important to note that, although students of color also can be activists, and although a rich literature exists on racial battle fatigue in students of color (e.g. Smith, Allen, and Danley 2007; Yosso et al. 2009), this study focuses solely on faculty and staff of color. This decision was made not only in part as a matter of focus – faculty and student contexts are different – but also to reflect existing studies on racial battle fatigue in PWIs. In virtually every case, these studies focus on *either* faculty of color *or* students of color.

Data collection

The interview protocol was composed of questions eliciting participants' experiences with activist burnout. Following an item about the nature of their racial justice activism, they were asked about symptoms and causes of their burnout, their recovery from burnout, and their persistence in activism despite experiences with burnout. Items reflected findings of previous activist burnout studies, especially Gorski and Chen's (2015) finding of the three previously discussed categories of causes for activist burnout:

Table 1. Summary of participants.

Pseudonym	Racial identity (as described by participant)	Socioeconomic status (as described by participant)	Gender	Sexual orientation	Age	Years of activism experience	How participant characterized activism focus
Anna	Latina	Middle class	Woman	Heterosexual	51	30	Chicanx educational rights
Barry	African-American	Working class	Man	Heterosexual	41	25	Resource mobilization in African-American communities
Felicia	Latina and Asian American	Working class	Woman	Bisexual	36	31	Racial justice in education
Gregory	African-American	Middle class	Man	Heterosexual	44	15	Access to higher education
Jonathan	African-American	Middle class	Man	Gay	46	16	Racial justice in teacher education
Lila	Arab American	Poor	Woman	Heterosexual	42	8	Racial justice in science education
Linda	Latina	Middle class	Woman	Heterosexual	59	49	Latinx educational rights
Rochelle	African-American	Middle class	Woman	Heterosexual	39	24	Racial justice in K-12 schools
Rosa	Latina	Working class	Woman	Heterosexual	37	15	Undocumented student rights, racial justice for queer students of color
Sofia	Latina and White	Working class	Woman	Heterosexual	42	11	DREAMers, racial health disparities

(1) unique characteristics of activists, (2) within-movement conditions, and (3) external pressures. Prior to data collection, the protocol was pilot-tested and adjusted based on feedback elicited during that process.

Participants were interviewed 60–90 min in person or via telephone. In some cases, follow-up interviews were conducted for clarification on specific points. Interviews were constructed conversationally, taking advantage of the researcher's shared experience as a racial justice activist to establish comfort and trust.

Analysis

Following common phenomenological processes, data analysis began with identifying what Creswell (2013) called 'significant statements' – snippets of responses that offered insight into how participants experienced burnout. Significant statements were organized into *clusters of meaning* (Creswell 2013) or themes (e.g. attributions of burnout to in-movement conditions, attributions of burnout to institutional resistance). These themes were used to capture the essence of the conditions surrounding their burnout, constituting the initial findings.

The initial findings were then reconsidered through the theoretical lens of racial battle fatigue (Smith 2004). This secondary analysis process was an attempt to identify intricacies in how racial battle fatigue informed participants' burnout. Although participants were not asked explicitly about it during the interview process, each described experiences associated with racial battle fatigue and the stress implications of coping with day-to-day racism at PWIs. These statements were reexamined by again identifying clusters of meaning to characterize the essence of participants' racial battle fatigue and how it informed burnout.

Findings

Synthesized here are experiences and conditions to which participants attributed their burnout. These findings are organized into the themes that emerged from the data analysis. Following this synthesis, I share findings of the second layer of analysis, examining how racial battle fatigue informed participants' burnout.

Causes of burnout

Participants attributed their burnout to (1) unbending commitments to racial justice, (2) institutional and interpersonal resistance, and (3) tensions and conflicts among campus activists.

All participants described attributed their burnout to some extent to all three of these cause categories.

Unbending commitments to racial justice

The culture of martyrdom in activist communities, encouraging activists to work themselves to exhaustion, has been documented in previous burnout scholarship (Chen and Gorski 2015). This culture is informed by conditions within social movements and by activists' urgency and commitments to their work. Lila captured how characteristics

shared among the participants feed this culture and, as a result, make them susceptible to burnout. She explained, 'I believe my health issues stem from my deep concern for the world – the burden I feel as an educator, as a critical pedagogue, as somebody who won't stop'. Sofia noted the unending challenge to unhook even momentarily from her activism: 'I think the hardest thing for me is just to disconnect . . . just going out and watching a movie with friends. I can't. I'm watching the movie and the whole time my head is going through all these things that are happening in the movie . . . all these-isms'. Like Sofia, participants' commitment is so ingrained that they cannot turn the anti-racism switch off.

Perpetually attuned to racism, it is difficult for the participants to detach from the culture of martyrdom, despite the stress it induces. Two dispositional descriptors capture the essence of participants' experience along these lines. The first, to which seven participants attributed some portion of their burnout, was an intense sense of responsibility to eliminate racism, whatever toll it might take on them. This meant making themselves vulnerable to stress-inducing consequences ranging from physical ailments to job insecurity. Felicia explained, 'I'm constantly vulnerable. It takes a piece of my heart . . . but I feel like that's my contribution to humanity'. Sofia, peeling back layers of anxiety her activism creates for her, shared,

I just can't stand inequity. It makes me physically ill if I think about it and don't do anything. [I can't live with myself if] I'm just being passive, or just noticing but being too afraid of the system or [of] losing my job. I feel like I'd rather lose my job and do the right thing than to watch [racism] happen.

Another common burnout-feeding characteristic, noted by six participants, was a comprehension of the high stakes of racial justice work. This comprehension was related to their understandings of structural racism and its implications for people of color within and outside academia. Anna described her recognition of 'the sociopolitical consequences of not being able to do what I needed to do' at a university where her activism was not supported. Her concern extended beyond the people locally affected by racist policies and practices: 'I really felt like I was carrying a very heavy load, and I really felt like I couldn't let people down. I couldn't let the future down'. It was not just the heavy loads of racial justice work carried by each participant that hastened their burnout but also the stress of imagining the implications for people of color should they fail to carry that load.

Demonstrating the interrelatedness of burnout causes, several participants explained how they were institutionally punished based on how white colleagues interpreted their racial justice urgency. Rochelle described the stress of 'being hugely misunderstood' at her university, as her activism represents 'the path of resistance in a world of the path of least resistance'. Because this institutional practice of taking 'the path of least resistance' dissuaded her colleagues from explicitly challenging racism, she felt an elevated responsibility to challenge it. She was constantly punished for doing so: 'I refuse to let go of things I think are important, which makes things appear to be adversarial. . . . And that makes you a target'. Her burnout, like that of many participants, is characterized both by the stress of understanding the high stakes of her activism and by the institutional response to her resulting sense of anti-racism urgency.

Overall, these results are consistent with scholarship on causes of activist burnout. Participants' unbending commitments, the result of deep understandings of structural racism, and profound senses of urgency to confront it at any cost to themselves made

them vulnerable to exhaustion and hopelessness. These are the most commonly cited burnout symptoms (e.g. Barry and Dordević 2007; Chen and Gorski 2015). Movement and organizational responses to this kind of burnout must focus on the fact that many people enter racial justice activism with these vulnerabilities. They notice and internalize, not just the frustrations of interpersonal bigotry, but the weight of structural racism and its implications (Eichstedt 2001). Although she did not connect it explicitly to burnout, González (2015) explained how this leads racial justice activists to ‘organiz[e] on adrenaline and stress until their bodies cave in’ (p. 16), which, she argued, is unsustainable for them and, as a result, damaging racial justice movements.

Institutional and interpersonal resistance to activism

Participants’ burnout also was connected to harsh resistance to their activism. Capturing the spirit of this theme, Rochelle explained, ‘[I’m] in a struggle with multiple institutions [within my university] that form coalitions of power that have multiple kinds of resources. ... That’s a ridiculous condition that I live under. ... And that burns me out a lot’. These experiences were characterized most commonly by (1) institutional reprisals for participants’ activism and (2) denial and invalidation by white colleagues and students.

Despite knowing that they would face reprisals, participants’ commitment made non-engagement in activism a non-option. They chose to absorb reprisals sometimes to the point of putting their employment at risk, hastening the emotional exhaustion that leads to burnout. Rochelle continued,

most of the people I’ve met in administration in higher education ... are there to protect the institution. ... And the kind of work that I do threatens that, which means that they are going to threaten me. And so that happens all the time. There is no professional stability.

Barry described how ‘warnings would become quite clear’ when he advocated for policy change related to racial justice. Jonathan attributed his burnout to the ‘professional vulnerability’ he experienced when he ‘pushed those envelopes’, challenging racism on campus.

Of the seven participants who attributed their burnout to the stress of institutional and interpersonal resistance, six had anxiety over job security. Of these, four were tenured faculty members. Even the protections of tenure could not curb their burnout.

All 10 participants experienced denial and invalidation from students or colleagues. However, accounting for a second common way they experienced interpersonal or institutional resistance, eight explicitly named *white* students’ and colleagues’ denial of racism and invalidation of racial justice activism as central to their burnout. Anna, capturing the sentiment of several participants, shared ‘The reason for the burnout is the sabotage from [white] students. And the attacks from the students. And the whole level of conferred dominance’.

Others attributed their burnout to constant demands from white colleagues to soften their racial justice stances. Jonathan recounted, ‘[White colleagues] tell me, “You’re moving too fast. You’re not speaking so I can hear you.” ... I take offense to that’. He grew emotionally exhausted having ‘the same damn conversation over and over and over again [with White colleagues and students] ... about [the myth that] Latino parents don’t care anything about their kids’ education. ...’ Rosa explained how, white

colleagues invalidated her by insisting ‘not everything is about race’. They then expected her to emotionally support their awareness-building:

...I ask[ed] a question [about a racist incident]. It blew up. And then someone who works in our unit ... comes to me and she’s like, *I heard you were offended*. And she’s crying and she’s cussing... All of a sudden it’s my responsibility to make her feel better about her mistake.

Felicia captured participants’ general experience of white resistance and how it contributed to burnout: ‘The institution itself is ... a white supremacist cult system... Me having the face and ideas that challenge it is a constant reminder of the shame they feel...’

Previous scholarship on activist burnout similarly points to resistance and retaliation from people and organizations threatened by activists’ causes. Usually this resistance comes from state or corporate actors (Davenport, Soule, and Armstrong 2011; Jacobs and Taylor 2011) or from counter-movements by organizations designed to protect members’ interests (Gorski 2011). The present study is the first focusing on burnout in activists whose primary activism sites are their workplaces and the first focusing on burnout in PWIs. Notably, although higher education often is seen as a bastion of liberalism, scholars of higher education (e.g. Stockdill and Danico 2012) and scholars of racial battle fatigue (e.g. Yosso et al. 2009) have argued that it can be better understood as a system that reproduces racial inequality. Supporting this view, the resistance and repercussions to which participants attributed their burnout came from within these institutions rather than from state or corporate actors – a condition not accounted for in previous burnout studies, which have tended to focus on volunteer activists or activists employed by activist organizations (Chen and Gorski 2015).

Tensions and conflicts among activists

Hostilities within communities of activists also contributed to participants’ burnout. They characterized these experiences in three overlapping ways. They described (1) white activists asserting their privilege in activist spaces, (2) infighting and competition among activists, and (3) sexism, heterosexism, and other intra-activist oppressions.

Eight participants named ways they were treated by white colleagues who identified as racial justice activists as a cause of their burnout. Capturing the spirit of this experience, Felicia explained, ‘I have [in my university] a lot of racial justice workers [who are] white, which is great. At the same time, they actually cause me more stress’. Several described how white activists used and took credit for their ideas. Others described white activists expecting their mentorship, but then refusing to confront racism. Rosa lamented,

That’s what burned me out. I realize my allies aren’t really the allies I thought they were... As an educator I know everyone is developing from wherever they are. So am I holding [white activists] to too high a standard?... My burnout comes from being everyone’s teacher, including people I think should know better.

Still others experienced the strain created by white activists wanting to control the pace of racial justice campus initiatives. Synthesizing several participants’ experiences, Sofia described how white activists’ penchants for interest convergence –

supporting racial justice only when it converged with their professional interests and removing support when interests did not align (Castagno and Lee 2007) – contributed to her burnout:

[They are] political operatives . . . people that want to politically look like they're doing the right thing in the moment with this group, and then they go to the next group and that politically right thing is completely the opposite of what they just told this group.

Participants' burnout also resulted from competition among activists. Anna captured the essence of this experience for the seven participants who shared it: 'There is a lot of competition. . . . And it takes energy to deal with some of that sometimes. That has led to burnout in the past'. Several participants similarly pointed to stress caused by ego-driven activism. Anna continued, 'It's an ego thing. . . . It takes some energy to deal with because you have to kind of stroke [other activists'] egos'.

Speaking of egos, Rosa reported being told she wasn't 'doing the work' the way fellow activists felt it should be done. Sofia attributed her burnout in part to a 'one-upmanship' culture among activists: *I'm undocumented* and *I'm Latino* and *I'm trans*. . . . And then someone else will say *I'm a woman* and *I'm this* and *I'm that*. And it's just like this constant *who's got it worst?* Others described tensions among 'old school' and newer activists, a 'you hurt my feelings and now I'm going to hurt your feelings' mentality and myriad additional intra-activist tensions. The result, captured by Sofia, is a 'cyclical . . . process of woundedness being absorbed by someone else who's wounded and being recycled back and forth': conditions that fed participants' burnout.

Finally, participants' burnout was characterized by oppression among activists. Of the eight women interviewed, five attributed their burnout to sexism from male activists. Anna described working with male activists 'who automatically assumed I wasn't as smart . . . or that I wasn't capable of doing something because I was a woman'. Sofia was exhausted by what she described as the 'machismo' of male activists. Several women participants attributed their burnout, in Felicia's words, to 'sexual objectification' by male activists. Rosa's burnout was in part the result of having to confront fellow activists who used religion to justify their heterosexism or who were 'brilliant' on racial justice but also 'elitist, classist asses'.

Many scholars have argued that these within-movement conditions have the most detrimental impacts on activists when it comes to burnout (Maslach and Gomes 2006; Plyler 2006; Pogrebin 1994). Activists generally expect some level of resistance (Case 2012) from outside their movements. They usually are aware of ways their engagement in activism is tied to the emotional impact of acknowledging structural racism; in fact, research shows that those who perceive the greatest levels of structural racism are most likely to become racial justice activists (Szymarski 2012). Although I could not find research addressing this specifically, it could be that those who come into social movements with the hope of finding more just spaces where they are surrounded by like-minded colleagues are hit particularly hard emotionally when they find that the oppressions and anxieties they experience outside their movements are replicated with disappointing precision within them.

The relationship between activist burnout and racial battle fatigue

Racial battle fatigue informed participants' burnout in two mirror-image ways. First, it exacerbated the threat of burnout. Second, institutional responses to participants'

activism elevated the racism they experienced, exacerbating their racial battle fatigue. Before discussing these conditions, it is important to note that participants struggled to distinguish between the accumulative effects of racism and the causes of their burnout. Felicia, capturing many participants' experiences, explained that her very presence at her university elicited racist responses, regardless of whether she advocated racial justice. She shared, 'I'm stereotyped as an Asian or Latino feisty woman, and they see that as some kind of threat'. She also identified this as a primary cause of her burnout. There is no easy way to pull these experiences apart, which points to the need to strengthen understandings of activist burnout with racial battle fatigue and vice versa. The interwoven nature of burnout and racial battle fatigue remains unaccounted for in the scholarship on both concepts.

Racial battle fatigue exacerbating burnout

Speaking to how racial battle fatigue informs burnout, all participants described how the battle fatigue induced by everyday racism at their PWIs was related to their burnout. In particular, they shared how this racism made them more susceptible to burnout. For example, Felicia attributed her burnout, not just to her activism but also to 'having to deal as a woman of color with the white supremacist patriarchy' at her university. She explained, 'I call it the wild, wild Whiteness instead of the wild, wild West'.

Clarifying the relationship between her burnout and everyday racism on and off campus, Rosa shared,

Whether ... doing the racial justice work on behalf of others, or merely trying to go to the grocery store and not be mistreated or not have the neighbor call the cops on us because they think there are too many cars in the driveway, the fatigue again is related to the [activism], but I also think it is just fatigue from life in general.

Capturing the experiences of several participants, she described 'career setbacks' she endured when her activism was devalued. She felt drained having to choose between an approach that would not upset her colleagues but would hurt her soul and one that reflected her values but made her vocationally vulnerable: 'I made the decision to do [anti-racism] work that made me feel good spiritually and ethically, but [that was] not necessarily valued ... and [was not] getting lines on my vitae that would make me look good'. Her activism elevated her battle fatigue; her battle fatigue elevated her burnout.

Others shared how they were punished because of the combination of their racial identities and their activist-scholarship, hastening their burnout. Rochelle described how these conditions worked together: 'Having to play multiple games at the same time, like the game of publish or perish, the agenda of social justice workers for subversion, and activism; those are conditions that cause extreme burnout for me'. Unlike white colleagues, she and other participants navigate those multiple games while also coping with racist resistance, which is elevated because of their activism. Although scholars of activism in higher education have identified the challenge of navigating these games for marginalized identity faculty and staff (Essed 2013; Marshall 2015), they generally have focused centrally on the hope of surviving academic careers rather than on the need to survive as activists. The present study emphasizes the importance of examining these survival attempts together.

Activism elevating the threat of battle fatigue

Nine participants described how being activists in their PWIs made them bigger targets of the mundane, ongoing racism (Carroll 1998; Pierce 1974) that underlies racial battle fatigue and can elevate their burnout.

Rosa captured the essence of this process:

I have been ... called in to be told that people don't like my attitude, that I'm too aggressive. ... Stating something clearly in a declarative way would be perceived as aggressive. So not only do I have to try to tell the truth about injustice ... but I also have to make other people feel good about it. ... [T]here are days where people are asking me to eat shit and smile about it ... I can't do that. I haven't been doing that, which is why I'm feeling burned out.

Like other participants, she has no choice but to speak out given her deep commitment to racial justice, but she knows she will be punished for doing so. The punishment is the institutional reprisal for her activism, a common cause of burnout (Cox 2011). But it is clearly raced, focusing on her 'attitude', painting her as 'aggressive'. This punishment does not just affect her life as an activist on campus; it affects her entire experience on and off campus. The resulting battle fatigue is reflected in the exasperation in her words ('...people are asking me to eat shit and smile about it'), which also hint at her exhaustion and hopelessness.

Sofia, like many participants, described feeling overwhelmed trying to navigate hostile institutional responses to her activism. Capturing the interplay of battle fatigue and burnout, she shared,

It was kind of being squished in that middle of the system that needs to change or I need to find other avenues ... I remember absolutely feeling like ... I have [no more] strength ... to hear one more story, to hear one more terrible injustice ... I have no room in my body anymore or my mind or my spirit. I just felt full ... of toxic, grimy injustice.

The institution was not going to change. Sofia was not going to soften her anti-racist commitment. Even if participants did not experience direct reprimands for their activism, the institutional heel-digging fatigued them spiritually, physically, and emotionally, reflecting common symptoms of both activist burnout (Maslach and Gomes 2006) and racial battle fatigue (Smith 2004).

What was clear overall when applying racial battle fatigue to an analysis of participants' burnout was that they had interlocking causes and interlocking effects. This pointed to the potential usefulness of each concept for informing understandings of the other.

Discussion

Largely reflecting causes of activist burnout described in previous scholarship, participants' burnout resulted from many causes falling roughly into three categories. These include (1) internal causes related to activists' unique characteristics, (2) external causes related to institutional resistance and reprisals, and (3) intra-activist causes related to tensions and oppressions among activists. Of these categories, the one that offers the newest insights compared with previous research is the third, intra-activist causes. All participants attributed their burnout in part to experiencing discrimination from other

activists. Over half of the women interviewed attributed their burnout in part to sexism from other activists. Nearly every interviewee attributed burnout to racism from white activists. The oppressions that exist outside racial justice movements appear to be replicated within participants' activist contexts, hastening burnout and likely disrupting movement stability (Rettig 2006).

Scholars previously have examined many conditions with which participants in this study contend, including tensions and infighting among activists, clashing activist egos, the culture of martyrdom (e.g. Barry and Dordević 2007; Gomes 1992). However, with few exceptions (e.g. Gorski and Chen 2015), discriminatory conditions and white-privilege wielding within activist communities have garnered little attention in activist burnout research. Future development of activist burnout as a theoretical concept should consider these realities.

These realities also are important to the bigger activist burnout discourse in the popular media. This discourse primarily revolves around self-care (Gorski 2015) – how activists should seek counseling or eat healthily to avoid burnout. Such an approach might be sensible as a response to the portion of participants' burnout attributed to internal causes. However, the usefulness of this discourse is undermined by the suggestion that activists of color can avoid burnout by taking better care of themselves when a major cause of their burnout is racism from white activists. From this view, the 'self-care' discourse harkens to a racist bootstrap mentality (Martin and Pimentel 2014). When strategies for avoiding burnout focus on self-care rather than addressing racism within activist communities, activists of color are asked to reshape *themselves* to endure racism and racial battle fatigue. When conditions in activist spaces contribute to racial battle fatigue, self-care is not a just or sustainable approach to quelling burnout. This demonstrates the inadequacy of approaches for responding to burnout among racial justice activists without considering how it is informed by racial battle fatigue.

Activist burnout scholars have warned more generally against centering self-care as an anti-burnout strategy, arguing that the focus should be on activist *community* care, addressing the culture of martyrdom and other conditions within activist communities (Cox 2011; Norwood 2013) – the kinds of conditions that can also inflame racial battle fatigue. This study's findings support this view. But they also stretch it, challenging burnout scholars to strengthen burnout theory by differentiating understandings of burnout. The process starts by understanding how marginalized-identity activists, including activists of color, cope with burnout- and battle-fatigue-inducing experiences within white-dominated spaces like PWIs. Privileged-identity activists, like white activists, are protected from and might even cause these experiences. When the essence of activist burnout is better understood and differentiated in this manner, activist communities can develop better solutions for decreasing its threat.

As demonstrated by this study, racial battle fatigue can be a useful tool in this accounting and in understanding the role day-to-day experiences with oppression play in activist burnout. It uncovers insidious racism people of color face, including resistance, invalidation, and silencing (Amos 2015; Misawa 2013). It challenges scholars and activist leaders to attend to the accumulation of day-to-day racism activists of color face both as activists of color and as people of color, inside and outside their activism. Future research on racism within PWIs could also examine what might be unique about the PWI context when it comes to activist burnout, strengthening understandings both

of racial conditions in higher education and of situations in which activists' primary sites of activism are within non-activist organizations for which they work.

Similarly, the development of racial battle fatigue as an analytical tool could be buttressed with understandings of how it might operate differently for people of color who are or are not involved in racial justice activism. The activists interviewed for this study universally believed that the racism they faced on campus was connected to their activism. Scholarship on racial battle fatigue has considered these distinctions in some ways, as in Yosso et al.'s (2009) finding that Latinx students at PWIs might be cautious about speaking up about racism for fear their advocacy could make them more vulnerable to racism. Their finding, too, points to the need to differentiate racial battle fatigue. Some people understand the risks of speaking up and do so anyway. As demonstrated in this study, this decision can make them more susceptible to conditions that elevate racial battle fatigue. Prior to this study, though, scholarship on racial battle fatigue had yet to specifically examine students, faculty, or staff of color who asserted themselves as activists. Stretching racial battle fatigue conceptually in this way could help scholars and movement leaders more effectively identify ways to support campus activists. It also could provide more insight into institutional resistance activists face on campus.

Although this single study examining the interplay between activist burnout and racial battle fatigue is not sufficient for proposing a theory of the former that incorporates the latter, further study should advance layered understandings that incorporate the distinctions this study began to uncover. Building on Smith's (2004) and others' groundbreaking work on racial battle fatigue in higher education, future research on campus activists could draw more concrete comparisons between white activists and activists of color or between people of color who do and do not engage in explicit activism. This would help extend understandings of how racial battle fatigue and burnout operate.

Conclusion

In this study, the layering of racial battle fatigue and activist burnout provided important insights into conditions at PWIs that elevate the threat of both for racial justice activists of color. Activist burnout is exacerbated by racial battle fatigue. The conditions that contribute to racial battle fatigue might be elevated for faculty and staff of color who are racial justice activists compared to those who are not. Separately, these concepts can be helpful for considering how to provide supports to sustain racial justice activists in or out of PWIs. Together they can offer an additional plane of understanding that might inform how to build supports for racial justice activists of color into activist communities and movements.

Scholarship on activist burnout heretofore has not substantially accounted for differences in experiences of burnout between privileged-identity activists and activists who cope with the stressors of activism while also coping with the kind of oppression they are battling. This study represents an attempt to begin this accounting. Continued examination of the experiences of racial justice activists based at PWIs and how burnout overlaps with racial battle fatigue might also look at student activists, following

examinations of racism student activists of color experience (Rhoads 1998; Ruff 2016) and racial battle fatigue students of color suffer (Yosso et al. 2009).

Limitations

Although this study's focus on racial justice activists of color in PWIs made sense considering the history of racial battle fatigue research, which is almost exclusively sited in PWIs, it also might limit the findings' applicability in some other contexts. Future research should examine these matters outside PWIs more thoroughly, perhaps in specific racial justice movements. Additionally, although participants' stories were rich, the relatively small sample size also limits the broad applicability of the findings. Finally, participants were not asked explicitly about *racial battle fatigue*. It wasn't until I began analyzing the data that I realized how helpful the concept would be in making sense of their experiences as activists of color. Future studies might draw on racial battle fatigue, not just in conceptual framing or analysis but also in instrument construction so participants can be asked more directly about the impact of their day-to-day experiences of racism and how it impacts their activism more directly.

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