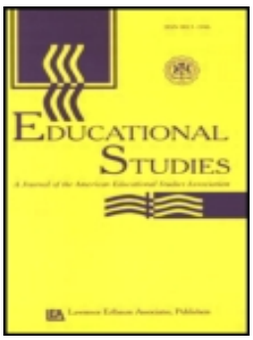

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"Frayed All Over:" The Causes and Consequences of Activist Burnout Among Social Justice Education Activists

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Despite the growing body of scholarship on burnout among social justice activists who are working on a variety of issues, from labor rights to queer justice, little attention has been paid to burnout among those whose activism focuses on issues of educational justice. To begin to address this omission and understand what supports might help social justice education activists mitigate burnout and sustain their activism, we analyzed interview data from 14 activists focused on activist burnout and its implications on movements for educational justice.. This analysis identified 3 major symptom categories of activist burnout and we gained insights into the *culture of martyrdom* in social justice education movements. These symptoms and the culture of martyrdom, by negatively impacting the health and sustainability of activists, threaten the efficiency and effectiveness of educational justice movements.

Forty years ago Freudenberger (1974) introduced the notion of vocational burnout to describe, not just a state of temporary fatigue or exasperation, but an ongoing and debilitating condition that threatens its victims' vocational persistence. In the years since, scholars have been studying the nature of burnout and honing its definition. For example, Schaufeli and Buunk (2003) defined burnout as "a state or process of mental exhaustion" (p. 383). Pines (1994) synthesized a variety of conceptions of burnout as "the end result of a process in which idealistic and highly committed people lose their spirit" (p. 381).

According to Goodwin and Pfaff (2001), activists, people whose passions and identities are wrapped up in social causes, are especially susceptible to burnout because they tend to invest considerable amounts of what Hochschild (1983) described as *emotional labor* into their activist work. This emotional investment makes activists vulnerable to feeling hopeless, overwhelmed, and discouraged—feelings that, over time, can culminate in burnout (Kovan & Dirkx, 2003). Scholars who have examined the phenomenon of burnout of activists whose activism is tied to social justice causes, including labor rights, racial justice, gender justice, peace, or queer justice, have suggested that, even when compared with other activists, they are at a particularly high risk of burnout (Maslach & Gomes, 2006; Plyler, 2006).

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Education researchers have produced a robust body of scholarship on the phenomenon of burnout among school teachers and administrators (e.g., Denton, Chaplin, & Wall, 2013; Farber 1991; Skaalvik, 2010). There is also a growing body of scholarship on the experiences and attitudes of activists whose activism revolves around educational rights and educational justice in both the pre-school through 12th grade (P–12) and higher education realms (e.g., Kezar, 2010; Picower, 2012; Urrieta, 2009). However, although scholars have examined activist burnout and its implications in other social justice contexts, such as labor rights (Klandermans, 2003) and civil rights (Goodwin and Pfaff, 2001) movements, little, if any, scholarly attention has been paid to understanding burnout among social justice activists—some of whom also may be teachers or administrators—whose activism focuses on educational justice, including causes like labor rights or racial justice within educational contexts. This is a notable omission, as activist burnout, has deleterious effects not only on the activists, but on the movements in which they participate (Rettig, 2006).

As social justice activists whose activism includes a variety of issues related to educational justice and rights, we have been concerned within our own activist communities about the lack of attention to self-care, substantial levels of activist burnout, and the lack of conversations about activist burnout and its implications on movements for educational justice. We decided to respond to this research gap, in part, by conducting a phenomenological study with 14 self-identifying social justice education activists who we interviewed about their own or observed experiences with activist burnout. Our primary research questions were: (a) How do social justice educational activists characterize the nature—the symptoms and impact—of their burnout?, and (b) How do social justice education activists characterize the extent to which resources for coping with or recovering from activist burnout are available to them? By addressing these questions, we hoped to learn what supports might be developed to help sustain social justice education activists and, as a result, to help sustain social justice educational movements.

For the purpose of this study, we defined *social justice activists* as people who identify social justice activism as their primary life's work. We defined social justice *education* activists as social justice activists whose activism revolves around social justice concerns such as racism, sexism, the corporatization of the public sphere, anti-immigrant oppression, and environmental justice as they relate to schools and schooling. (See Table 1 for a summary of the social justice issues around which the participants' activism revolved.) The participants for this study were drawn from a larger sample of social justice activists because they specifically identified educational contexts as a primary focus of their activism. As described in more detail later, although not all participants of this study work within educational organizations, all focus their social justice work on creating and sustaining a more equitable and just distribution of educational access and opportunity.

POSITIONALITY OF THE RESEARCHERS

Gorski is a White, US-born, middle-class man and an associate professor at a public university. Gorski teaches classes on social justice and human rights, but considers his primary life's work racial and economic justice activism, particularly related to educational access. Gorski has struggled with some of the symptoms of activist burnout, but has not experienced full-blown burnout, despite seeing its effects in many of the social justice education movements and organizations

TABLE 1
Synthesis of Participant Identities and Activism

Participant Pseudonym	*Racial Identity (as described by participants)*	*Socioeconomic Status (as self-identified by participants)*	*Gender*	*Age*	*Years of Activist Experience*	*Activism*
Bethany	Latino & African American	Middle class	Female	35	15	Educational justice for students with learning disabilities
Cathy	White	Middle class	Female	53	30	Student rights in higher education, immigrant rights
Christopher	Latino & White	Working class	Male	45	25	Educational justice in higher education, Latino educational justice
Ellen	African American	Working class	Female	39	34	Systemic K-12 educational justice
Gwen	White	Middle class	Female	47	28	Racial justice in education
Hortense	White	Working class	Female	42	11	Economic justice in education, eliminating the school-to-prison pipeline
Heidi	White	Managerial class	Female	41	15	Economic justice in education, women's rights, animal rights
Isabel	African American & Native American	Poor	Female	52	37	Social justice arts education
Jennifer	White	Working class	Female	45	10	Critical education, teaching about social justice
Kara	White	Middle class	Female	54	25	Racial justice in education
Laurence	White	Middle class	Male	44	25	Ecopedagogy, vegan education
Patrice	Multiracial	Middle class	Female	43	15	Anticolonial education, anti-oppression community education
Stella	White	Middle class	Female	49	20	Immigrant rights in education, economic justice, environmental justice
Allison	White	[Chose not to disclose]	Female	52	30	Humane education (teaching for social justice, environmental justice, and animal rights)

in which he has been involved during his 20 years of activism. Observing the ways in which activist burnout has weakened these movements and organizations has led Gorski to adopt the study of social justice activist burnout as a major focus of his scholarship, so that he can develop strategies for mitigating it and, as a result, strengthen the sustainability and efficiency of social justice work in education. Although Gorski's sense of urgency to understand and mitigate activist burnout and his ties to many circles of social justice education activists across the United States could be construed as potential biases in the data analysis of this study, this potential is tempered—although admittedly never completely dissolved—both by his commitment to mitigate burnout as effectively as possible, which requires deep and clear analysis, and by his collaboration with a coauthor.

Chen is a middle-class woman from China and an assistant professor at a public university in the United States. Chen's primary teaching and research interest revolves around several human rights issues, including global women's and indigenous rights. As an educator teaching courses on human rights, Chen has been fortunate enough to collaborate with many human rights activists and has witnessed the struggles they have faced related to activist burnout. Chen considers herself an educator-activist and has experienced similar challenges as those in this study. Both her personal experiences and observations led to her passion for studying activist burnout, with the hope that someday intervention tools could be available to help communities of social justice activists. Chen is aware of the potential bias she may carry into conducting the research based on her commitment to social justice and insider status related to social justice activism.

LITERATURE REVIEW

We were unable to find scholarship on burnout among activists focusing on social justice issues in educational contexts. However, the broader literature on activist burnout, and especially activist burnout among activists working on other social justice causes, provided important context for this study.

Activist Burnout and Its Causes

As noted earlier, although common uses of *burnout* often refer to situations in which workers, volunteers, or activists feel temporarily tired or overwhelmed, Freudenberger (1974) introduced a notion of vocational burnout to describe a much more debilitating and destabilizing condition. Over the last 40 years, researchers building on Fruedenberger's burnout scholarship have conceptualized burnout as a chronic condition (Maslach & Leiter, 2005) characterized by a "state or process of mental exhaustion" (Schaufeli & Buunk, 2003, p. 383). This is the kind of burnout often described as impacting some teachers due to a variety of conditions, including low levels of teacher self-efficacy (or belief in one's abilities), the challenge of dealing with growing class sizes, and ineffective leadership, among other things (e.g., Heidmats & Liik, 2014; Oakes, Lane, Jenkins, & Booker, 2015; Williams & Dikes, 2015). This research has revealed some similarities in the symptoms associated with teacher burnout and activist burnout (and other forms of vocational burnout), described in more detail later in the article.

According to Klandermans (2003), rates of activist disengagement have been estimated at 50% to 60%. Although we were unable to find estimates of burnout in other contexts, scholars who study activist burnout, including social justice activist burnout, speculate that activists are especially susceptible to burnout due to their deeply-felt commitments to social justice causes and the emotional investments they put into their activism. The very nature of activist work related to social issues, Maslach and Gomes (2006) explained, "involves cultivating and maintaining awareness of large and overwhelming social problems, often carrying a burden of knowledge that society as a whole is unable or unwilling to face" (p. 43), making it different in nature from most other vocational contexts. Being conscious of injustice—of the impacts of deep structural racism or of heteronormativity or of the unequal distribution of educational opportunity—in a world in which most people choose not to be conscious, immersing themselves in work that requires that sort of emotional commitment, makes social justice activists uniquely vulnerable to stress, self-inflicted pressure, and social isolation (Kovan & Dirkx, 2003). Based on her study of social justice activists and her own experiences with activist burnout, Plyler (2006) observed, "Social justice work often takes a detrimental toll on activists; I have witnessed—within the political and community groups I'm a member of in Toronto—organizers paying for their activism with their emotional, mental, and physical health" (p. 123).

Unfortunately, despite the toll that activism may be taking on social justice activists, studies of activist burnout (Plyler, 2006; Rodgers, 2010), as well as personal narratives from social justice activists (Nair, 2004; Pigni, 2013), point to a culture of silence within activist communities when it comes to burnout. For example, Rodgers (2010), who studied activist burnout among Amnesty International workers, found what she characterized as a destructive *culture of selflessness* in which open conversations about challenges associated with burnout were scarce and in which those challenges were seen as an expected sacrifice for the good of the cause. She explained:

> The ubiquitous discourse of selflessness pervades the internal dynamics of the organization, and in terms of the emotional culture of the organization, it means that displays of personal strain, sadness, or depression, while perhaps understandable, are viewed by a considerable amount of the staff as unnecessary and self-indulgent. (p. 279)

Others have noted similar cultural dynamics in other social justice activist spaces, finding that time devoted to self-care—to trying to mitigate looming burnout—is looked upon with suspicion or even derision, not just within social justice organizations, but among many individual social justice activists (Pigni, 2013; Plyler, 2006). And, of course, the silence about burnout serves, itself, to hasten burnout, as Rodgers (2010) learned:

> The physical burn-out and stress of overwork may inevitably lead to employee turnover and turnover at Amnesty International is high. Indeed, in the period which my project spanned, I attempted to contact many of my informants for follow-up interviews. By the end of the project, a full one-third of them, including many that were long-time employees, had left the organization. (p. 286)

Researchers have identified other possible causes of burnout among social justice activists, including power struggles within activist organizations and movements (Gomes, 1992; Plyler, 2006; Wineman, 2003). However, in many cases in which they have done so, they also have linked those causes back to this culture of selflessness and the related lack of self-care among

activists (Nair, 2004; Pigni, 2013; Rodgers, 2010). For example, based on her synthesis of scholarship about burnout among social justice activists, Plyler (2006) worried that, rather than "figuring out ways to take care of ourselves and each other, social justice groups lose brilliant and committed activists to burnout, disillusionment, and poor health" (p. 123). This, she argued, results in troubling conditions within social justice movements, which can become "plagued by fragmentation, lack of reflection and discussion, and 'wheel reinventing"' (p. 123).

Another contributor to burnout among some social justice activists, although it is addressed mostly in implicit ways in the existing literature, is that activists who are part of marginalized communities must contend with additional layers of anxiety, stress, and emotional exhaustion related, not just to the oppressions their activism is targeting, but also to the oppressions they are experiencing, sometimes even within activist communities and organizations (Leondar-Wright, 2014; Lorde, 1988; Plyler, 2006; Wineman, 2003). For example, when Vaccaro and Mena (2011) studied the experiences of queer student activists of color within predominantly White queer activist organizations, they found that the racism within the queer movement took an additional toll on them—a toll the White activists were unwilling to acknowledge. Similarly, Lorde (1988), an African American racial, gender, queer, and economic justice activist, speaking to the response she received from White feminists simply for asking them to consider why so few women of color were attending an organizing meeting, lamented, "Of course, I was accused of 'brutalizing' the [White] organizers by simply asking why Black women were absent" (p. 64). Leondar-Wright (2014) detailed how the failure to consider the ways in which socioeconomic class impacts activists' paths into activism and experiences of the cultures with a variety of social movements can lead to the marginalization of lower-income activists and, and a result, derail the work of the movements. We have witnessed similar dynamics in a variety of educational justice movements and organizations, and particularly in those fighting against the privatization of public schools wherein, for example, White and economically secure activists push a sort of *colorblind* approach, arguing that neoliberal school reform is bad for everybody while failing to see how activists of color and lower-income activists are marginalized by that approach, and largely invisible in the movement or organizational leadership. Plyler (2006), speaking from her experience as an activist with relative economic privilege, pointed out, as well, that some of the supports that might sustain activists or help mitigate burnout, such as high-quality healthcare, is tied to her privilege. Privilege begets privilege, even when it comes to social justice activists and their experiences with burnout.

The Symptoms and Implications of Activist Burnout

Scholars who have studied activist burnout and activists who have provided firsthand accounts of burnout from within particular movements or activist organizations have identified a broad array of characterizing symptoms (Kovan & Dirkx, 2003; Plyler, 2006; Rettig, 2006). Maslach and Gomes (2006) synthesized many of these symptoms into three primary signs of activist burnout, which they found among peace activists: (a) exhaustion (feeling emotionally and physically drained), (b) cynicism (having negative associations with the work that once seemed so important), and (c) inefficacy (doubting self-worth and lack of activist achievement). They called these the "smoldering embers" left behind when the "initial 'fire' of enthusiasm, dedication, and commitment to the cause has 'burned out"' (p. 43). Others have built on their findings. For example, Vacarro and Mena (2011), based on their study of burnout among queer activists of

color, complicated previous researchers' findings that a lack of attention to self-care hastens burnout when they reported that their interviewees' lack of self-care was actually a symptom of their burnout, perhaps connected with both cynicism and inefficacy.

The scholars and activists who have written about activist burnout among social justice activists have noted with great clarity the negative impact these symptoms have on individual activists. Rettig (2006), for instance, explained, "When an activist burns out, she typically derails her career and damages her self-esteem and relationships" (p. 16). What they almost unanimously find more alarming, though, is the negative impact activist burnout has on social justice movements. Continuing, Rettig lamented that the burned out activist "also deprives her organization and movement of her valuable experience and wisdom" (p. 16). This is because activists who experience burnout nearly always cut back on, or completely disengage from, their activism (Maslach & Gomes, 2006; Rodgers, 2010; Vacarro & Mena, 2011). Rettig (2006) concluded, "The worst problem, however, may be that when an activist burns out she deprives younger activists of a mentor, thus making *them* more likely to burn out" (p. 16). In other words, understanding the nature of, and then finding ways to mitigate, activist burnout is an important step toward sustaining the efforts of individual activists. But it is a crucial step toward sustaining social justice movements (Lorde, 1988; Plyler, 2006; Wollman & Wexler, 1992).

This is why, as social justice activists and as scholars of social justice activism, we were dismayed to find virtually no scholarship on activist burnout among social justice education activists, despite the growing body of scholarship on burnout among teachers, administrators, and other education workers. Although there is certainly overlap between people who work in education and social justice education activists in the sense that some educators also are activists, the emotional labor described earlier, and other sorts of vulnerabilities that social justice activists invest in their work, can make them additionally susceptible to burnout (Goodwin & Pfaff, 2001; Maslach & Gomes, 2006), which is why scholars began to study and theorize activist burnout outside the context of other forms of vocational burnout. Additionally, although there is certainly some amount of overlap between the experiences of social justice activists whose activism focuses on education and those whose activism focuses on other spheres and contexts, previous scholarship has uncovered how distinctive conditions within specific movements and organizations affect activists' experiences with burnout within those movements differently. For example, Klandermans (2003) and Gomes (1992) identified stressors related to negative relationships within activist organizations and other within-organization conditions as leading causes of burnout among labor activists and peace activists respectively. However, Kovan and Dirkx (2003) pointed to more internal struggles, such as personal emotional attachments to activist causes, as primary causes of burnout among environmental activists. If we hope to develop strategies to sustain social justice movements in education, we must begin, at least in part, by understanding the impact of those movements on the activists who are involved in them so that we might identify the supports that will keep them, as one of our participants put it, "in the game."

METHODOLOGY

To begin developing an understanding of the symptoms and impact of activist burnout on social justice educational activists, and how they characterize the extent to which resources for coping

with activist burnout are available to them, we analyzed data from 14 semistructured interviews that we conducted as part of a larger study on burnout and self-care among social justice and human rights activists in the United States. As part of the original sample of activists, each of the interviewees in this study (a) identified social justice activism as their primary life's work, (b) reported having adopted one or more self-care strategies to mitigate burnout or more generally sustain their activism, and (c) saw their self-care strategies and social justice activism as inextricably linked. A fourth criteria for the activists whose interviews we analyzed for this article was that they specifically identified social justice activism related to educational contexts or policy as their primary activist focus. Additionally, we did not consider somebody an activist if she or he reported participating in activism solely through paid employment. So, although many of the participants worked in educational organizations—universities, schools, nonprofit organizations focused on educational justice—doing so was not sufficient to be included in this study. This was our imperfect way of helping to ensure that participants had emotional ties, not just employment ties, to social justice work in education. The participant selection, data collection, and analysis procedures are described in more detail in the following.

Due to the scarcity of scholarship on burnout among social justice education activists, we chose to adopt a grounded theory approach, allowing new theory and understandings to emerge through the analysis, rather than relying on existing theoretical constructs. We were inspired by Charmaz's (2013) argument that grounded theory provides flexibility for engaging in innovative and fresh analyses, particularly when examining justice-related phenomena that have received little scholarly attention. We adopted a phenomenological approach, finding that it lent itself to a study that focused specifically on experiences shared, not just among the participants, but also among the researchers. According to Creswell (2006), the strength of phenomenology is in capturing the essence of a lived experience as shared by multiple people who have that experience in common. It is well suited, Creswell explained, for situations in which the examination of such a shared experience might help inform or develop policy and practice. In the case of this study, phenomenology was employed to deepen understandings of the lived experiences of activist burnout among social justice education activists, as well as the access they feel they have had to the kinds of supports that would mitigate their burnout. It is our hope that these understandings will inform policies and practices within social justice education organizations and movements that could minimize burnout and bolster activist sustainability.

Participants

To gather the original sample of activists from which the participants in this study were drawn, we used a snowball method of purposeful sampling (Creswell, 2009). We began by identifying people who we knew fit our sample criteria, and then inquired as to whether they knew anyone else who fit the criteria. Potential participants were asked to provide information demonstrating that they met the criteria.

During our initial coding process of the full original sample, we found that all but one of the interviewees whose activism focused on educational justice concerns reported experiencing activist burnout, even though that experience was never identified by us as a criterion for participating in the study. Notably, the one social justice education activist who initially reported in her interview never having experienced burnout later suggested that she had experienced burnout, even to the

extent of almost leaving activism altogether. It is likely that the prevalence of burnout among the social justice education activists reflected a sort of selection bias in the larger original sample, in the sense that we were seeking participants who were purposeful about sustaining themselves by adopting specific self-care strategies. Nevertheless, the prevalence of burnout among them led us to wonder what we might learn about the nature of burnout and the perception of access to burnout-mitigating resources specifically among what may be a category of social justice activists especially prone to burnout.

Among our participants were social justice education activists whose activism addressed a broad range of social justice issues in an equally broad range of educational contexts. Their causes included, for example, educational justice for students with disabilities, undocumented students, and low-income students; racial justice, queer justice, and gender justice in schools; and educational transformation through ecopedagogy, critical pedagogy, and social justice arts education. The nature of the participants' activism was equally diverse. It included a wide range of acts of civil disobedience, community education, protests and marches, organizing, and other actions. Because we were interested in the experience of burnout and access to resources for mitigating burnout and not on how particular types of activism might have correlated with burnout, we did not differentiate in our interview process or analysis on the basis of activist approach, although we do see this as an important next step in research on social justice education activist burnout. Most of the interviewees participated in activism related to multiple social justice issues, but each of them specifically identified education as a primary realm of their activist work. As mentioned earlier, each participant defined her or his life's purpose as social justice activism. All had jobs outside of their activism. People who defined their activism solely as what they did as part of their paid employment were not considered for the study.

The participants were diverse, as well, in regards to racial identity, age, and the amount of years they had been involved in educational justice activism. They were less diverse when it came to socioeconomic status, as most identified as working or middle class, and gender identity. The latter might have reflected a variety of factors, such as the disproportionate number of women who work in education, but it also was indicative of a bigger challenge we faced when trying to identify male social justice activists who were willing to participate in a study about burnout and self-care. We recognize the challenge inherent in collecting identity data in general. For example, people with similar racial or ethnic backgrounds might choose to characterize their racial identities in very different ways and people with vastly different levels of wealth—almost half of all people in the U.S.—identify as *middle class* (Morin & Motel, 2012); roughly 85% identify as either *lower middle-*, *middle-*, or *upper middle-class* (Pew Research Center, 2015). So although, like all identity data, the categories we captured should not be seen as precise indicators of the diversity of our participants, they do, at the very least, indicate the ways in which the participants identified themselves. Table 1 synthesizes the sample's demographics, as well as each participant's social justice educational activist commitments.

Procedure

During the original data collection, we conducted and audio-recorded roughly 60-min interviews either by phone or Skype (a Web-based video phone program) with each activist. In some cases, briefer follow-up interviews, sometimes via electronic mail, were conducted to clarify specific

points discussed by the participants. Interviews were conversational in nature, as often is the case in phenomenological research, particularly when the researchers share with the participants the phenomenon under study. We used a loose interview protocol with items that were purposefully broad and open-ended, attempting, in the spirit of grounded theory, to provide participants with the space to share their various experiences with activism and burnout including those about which we may never have thought to ask. We inquired about the nature and focus of their activism, their experiences with activist burnout, the nature of their mindfulness practices, and the relationship between their mindfulness practices and their activism. We piloted the protocol with three social justice activists and modified parts of the wording and order of the items based on their feedback.

Analysis

In this study, based on 14 of the original interviewees, our analysis focused on participants' descriptions of activist burnout and responses to follow-up questions about the types of resources available to them to mitigate the effects or threat of burnout. We employed Strauss and Corbin's (1990) three-step coding process in our analysis. First, during open coding, we organized data according to general themes. Then we initiated, during axial coding, a process by which we reexamined general themes looking for patterns and relationships and, as a result, exposed subthemes. Finally, through collective coding we reconsidered data within each theme and subtheme in order to identify deeper intricacies and patterns. Initially, we each coded half of the interviews. Then, to ensure coding consistency, we reviewed one another's coding notes and talked through divergences in our coding and analyses.

FINDINGS

Each of the 14 activists experienced symptoms indicative of activist burnout. We begin sharing our findings by synthesizing their characterizations of those symptoms into distinct, although somewhat overlapping, symptom categories. We turn, then, to a related theme that emerged from our analysis, describing participants' experiences with the most prevalent implication of these symptoms: their need to withdraw partially or completely from their activism. Next, in reference to our second research question, we summarize the themes that emerged from our analysis of the interview data regarding the activists' perceptions of the availability, or lack thereof, of supports and resources within their movements and movement organizations for coping with or recovering from activist burnout.

Symptoms of Activist Burnout

Maslach and Gomes (2006) identified three components of burnout among peace activists: (a) exhaustion, (b) cynicism, and (c) inefficacy. Although we initially considered using these components as a framework for our analysis, recognizing that our data came from activists working in a different sphere, we chose, instead, to allow categories to emerge from our analysis, providing a more precise synthesis of the participants' experiences. The social justice education activists

characterized the symptoms of their burnout in a wide variety of ways, which we synthesized into three symptom categories: (a) deterioration of psychological and emotional well-being, (b) deterioration of physical well-being, and (c) disillusionment and hopelessness.

Deterioration of psychological and emotional well-being. Ten of the 14 participants, 71.4%, experienced a deterioration of psychological or mental health due to their social justice education activism and the conditions surrounding that activism. It is important to note here, again, that we are not referring to temporary bouts of sadness or situational fatigue, but instead to chronic psychological and mental health effects that participants tied directly to their activism. For example, several of the activists described impacts symptomatic of chronic depression. Christopher shared that, during his bouts with activist burnout, "I experience what people would consider typical early signs of depression: not wanting to get out of bed, not wanting to leave the house. . . ." Bethany could relate: "Sometimes it was really hard just to get up in the morning." She described how the effects of activist burnout from her social justice work in education began to creep into her home life: "Last year I was really, really, really depressed. And I said I have to do something about this because I didn't even have energy to play with my children."

Others described increasingly overwhelming challenges with stress and anxiety that they tied directly to their social justice education activism. Several interviewees, for example, linked stress and anxiety to chronic troubles sleeping. Heidi, capturing a theme in several of the activists' experiences, explained:

> One of the first indicators for me is insomnia. So if I notice I'm waking up in the middle of the night thinking about how I need to do this or bring this in or what time I am meeting with these parents, and that starts repeating itself.

The insomnia became so bad for Cathy that she began to worry that the stress of her activist work might lead to an addiction to sleeping pills.

Several others described perpetual challenges with anxiety and panic attacks. Stella, for example, shared a story about how the anxiety of her educational justice activism became so bad that she started experiencing anxiety attacks: "I was driving one day and my chest hurt so bad. . . . It was like I had this vice around me and it was pressing on me. I knew that it was anxiety." Like many of the activists, and speaking to Rettig's (2006) and others' concerns about the ultimate implications of activist burnout on social justice movements, Stella characterized the overall toll her activism took on her psychological and emotional health as having a devastating effect on her effectiveness as an activist:

> I was losing my capacity to think well. . . . My sense of creativity and being able to see what is going on and identify, like, 'Here is an effective strategy; here is a principle we need to cling to; here are relationships that are important that we need to preserve.'. . . It was like I had no sense about how to navigate that any [longer]. My thinking was very muddy and I felt sort of immobilized in terms of being able to produce any sort of work or take any sort of action.

Many participants also pointed to a more general sense of debilitating, continuous emotional exhaustion. Patrice, for example, lamented her constant battle with "a lot of fatigue" as a result of her activism. Christopher described long periods of feeling "frayed at both ends, frayed all over"

due to his educational justice activism. Several even described how they had begun to ingest other activists' exhaustion and fatigue. Shari, for instance, shared a story about her interactions with a fellow activist, capturing what she saw as an epidemic of negativity pressing upon her in activist circles, feeding her burnout:

> We get together once a month for happy hour and what we do—we don't talk about what's going on in our lives. We bitch about other people in the movement. And it's gotten to the point where I don't think I want to spend that much time with her even though she has a lot to teach me and she's doing incredible work. But the fatigue—her fatigue—is becoming . . . really negative.

Despite what many saw as a sort of epidemic of deteriorating emotional well-being in their social justice education activist circles, none of the activists, even when prompted, could identify a single time when the social justice education related activist organizations and movements in which they were involved provided resources for helping them cope with these challenges.

Deterioration of physical well-being. Nine of the participants, 64.3%, experienced a deterioration of their physical health as a contributor to activist burnout. Again, in interpreting the data, we did not include interviewees in this category who did not describe serious or chronic health conditions and characterize those conditions as being related to the nature and contexts of their activism.

The activists noted a variety of ways in which their activism and the culture of social justice activist movements and organizations (which are described in more detail later) took a toll on their physical well-being. They described trouble eating, ongoing and debilitating physical fatigue, and unhealthy eating due to the guilt they experienced if they simply took time out of their activist work to slow down and eat healthily. And, as Patrice captured so succinctly, many of the interviewees lamented the fact that there were "very few resting points" for them to recover from the physical toll of their activism by tending to their own health: a result of a culture within many social justice movements that paints self-care as privilege, rather than a strategic necessity for sustaining the activists who are the building blocks of those movements.

Several of the participants attributed serious and specific medical conditions to the physical toll of their educational justice activism. Ellen explained that, consistent with the culture of social justice activism, she was "just super driven, super hard on myself, and burning myself out really badly. Doing too much in my 20s, I ended up with pneumonia twice and ended up in the hospital once, just from doing way too much." Gwen shared a similar experience:

> I think earlier on for me [the manifestation of burnout] was very physical because I would basically push myself [in my activism] to the point of being very ill or [having] just sheer exhaustion. There was still such a sense of guilt and urgency connected with the work so that I couldn't step away until my physical body wouldn't allow me to do it anymore. So I would say in my 20s and 30s there were chunks of time that I spent feeling really ill. You know—getting a serious case of strep throat or pneumonia or something where I physically couldn't do it anymore.

Isabel attributed her cancer to a similar phenomenon: the ceaseless physical toll of social justice education activism with no break for self-care.

Even more so than was the case when they described the deterioration of their emotional and psychological well-being, the activists who talked about the deterioration of their physical well-being pointed explicitly to links between that deterioration and what Rodgers (2010) described as the *culture of selflessness* in activist organizations. Interviewees described it as a "culture of martyrdom" or a "narcissistic complex." Several alluded to the ways in which such a culture discouraged them from tending to their physical health. Patrice, for example, felt pulled into "a lot of activist spaces where people are just killing themselves and don't engage in self-care in very comprehensive ways and don't really think about how to act in measured ways. There's this constant overdrive level of activity." Meanwhile, as was the case with the emotional and psychological symptoms, none of the interviewees mentioned feeling any sense of support for mitigating the physical symptoms of burnout from the activist movements and organizations in which they worked.

Disillusionment and hopelessness. Although we might have included these conditions in the *deterioration of psychological and emotional well-being* category, it was our interpretation that the participants' disillusionment and hopelessness reflected less their general health and well-being than a shift in attitude or disposition toward their social justice education activism. Although all 14 of the activists described experiencing some level of disillusionment, hopelessness, or discouragement at some point during their activist lives, eight of them, 57.1%, grew sufficiently disillusioned or hopeless with their activism or with the movements in which they had invested that they reached the point of walking away from or nearly walking away from it.

Several described extended periods of losing hope to the point that they began to feel disillusioned about their activist work. Bethany shared, "You feel like, 'I'm putting in all this energy and I don't see anything changing,' so it gives you a sense of burnout. [You wonder], is it really working? Does it really matter that I do all this?" Like Bethany, Christopher described reaching the point of questioning whether what he was doing was making a difference: "The sense of 'Well, I'm really tired and I don't know that I'm actually seeing measurable outcomes, things that actually tell me that I'm making a difference."

Others, like Patrice, felt increasingly debilitated by the enormity of the sociopolitical conditions they were trying to change. Patrice captured the spirit of sentiments shared by many of her fellow social justice education activists:

> The burnout that I feel . . . is just the amount of work that there is to be done. It feels endless. It feels like a lot of heavy lifting. . . . I felt burned out with that, the circumstances around activism that make it so unwieldy and make it such a large nonstop endeavor.

She continued:

> And I never feel that I'm doing enough. . . . Like the feeling you're only scratching the surface of what needs to be done. So I think that's where the despondency comes from and the sense of burnout: Where are we going? How much have we accomplished?

In addition to describing experiences of chronic hopelessness and disillusionment, several of the activists discussed the impact those experiences had on them in deeper ways. For example, three of the participants referred specifically to how losing themselves in these feelings affected

their family relationships. Ellen lamented, "Usually my family suffers. . . . I'll be crabby or not attending to family needs, not just being, in a lot of ways, the parent I want to be." Shari explained that, in her experience, these feelings contribute to strained relationships within activist communities:

> And also as with many social justice movements, there's a lot of in-fighting in the movement. And I got caught up in that. The infighting is based on 'Well, who's getting the credit for the work? Who's getting the grants for the work?'

Stella concluded, "I was just losing my soul."

Withdrawing From Activism

Previous scholarship has suggested that a majority of activists who experience burnout withdraw partially or completely from their activism (Maslach & Gomes, 2006; Rettig, 2006; Rodgers, 2010; Vacarro & Mena, 2011). Harkening to Rettig's (2006) conception of activist burnout as "the act of *involuntarily* leaving activism, or reducing one's level of activism" (p. 16), almost every participant in this study did so, or came close to doing so, in one or more instances before deciding, against the culture of martyrdom they might have been observing in their social justice education movements, to look outside of those movements for self-care strategies and support—a pattern discussed in more detail later. For some participants, taking a break meant detaching from activist organizations for a month or two to tend to the ways their health was deteriorating due to their activism. For others, it meant disengaging for a couple of years to find ways to sustain themselves.

Shari, for example, described how the exhaustion and hopelessness related to activism that was once so important to her culminated in her walking away:

> When I left the XYZ organization, I was at a point where 'I don't want to do [this activist work] anymore.' Years before, I was so passionate about it. It [previously] had been all I wanted to do, all I wanted to think about or read about or talk about.

Gwen shared that there had been times when she felt overwhelmed and exhausted over sustained periods due to her experiences with social justice education activism. "I've been entirely burned out and just had to take a break," she said. Allison spoke to the experiences of the activists whose burnout was more severe, explaining that she had reached points of feeling "I just need to quit all of this." Six participants described losing activism time to stays in the hospital or long recoveries from conditions that they attributed to the stresses and anxieties of their activism, including chronic depression, pneumonia, and cancer. Although others never did completely disengage from their activism—generally, these were participants who more easily found supports or strategies they needed to mitigate their burnout—all, at the very least, cut back on their activist work or ceased their activism for briefer periods of time.

Notably, three of the participants of color referred to their own withdrawals as relating, at least in part, to the racism they experienced within the activist movements and organizations in which they participated. Their experiences harkened back to previously cited scholarship (Lorde, 1988;

Plyler, 2006; Wineman, 2003) describing how marginalized communities bear the brunt, not only of their marginalization in society, but of their marginalization within the very movements and organizations created to fight their marginalization. Patrice, for example, shared:

> This is something that my girls and I talk about constantly is the wear and tear of what it is to walk around this world in our skin, just the constant micro-aggressions that are there and the paper cuts that occur. . . .

Ellen similarly described how the weight of being a racial justice activist in the education milieu combined with being a teacher of color solidified her burnout and made her withdraw at times from activist work as a matter of survival. Although all of the activists were asked during their interviews about their observations of activist burnout among the communities of activists with which they have worked, none of the White-identifying participants acknowledged this reality—that, in essence, privilege mitigates burnout and oppression within organizations that ought to be fighting oppression worsens burnout. Our analysis suggests that this lack of consciousness on the parts of White activists might hasten the withdrawal of activists of color from their activism.

The Availability of Supports for Overcoming Activist Burnout

Participants were asked whether they had received mentoring or had access to any other supports within the activist movements and organizations through which they did their social justice education activism. Many described supportive home environments. Some described small networks of other activists who were supportive in informal ways. Heidi shared how one of her Humane Education graduate courses included conversations about self-care. However, none of the activists could recall any mentoring or resources provided by the social justice education movements or organizations with which they identified.

Instead, they described situations that were characterized by one participant, Christopher, as "antimentoring, reverse-mentoring." He explained:

> One friend and colleague of mine, she has this sense of, well, she is really committed to the work, so being tired and worn out and just having your family life collapse around you is just the price of being in the game. That, to me, is antimentoring. I am having struggles and your response to me is essentially, 'Man up and deal with it.'

Stella added:

> There's nothing in my training that has even come near [mentoring on coping with social justice activist burnout]. As I'm thinking about it, it sort of perpetuated the disconnect from my body—you know, you don't need to face tension, you need to rise above the tension.

Supporting much of the existing literature about activist burnout (Pigni, 2013; Plyler, 2006; Rodgers, 2010), the participants described in their movements what amounted to the opposite of support for activist sustainability. They almost unanimously described a culture that, at best,

devalued and, at worst, shamed attention to self-care or conversations about burnout. So those seeking support had to find it outside of their social justice education movements and organizations, often leading to their temporary withdrawal from those movements and organizations. And even to do that, many of the activists needed to overcome the guilt and shame they felt because of the *culture of martyrdom* within the activist organizations and movements. Ellen, who eventually started doing yoga to help cope with her burnout symptoms, explained:

> Who am I to spend a few hours a week stretching on a mat when maybe there is a single mom who is working two jobs and can't feed her children and I need to address the injustices that come her way?

Heidi, capturing the spirit of self-care guilt behind many of the activists' stories, shared

> Anything that is not spending time being active and being an activist is considered a luxury or privilege or something that does not benefit animals or children or women, whatever the social justice issue is. At the end of the day, I can go to bed in my nice comfortable bed knowing that animals and humans are suffering. Doing anything personal . . . might be seen as a luxury.

Jennifer likened this disposition with the "Protestant work ethic," explaining that activists socialized with that ethic

> have suspicion toward anything that feels good and anything that is self-directed. People are often conditioned to think that if I do something for myself that is selfish and I am not doing good. What is good is to self-sacrifice for the good of others.

Others described being socialized within their activist circles with the attitude that self-care is "a distraction" or "frivolous" or "self-indulgent." This combination of conditions—the strong emotional investment that carries activists into movements and at least in part drives their social justice work, plus a culture of martyrdom built in part out of this emotional investment, plus a deep understanding of injustice and its impact, plus a lack of attention to self-care among activists—is a sort of script for social justice activist burnout within existing literature.

Despite the shared experience of never having received adequate—or any—burnout-mitigating supports from within their activist organizations and movements, when asked what kinds of supports would be useful to them, the participants were quick with suggestions. Some wanted very concrete resources, such as information about exercise and healthy diets or coping with the tension of their work. Christopher, for example, wanted a better "understanding of the actual way our brains react [that are reflected in] techniques and skills . . . to help move through difficult conversations a little better."

Others wanted help learning how to overcome the "culture of martyrdom" so that they could talk more openly about activist burnout and other challenges associated with the most grueling aspects of their activism. Ellen wanted help "naming the burnout and naming the ineffectiveness of working ourselves until we burn out." Heidi, like several of her fellow activists, spoke to the desire to connect with other activists in dialogue so they could more clearly connect with the idea that "when you're healthy and active and centered, [it] is going to make you an even more effective activist."

What was most notable about the participants' statements of desire for resources and support to deal with burnout was that, in every case, they associated support for their well-being, not just to their individual health, but also to the health of their movements. "What good am I in this movement," Kara asked, "if I'm making myself exhausted and miserable [rather than] standing up boldly and claiming my space?" Stella argued that part of the point of overcoming the culture of selflessness—"the idea that we should be self-sacrificing and not take care of ourselves and just work really hard so we sort of collapse into burnout"—was that that culture "really is part of the dominant paradigm." In other words, it was part and parcel of the bigger system of injustice she imagined she was fighting in her activism.

Ellen, explaining Stella's point further and synthesizing much of her fellow activists' reflections, offered:

> One thing I think that doesn't always get the best audience is this kind of big picture look at [activists'] roles in addressing injustice and in making change in the sense of the smallness of our role—the idea that we can only do what we can do. With some people that's empowering and for some people it's frustrating. And if not said right or not understood right, it looks very privileged. . . . I think there is a little bit of ego that's involved in believing that change is on your shoulders. . . . I think that ego gets in the way a little bit, too, of the changes people are trying to make.

By learning to let go of that ego, she explained, she can mitigate her activist burnout and, as a result, be a more effective activist for social justice in education.

DISCUSSION

Our findings begin to establish that the phenomenon of activist burnout, previously described as prevalent in a variety of other social-justice-related movements, also exists among activists whose social justice activism focuses on educational justice. In fact, our findings suggest that levels of activist burnout are substantial among social justice education activists. We are careful not to base this assertion solely on an extrapolation of the experiences of the participants, as the original sample from which they were drawn was constructed of people who had adopted self-care strategies to bolster their activist sustainability—something they might have done because of their experiences with burnout. Still, when we combine their experiences with their observations of patterns of burnout within their own movements and organizations, there is compelling evidence of activist burnout, similar to that described by scholars who have studied other social justice movements and organizations related to labor rights (Klandermans, 2003), civil rights (Goodwin & Pfaff, 2001), and queer rights (Vaccaro & Mena, 2011).

Similarly consistent with existing scholarship was our finding of a culture of martyrdom within social justice education activists and organizations. Mirroring Rodgers's (2010) findings in her study of the culture of selflessness among Amnesty International workers, our interviewees reported unanimously that they had been socialized within their activist communities to consider self-care "self-indulgent"—to feel guilty if they desired to look after their own well-being. By discouraging discussion about, and the development of, critical resources for coping with activist burnout, this culture has a deleterious effect, not only on individual activists, but also on the social justice education movements in which they are involved. What

happened with nearly all of the participants was, according to Plyler (2006) and Rettig (2006), the worst-case scenario for the sustainability of social justice movements. Many of the activists we interviewed, lacking the resources and support to cope with symptoms of activist burnout, either walked away from their activism at least temporarily or were very close to doing so before going outside of their movements or organizations to seek the resources and support they needed.

An interesting complexity that we began to uncover in this study, but that needs more attention to be understood with more precision, is that some of the variables that one might assume could help predict which social justice education activists are most susceptible to activist burnout—the issues they focus upon (e.g., privatization, the school to prison pipeline, or heteronormativity in school curriculum) or the form of their activism (e.g., protesting, community education, or teacher organizing), for example—may not be the most important predictors of activists' experiences with activist burnout. The participants focused on a variety of issues and engaged in a variety of forms of activism, and all of them experienced at least one symptom of activist burnout. This may be because, with all of the potential vulnerabilities experienced by social justice education activists, the one with the most impact (and, suitably, the one documented with the most depth in the literature), the expenditure of emotional labor or the emotional investment in justice, appears to be a virtually universal reality among them (Goodwin & Pfaff, 2001; Maslach & Gomes, 2006). It is, to some extent, both what brings many social justice activists to their activism to begin with, and what makes them so susceptible to burnout (Kovan & Dirkx, 2003). However, closer examination of burnout across variables such as activist target issues and forms of activism might lead to more tailored strategies for helping people in different contexts cope with the challenges they face.

Similarly, each participant reported experiencing the impacts of the culture of selflessness or culture of martyrdom in their social justice education activist circles. We, too, have experienced this culture of martyrdom within social justice movements and organizations, including those focused on education. We have felt its spirit-withering effects. With all of the other threats to progress on social justice education fronts in the United States today—the increasing hold of neoliberal school reform initiatives, the related corporatization of P–12 and higher education, the deprofessionalization of teachers, the racial and economic resegregation of schools, the looming threat of the standardization of technician-oriented teacher education, among others—and based on the experiences shared by the activists interviewed in this study, it is essential to the future of social justice movements in education that movement leaders and activist organizations work purposefully to transform that culture. We propose, based on our findings, a concerted effort at fostering open dialogue about educational social justice activist burnout and its symptoms, including the ways in which other dynamics of the cultures of social justice education movements—ego-driven tensions, in-fighting, and particularly the marginalization of already-marginalized people within these movements—contribute to burnout and to the defection of activists from movements to which they once were dedicated.

The three categories of activist burnout symptoms among social justice activists that emerged from our analysis (deterioration of emotional and psychological health, deterioration of physical health, and disillusionment and hopelessness), and the specific conditions related to those symptoms detailed earlier, provide possible points of departure for developing burnout-mitigating supports and resources. Similarly helpful are the activists' own suggestions for the kinds of support they needed. Most popular among these, again, was help overcoming the culture of self-

lessness and spaces where they could discuss their experiences with activist burnout openly. We intend to find ways to create these spaces within our own activist communities and organizations, both in and out of education contexts, and we hope that this study encourages other social justice education activists and scholars to do the same.

Our findings also demonstrated that, despite the messages many of the participants received from within their activist communities that anything resembling self-care is simple luxuriousness and self-indulgent rather than, in Lorde's (1988) words, "an act of political warfare" (p. 131), their hopes for finding resources and support for self-care were tied directly to their hopes for being the most effective activists they could be. They want to find ways to sustain themselves in their activism. That, too, is a potential point of departure for conversations, activist self-care or community-care workshops, or other forums that could begin to shift the culture within social justice education organizations and movements toward one that helps to sustain activists and, as a result, sustains movements. It might be a way to encourage people who remain reluctant to talk about their own needs to join these conversations. This is not self-indulgence. This is part of a holistic commitment to social justice causes.

It is important here that we acknowledge limitations of this study. First, the participants did not represent a randomly selected sample of social justice education activists, but rather a subset of a larger sample of social justice activists who had been selected because they had adopted self-care strategies to mitigate the threat of burnout from their activism. As mentioned previously, this limits the extent to which we can generalize from their experiences with activist burnout. On the other hand, the fact that each of the participants recovered from activist burnout or its threat due to their self-care strategies, and that they continued to tend to their own well-being, could have positioned them to be more mindful and reflective about their previous bouts with burnout than activists who had not yet found ways to cope with burnout symptoms or who had not even acknowledged the existence of burnout, might have been. Second, the fact that our sample was comprised of people scattered across several different social justice education activist movements hindered our ability to delve deeply into any particular movement. Third, although we reported experiences that participants explicitly associated with the impact of their participation in social justice education activism, it is in the end not entirely possible to know the full extent to which participants who experienced specific burnout symptoms had other conditions that might have exacerbated those symptoms. Still, that participants associated the conditions with their activism is, itself, notable.

We hope that, in future studies, we and other scholars will look more closely at specific movements within the social justice education realm. Particularly in need of attention are the experiences of the participants of color who linked their burnout, at least in part, to racism within their movements and activist organizations. Additionally, we intend in future research to examine and map the specific strategies these and other social justice education activists have used to bolster their activist sustainability and to analyze the benefits they derived from those strategies.

CONCLUSION

In this study, we found evidence that activist burnout and its deleterious symptoms destabilize movements for social justice in education by deteriorating the emotional and physical health of individual activists and by causing some to lose hope in their work. Further destabilizing is the

virtual absence of dialogue within social justice education movements and organizations about activist burnout and its effects, much less mentoring or other supports for activists. Despite being immersed in a culture that rewards inattention and derides attention to self-care, the social justice education activists interviewed for this study craved safe spaces to discuss their burnout and strategies to overcome them. Our findings supported much of the existing scholarship focused on activists from other social justice movements. They also added important complexities to existing understandings of activist burnout symptoms and the impact of those symptoms on activists and their movements.

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