

“Measuring” Social Justice and Human Rights Activist Burnout

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The Context

Social justice and human rights activism fraught with unique challenges that are not accounted for in traditional conceptions of vocational “burnout” or vocational “persistence.”

- High investments of emotional labor
- Threats of incarceration, murder, rape, torture...
- Deep understandings of social conditions most people are “unwilling or unable to face”
(Maslach & Gomes, 2006, p. 43)

The Context, Pt. 2

Among biggest and least studied barriers to successful SJHR movements?

- Activist burnout (Plyler, 2006)
- Low levels of activist persistence (estimated 50-60% eventually walk away and never return)
- High rates of turnover
 - Rodgers (2010) study of Amnesty International headquarters – 1/3 of staff had turned over just during the course of her less-than-1-year study

Our Intention

1

- Conduct interview studies to help us characterize unique aspects of SJHR activist burnout

2

- Map symptoms, causes, and consequences of burnout from perspective of activists

3

- Develop unique burnout/persistence scale or inventory

4

- Use what we learn to develop tools to strengthen activist persistence and, as a result, strengthen SJHR movements

1. Interview Studies

Studies:

- 23 people who identified generally as SJHR activists who have experienced and recovered from burnout, leaving and then reengaging with activism (Chen & Gorski, 2015; Gorski & Chen, 2015)
- 30 people who identify specifically as *racial justice* activists who have experienced and recovered from activism (analysis ongoing)

1. Interview Studies

Upcoming (identifying participants):

- Animal rights activists who have experienced and recovered from burnout
 - Chosen because there is a fairly robust literature on activist persistence among animal rights activists
- College student activists who sustained activist involvement from high school through college
 - Chosen because of a request and funding from CWB at GMU

2. Mapping Burnout: Notable Findings

*Symptoms: Three major categories

1. Debilitating deterioration of physical health
2. Debilitating deterioration of psychological or emotional health
3. Debilitating deterioration of hope

“debilitating” = “long-term negative impact on effectiveness as an activist”

*Fairly consistent with broader vocational burnout scholarship

2. Mapping Burnout: Notable Findings

*Causes: Three major categories

1. Self: emotional investment, understanding of high-stakes, knowledge of implications of structural oppression
2. External: resistance, scope of injustice, funding challenges, targeting for scorn or imprisonment or violence
3. *In-movement: bigotry/discrimination *within* movements, culture of martyrdom, competition for recognition

* Need more research on this. It appears to be the biggest source of burnout according to our interviewees.

2. Mapping Burnout: Notable Findings

*Causes: Within-Movement Dynamics

1. **Culture of martyrdom**—implicit expectation that if you don't burn out, you're not committed; silencing of people who raise concerns about well-being
2. **Bigotry and oppression**—sexism, racism, heterosexism among activists
3. **Infighting, “backbiting,” struggles for power**—partially relates to pressure and anxiety from internal burnout causes

--These are the *most* prevalent set of causes from qualitative studies, but *least* prevalent set of causes explored in existing activist burnout or persistence research

2. Mapping Burnout: Notable Findings

Other Notable Findings

- Regular mindfulness practices (e.g., yoga, meditation) overwhelmingly effective in helping activists recover from burnout and return to activism (Gorski, 2015)
- Distinction between being an activist and being an activist who also is part of the marginalized community for which the activism advocates (need more research on this!)
- Only 1 of 23 interviewees in first study had any sort of in-movement mentoring on coping with the stressors of activism (Chen & Gorski, 2015)

3a. Creating Activist-Oriented Inventory

- Drew from qualitative findings, existing burnout scholarship
- Took cues about phrasing from existing burnout and well-being scales, such as the Copenhagen Burnout Inventory (Borritz & Kristensen, 2004) and the Flourishing Scale (Diener & Biswas-Diener, 2009)
- Sought feedback from six expert reviewers

3b. Creating Activist-Oriented Inventory

“We performed statistical analyses to evaluate the quantitative structure of the items and the overall construct. Specifically, through our exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses, we investigated the associations among the 14 AFFI items and determined whether the items could be grouped into themes. Two themes (or subscales) emerged and were determined to be statistically and theoretically sound - fatigue and flourishing. Our findings from the regression analyses suggested that these two themes are different from traditional indicators of well-being such as resilience and life satisfaction. We see the the final 12-item AFFI as a unique scale to measure various dimensions of activists' well-being...” –*Duhita Mahatmya*



3c. Creating Activist-Oriented Inventory

AFFI = Activist Fatigue and Flourishing Inventory

3d. Creating Activist-Oriented Inventory

Sample items: Fatigue

- I lack energy to cultivate relationships with family and friends because of the energy I put into activism.
- When I think about the injustices in the world, I feel hopeless.

3e. Creating Activist-Oriented Inventory

Sample items: Flourishing

- I feel hopeful that positive social change is possible.
- My activism feels like a positive aspect of my life.

Next Steps

- Continuing qualitative studies
- Publishing AFFI (*Social Indicators*)
- Analyzing survey data from 550 activists around the world using the AFFI



What We Need from Researchers

- More research overall on activist burnout and persistence, particularly related to impact of movement dynamics and inter-movement challenges—especially (in a US context) racism and patriarchy within SJHR movements
- Burnout/persistence scales focused that can be used to assess organizational health and effectiveness, not just individual activist well-being or fatigue
- SJHR discourses that frame attention to burnout and activist persistence *as an important part of activism* rather than as selling out or lack of commitment

Thank you.

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**CARING FOR
MYSELF IS NOT
SELF-INDULGENCE,
IT IS SELF-
PRESERVATION
AND THAT IS
AN ACT OF
POLITICAL
WARFARE.**

AUDRE LORDE

