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Relieving Burnout and the "Martyr Syndrome" Among Social Justice Education Activists: The Implications and Effects of Mindfulness

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Abstract Activist burnout, which causes activists to disengage from their activism, is a formidable barrier to the sustainability of social justice movements, including those focused on social justice in educational contexts. However, the cultures of these movements often disregard the importance of self-care, seeing it as self-indulgence, putting activists at even higher risks of burnout. In this study, one of the first to assess the impact of specific self-care strategies on activist burnout, data from interviews with 14 social justice education activists are analyzed in order to uncover how they used mindfulness practices such as yoga, tai-chi, and meditation to cope with burnout. The analysis revealed a variety of ways in which mindfulness mitigated their burnout experiences. It revealed, as well, a shared perception that, beyond helping to sustain their activism, mindfulness made them more effective activists.

Keywords Social justice · Activism · Burnout · Mindfulness · Well-being

Introduction

It can be easy to assume that the most formidable barrier to progress for social justice movements is resistance from the people and institutions whose interests would be endangered by the realization of a more just world. However, many scholars who have studied social justice movements have identified what may be an equally, or even more, formidable challenge when it comes to the success of social justice movements. They point to what is commonly called activist burnout

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(Maslach and Gomes 2006; Pines 1994; Plyler 2006; Rodgers 2010): a condition that affects not only the well-being of individual activists, but also the sustainability of social justice movements.

Scholars developed the idea of activist burnout by building upon theories of vocational burnout pioneered by Freudenberger (1974). In his and later conceptions, as Maslach and Leiter (2005) explained, burnout is not simply a temporary bout with frustration or weariness, but rather a chronic condition that has debilitating and long-term implications. Scholars of activist burnout have identified a wide variety of symptoms that are described in more detail later. Synthesizing these symptoms into a concise description of activist burnout, Maslach and Gomes (2006) wrote, "The initial 'fire' of enthusiasm, dedication, and commitment to the cause has 'burned out,' leaving behind the smoldering embers of exhaustion, cynicism, and ineffectiveness" (p. 43). These conditions cause most activists who experience them, as Rettig (2006) pointed out, to *involuntarily* scale back on or leave their activism, having a negative effect on the efficiency and effectiveness of social movements.

In a small but growing body of scholarship, researchers have begun to identify the conditions and supports that might mitigate the effects of activist burnout on individual social justice activists and the movements in which they participate. Maslach and Gomes (2006), for example, recommended that peace activists mitigate the threat of burnout by tending to their physical health, learning to say "no" when they have reached their work limits, and finding opportunities for joy. However, little heretofore has been done to evaluate the actual impact of specific strategies or sets of strategies for mitigating activist burnout and fostering activist sustainability. So, although the strategies identified within the existing scholarship provide some points of departure, they remain somewhat vague. How, for example, can activists who are so passionate about their activism learn to recognize their workload limits? It is notable as well that, despite the growing body of scholarship on teacher and administrator burnout, the education literature appears to be completely void of scholarship on burnout among educational activists, including social justice activists who focus on educational issues (hereafter referred to as *educational justice activists*).

This study represents an attempt to examine the impact of actual self-care strategies on the educational justice activists who have adopted them. It was inspired in part by the exploratory work of Hick and Furlotte (2009), who drew links between social justice and mindfulness theory. They identified, based on an examination of mindfulness scholarship through a social justice lens, four areas of overlap: a deep awareness of social relations, a rejection of dualistic thinking and a recognition of interconnectedness, a focus on consciousness-raising and an understanding of unjust ideology born of false consciousness, and critical self-reflection. The study was inspired, as well, by the researcher's own observations of both the growing popularity of mindfulness practices—meditation, yoga, and others—among some of the educational justice activists and the simultaneous scorn for these practices among others.

Researcher Positionality

I am a white heterosexual middle class male, 42 years old. Although I work full time as an associate professor at a public university, I think of myself first and foremost as a social justice activist concerned most intensely with racial and economic justice as they relate to educational access and opportunity in the US. I have seen the work of activism around these issues as my primary vocation and fellow activists as my most important "colleagues" for roughly 20 years. I maintain a mindfulness practice largely through yoga and meditation and recognize that many people cannot afford the luxury of paying to participate in these practices. Although I have not experienced full-blown activist burnout, I have observed its effects in a variety of activist organizations and social movements, which has given me a sense of urgency to understand and address it. This urgency, along with my close ties to other educational justice activists, could bias me toward wanting to find a solution in mindfulness practices. Balancing this potential bias is the fact I was socialized into activist communities that were hostile to any conversation of self-care and, as a result, despite my own mindfulness practice, generally entered this study skeptical of the potential of mindfulness as a sufficient mitigation for activist burnout.

Definitions

For the purpose of this study social justice activists were defined as people who identified social justice activism as their primary life's work. Educational justice activists, then, were defined as those whose activism focused on creating more just educational systems and organizations (such as schools and school districts) by eliminating unjust conditions such as racism, economic injustice, heterosexism, corporatization, sexism, anti-immigrant oppression, and ableism (see Table 1 for a summary of participants and their activism.).

Contextualizing This Study

Scholars have produced a robust body of research on teacher or administrator burnout, some of which draws on scholarly roots similar to research on activist burnout (Denton et al. 2013; Farber 1991; Skaalvik 2010), but which ultimately does not speak to the specific burnout experiences of educational activists or, more particularly, social justice activists whose work focuses on educational justice concerns. This is a notable gap in the literature because, although certainly there is overlap between school workers and educational justice activists, as described in more detail below, social justice activists face unique challenges, such as deep levels of emotional investment and the pressures of understanding the implications of injustice to marginalized communities. There is a growing body of scholarship through which researchers have begun to capture the experiences and dispositions of educational activists (Kezar 2010; Picower 2012; Urrieta 2009). However, there remains a scarcity of scholarship that addresses the phenomenon of activist burnout among educational justice activists. Similarly, with the exception of what can be

Table 1 Synthesis of participant identities and activism

Participant pseudonym	Racial identity (as described by participants)	Socioeconomic status	Gender	Age	Years of activist experience	Activism	Mindfulness practices
Bethany	Latino and African American	Middle class	Female	35	15	Educational justice for students with learning disabilities	Meditation, yoga
Cathy	White	Middle class	Female	53	30	Student rights in higher education, immigrant rights	Yoga, meditative swimming
Christopher	Latino and White	Working class	Male	45	25	Educational justice in higher education, Latino educational justice	Meditation
Ellen	African American	Working class	Female	39	34	Systemic K-12 educational justice	Yoga, meditation
Gwen	White	Middle class	Female	47	28	Racial justice in education	Tai-chi, yoga, chi gong
Hortense	White	Working class	Female	42	11	Economic justice in education, eliminating the school-to-prison pipeline	Meditation
Heidi	White	Managerial class	Female	41	15	Economic justice in education, women's rights, animal rights	Meditation, yoga
Isabel	African American and Native American	Poor	Female	52	37	Social justice arts education	Sacred storytelling
Jennifer	White	Working class	Female	45	10	Critical education, teaching about social justice	Yoga, meditation
Kara	White	Middle class	Female	54	25	Racial justice in education	Yoga, meditation
Laurence	White	Middle class	Male	44	25	Ecopedagogy, vegan education	Contemplative walking
Patrice	Multiracial	Middle class	Female	43	15	Anticolonial education, anti-oppression community education	Meditation

Table 1 continued

Participant pseudonym	Racial identity (as described by participants)	Socioeconomic status	Gender	Age	Years of activist experience	Activism	Mindfulness practices
Stella	White	Middle class	Female	49	20	Immigrant rights in education, economic justice, environmental justice	Yoga, meditation
Allison	White	[Chose not to disclose]	Female	52	30	Humane education (teaching for social justice, environmental justice, and animal rights)	Silent walks, aikido

gleaned from the individual experiences explored in some social justice activists' personal essays (see, for example, Pigni 2013), little is known about the effect of any particular strategy for mitigating activist burnout among any social justice activists, including the effect of mindfulness practices on the activist burnout of educational justice activists.

Most helpful in contextualizing this study was scholarship on two topics: (1) the causes and implications of activist burnout among social justice activists, and (2) interventions for activist burnout within social justice movements. A synthesis of this scholarship is followed by a brief review of the basic principles of mindfulness.

The Causes and Implications of Activist Burnout

Scholars studying activist burnout among social justice activists have linked activist burnout to a wide variety of causes. For example, Klandermans (2003) who studied union activists, and Plyler (2006), who studied social justice activists in Toronto, pointed to negative interpersonal relationships within movements and associated burnout with activists' feelings of powerlessness. In what appears to be the sole analysis of activist burnout situated within an educational context, Vaccaro and Mena (2011) found based on their study of queer university students of color involved in predominantly white queer rights student activist groups that overwhelming time commitments contributed to activist burnout.

Beyond these findings, two interrelated causes of activist burnout among social justice activists were identified more consistently in the literature. First, social justice activism requires a unique kind of emotional vulnerability (Goodwin and Pfaff 2001). It requires, in the words of Maslach and Gomes (2006), "cultivating … awareness of large and overwhelming social problems, often carrying a burden of knowledge that society … is unable or unwilling to face" (p. 43). The emotional burden related to knowing what is at stake—the perpetuation of injustice, oppression, and suffering—makes social justice activists especially vulnerable to anxiety, stress, and other precursors to activist burnout (Kovan and Dirkx 2003; Pines 1994). These conditions, Maslach and Gomes (2006) concluded, "can lead to feelings of pressure and isolation that easily feed into burnout" (p. 43).

Secondly, and despite this emotional, mental, and physical toll, the culture of many social justice organizations and movements dissuades activists from attending to their own well-being (Nair 2004; Plyler 2006; Rodgers 2010). Rodgers (2010), who studied burnout among Amnesty International workers, described how they were worn down by a culture of selflessness that pervaded the organization. Emotional toil was considered "a sacrifice for the cause" while any recognition of anxiety or depression was "viewed as unnecessary" (p. 279). Plyler (2006) observed the same phenomenon in her own social justice activist life, explaining that "the fear of having open dialogues about how our organizing impacts us emotionally, politically, physically and spiritually" (p. 133), endemic within activist culture, has led her at times to disengage from activism. Nair (2004) noted how, because of the lack of spaces for dialogue about the emotional toll of activism, the resulting tensions and anxieties strain relationships within activist organizations and movements.

The collective result often is activist burnout, which has debilitating implications for individual activists and social justice movements. The primary implication of burnout is this: a majority of social justice activists who experience it scale back on their activism or altogether abandon the movements in which they were participating (Maslach and Gomes 2006; Plyler 2006; Rodgers 2010; Vaccaro and Mena 2011). For the individual activist, this could negatively impact self-esteem and interpersonal relationships (Rettig 2006). For activist organizations, it could mean disruptive staff turnover, as Rodgers (2010) observed at Amnesty International. In regards to social justice movements, Rettig (2006) lamented that, when an activist burns out,

> She also deprives her organization and movement of her valuable experience and wisdom. 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)

Interventions for Activist Burnout

Helping activists cope with the threat of burnout requires interventions at the individual level and the organization or movement level (Maslach and Leiter 2005). At the organization or movement level, Kovan and Dirkx (2003) found that having access to opportunities for professional development had a renewing effect on environmental activists. Gomes (1992) argued that activist organizations could do a better job cultivating peaceful relationships among activists. Meanwhile, they must tend to biases and inequities within social justice movements, where people of color, queer-identifying people, and other marginalized people often are forced to withstand the threats of burnout while also being disempowered by fellow activists (Lorde 1988; Vaccaro and Mena 2011). Most importantly, social justice activist organizations could root out the culture of selflessness and create space for conversations about well-being (Nepstad 2004).

At the individual level, scholars of activist burnout have recommended that activists do a better job tending to their physical health (Maslach and Gomes 2006), avoiding a "blaming" orientation (Nair 2004), and finding balance between self-care and activism (Plyler 2006; Maslach and Leiter 2005). Although the literature includes many such suggestions, they tend to be somewhat vague. How does one find balance between self-care and activism, especially within the culture of selflessness that pervades social justice activist spaces? Lorde (1988), drawing on her own experience, was the exception in this regard. The secret of self-sustainability, she explained, was to identify something

> your soul craves for nourishment—a different religion, a quiet spot, a dance class—and satisfy it. That satisfaction does not have to be costly or difficult. Only a need that is recognized, articulated, and answered. (p. 124)

It is important to note that the suggestions for mitigating activist burnout in the existing literature were not derived from studies about which mitigations work. Rather, in most every case they are based either on scholars' personal experiences

with specific strategies or on scholars' attempts, based on their interpretations of what burned out activists need, to help address the activist burnout they had documented in their studies.

Mindfulness and Mitigating Activist Burnout

The notion of mindfulness has a 2500 year history rooted in Buddhist philosophy. It refers to an active and purposeful awareness of what is happening in the moment in an individual's immediate environment (Shapiro 2009). A sense of mindfulness allows us to pay attention to the world around us with more intention (Kabat-Zinn 1994) and to be fully present (Bays 2011) in the moment rather than losing ourselves in the noise and chaos that fill some of the spaces we inhabit, such as many activist spaces. Mindfulness also is about learning how to let go of judgment, including self-judgment. As Kornfield (2011) explained, mindfulness

> Is a nonjudgmental, receptive awareness, a respectful awareness. Unfortunately, much of the time, we don't attend in this way. Instead, we react, judging whether we like, dislike, or can ignore what is happening. Or we measure our experience against our expectations. We evaluate ourselves and others with a stream of commentary and criticism. (p. 8)

By helping people to avoid this sort of negative reactionary thinking and be more present and open, mindfulness allows us to manage difficult experiences and debilitating emotions more effectively (Smalley and Winston 2011).

Researchers have measured the impact of mindfulness, including engagement with specific activities often described as mindfulness practices—activities that help to cultivate mindfulness in people who practice them for that purpose such as silent walks, chanting, tai-chi, yoga, and meditation. On the basis of that research, they have linked mindfulness to measures of physical and emotional well-being (Howell et al. 2011; Schonert-Reichl and Lawlor 2010; Siegel 2011). The present study appears to be the first that has explored the relationship between mindfulness and a form of activist well-being.

As mentioned earlier, this study was inspired in part by Hick and Furlotte's (2009) conceptual analysis of the relationship between mindfulness and social justice. They described four points of connection between the two: (1) both are concerned with the ways people relate to one another and how we position ourselves to reproduce social conditions, (2) both acknowledge human interconnectedness while rejecting simplistic dualities, (3) both are rooted in consciousness-raising, and (4) both rely on self-reflection. In most other cases, connections drawn between social justice work and mindfulness have been more implicit, mentioned in personal essays by activists craving self-care. Nair (2004), for example, who was a social justice activist, then burned out and left activism, then became a yoga teacher, then returned to activism, reflected,

> The 'doing' was all 'out there', making a difference, a change, bringing about justice and equality. With time and years slipping through the hourglass, I

began to realise that my activities as an activist never permitted me to 'look into' or reflect on the 'actor' of the activism. (p. 29)

Well-known social justice scholar-activists such as Angela Davis (in an interview with Platt 2014) and Lorde (1988) also have described the importance of mindfulness practices in their lives and work and have endorsed self-care. Lorde (1988) famously wrote, "Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare" (p. 131). But again, both described these connections subtly and implicitly, not referring to what they were endorsing *as mindfulness*.

A rare direct and explicit conversation of this connection *in practice* was found in the writing of Pigni (2013), a psychologist who works with activists and who has advocated mindfulness as a mitigation for burnout. "Mindulness," she explained, provides a breathing space to take stock and re-energize our actions from a place of care, awareness, and creativity (¶ 9).

Methodology

In this study a phenomenological approach was adopted in order to examine a phenomenon that heretofore had received little attention: the adoption of mindfulness practices among educational justice activists who have experienced activist burnout. According to Creswell (2006), phenomenological research is meant to capture the essence of a particular lived experience by describing the common aspects of that lived experience among multiple people who have had it. The purpose, in this case, was to capture the essence of, and to be able to describe, the impact of mindfulness practices on educational activists who adopted them in order to cope with activist burnout. As Creswell (2006) explains, phenomenological study is best suited for situations in which understandings of multiple people's experiences of a particular phenomenon might help "develop practices and policies" (p. 60). In this case, the researcher is interested in informing practices and policies within educational justice movements, particularly as they related to the well-being and sustainability of educational justice activists. Data from 14 in-depth interviews with educational justice activists who adopted mindfulness practices in order to mitigate activist burnout were analyzed.

I drew from Hick and Furlotte's (2009) rumination about connections between mindfulness and social justice in order to ground the analysis and discussion. However, because their intention was more to describe and explore this connection than to offer a theory of the connection, and because little empirical or theoretical scholarship exists related to this connection, grounded theory was employed, allowing theory to emerge from the analysis rather than examining the data through a particular theoretical lens. In other words, Hick and Furlotte's connections between mindfulness and social justice were not used as a framework for data analysis so much as a point of reflection regarding the findings.

Participants

Participants were drawn from a larger sample of interviews conducted of US—based social justice and human rights activists collected for a broader phenomenological study of activist burnout and mindfulness practices among activists engaged in a wide variety of social justice work. Activists in this original sample were identified through snowball sampling. Requests for participants were distributed through Facebook pages and email forums frequented by social justice and human rights activists. In order to participate in the study, participants were screened for three criteria: (a) they identified their primary life's work as social justice or human rights activism, (b) they reported regular engagement with one or more mindfulness practices in order to mitigate activist burnout, and (c) they saw their mindfulness practices and activism as inextricably related.

For the present study, the 14 participants who specified that their social justice activism focused on educational issues were extracted from the larger sample. Although burnout symptoms varied among them, each reported experiencing at least one of the three key signs of activist burnout as described by Maslach and Gomes (2006): chronic social and emotional exhaustion from their activist work, chronic cynicism regarding their activist work, and chronic feelings of inefficacy (or self-doubt) regarding the meaningfulness and effectiveness of their activist work. All, supporting Rettig's (2006) conception of burnout as involuntarily leaving one's activism, had left their activism at some point due to their burnout.

As indicated in Table 1, the focus of participants' educational justice activism varied tremendously. Their mindfulness practices varied, as well. Similarly, the participants were diverse by race, socioeconomic status, age, and years of activist experience. Admittedly, we struggled to find men willing to speak with us about activist burnout and self-care, a reality that might suggest a gendered pattern in terms of who is more likely to feel comfortable acknowledging burnout and attending to their own well-being. It could be indicative, as well, of larger gendered patterns of who participates in mindfulness-based self-care practices more generally.

Procedure

Roughly 60-min in-depth interviews were conducted by phone or Skype (a video phone program) with each participant, sometimes buttressed by follow-up interviews, either by phone or email. According to Johnson (2002), in-depth interviews are designed to reach a deep level of intimacy between the interviewer and participant and, as a result, a deeper level of knowledge about the issue or phenomenon being studied. The interview protocol included questions related to four broad areas of experience: (1) characteristics of participants' activism, such as the social justice issues it addressed and the form their activism took (e.g., community education, direct action, or protesting), (2) the nature of participants' mindfulness practices, (3) participants' experience with activist burnout, and (4) participants' perceptions of the relationship between their mindfulness practices and their activism. In the spirit of phenomenological study, primary interview questions

were designed to be open-ended and broad (Moustaks 1994), but follow-up questions were designed to elicit more intimate and specific details about participants' experiences.

Analysis

Data were analyzed using a coding approach inspired both by Strauss and Corbin's (1990) three-step coding process and by standard phenomenological data analysis techniques as described by Creswell (2006), Moustaks (1994), and Polkinghorne (1989). First, in a sort of combination of Strauss and Corbin's "open coding" and a more traditional phenomenological approach of examining data for, in Creswell's words, "'significant statements,' sentences, or quotes" (p. 61) that lend to a deeper understanding of participants' phenomenological experiences, participant responses were analyzed for statements related to the ways in which participants described the impact of their mindfulness practices on their experiences with burnout and their activism more generally. These statements were organized into recurring themes in an attempt to find patterns and relationships, which allowed the researcher to identify two subthemes related to participants experiences: (1) the impact of participants' mindfulness practices on their activist burnout, and (2) the impact of participants' mindfulness practices on their activism more broadly. Finally, Strauss and Corbin's (1990) third coding step data organized by themes were reexamined, allowing the researcher to mine them for more complex intricacies or "clusters of meaning" (Creswell 2006) across participants related to these broad themes. These clusters are described in detail below.

Findings

The educational justice activists interviewed for this study were unanimous in their assessment that their mindfulness practices, and the resulting increases in their mindfulness, played a substantial role, not just in helping them cope with or recover from activist burnout, but also making them altogether more effective activists. I begin by exploring the former: participants' characterizations of how mindfulness practices mitigated the threat of burnout or helped them recover from burnout. I turn, then, to their perceptions of the ways mindfulness affected their activism more broadly.

Mindfulness and the Mitigation of Activist Burnout

The participants identified many ways in which mindfulness practices helped them cope with and overcome burnout. Although their experiences varied, three overlapping themes emerged. Mindfulness practices enabled them to cope with or recover from activist burnout by (1) helping them find balance between their activism and self-care without feeling guilty about doing so, (2) helping them slow down and see the "big picture," letting go of the pressure to eliminate injustice

instantaneously, and (3) helping them more effectively manage the stress and anxiety of their activism.

Finding Balance Without Guilt

Nine participants described how mindfulness helped them find some balance in their lives by looking after their own well-being without feeling guilty about doing so. Mindfulness helped them overcome pressures from within their movements and organizations to associate self-care with guilt. Consistent with existing scholarship on activist burnout (Plyler 2006; Rodgers 2010), the activists described how they contended with an activist culture that demeaned self-care and discouraged conversations about anxiety, stress, and burnout. Hortense, for example, described what she called the "martyr syndrome" in educational justice activism circles—a culture that leads activists to believe that self-care is an indulgence, a marker of privilege, and that thereby discourages activists from seeking ways to sustain themselves. Other participants described how, through mindfulness, they came to see this culture of martyrdom as purposeful—as a way that the hegemony of individualism is present even in contexts in which people imagine themselves as doing counter-hegemonic activist work. Although many recognized that this culture was consistent with broader societal hegemony in the US, they believed they were better able to see that hegemony at work in their activist communities, and so better able to respond to it. Stella captured the sentiment of many of her fellow activists on this front, describing what she came to see through her mindfulness practice:

> I think that 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—that really is part of the dominant paradigm.

This was an important realization, as it helped her and many of the activists begin to give themselves permission to seek balance between pouring themselves into their activism and tending to their well-being, not out of selfishness, but out of commitment to their movements. That shift allowed them to let go of the culture of selflessness (Rodgers 2010) guilt. Hortense, whose activism mostly involved social justice teaching and community education, explained that through her mindfulness practices she came to realize that "I'm not going to be a good teacher if I'm miserable or if I'm not taking care of myself." Similarly, Heidi shared,

> I gain so much joy and value … from the activism that I do, but at the same time, at the end of the day, if I'm exhausted or depressed or I can't stop crying or I'm sick, I can't be an activist… So that mindfulness component is important.

Jennifer agreed, describing how mindfulness helped her break through, not just the culture of selflessness, but a hegemonic notion of hard work:

> People who don't do these practices see them as self-indulgence… but you have to take care of yourself in order to offer anything to anyone else… Also, people raised with the Protestant work ethic have suspicion toward anything

that feels good… People are often conditioned to think that if I do something for myself that is selfish and I am not doing good.

Mindfulness helped her to realize that "work on the self is a necessary prerequisite to making any kind of change."

Others referred to breaking through the culture of martyrdom through their mindfulness practices and learning to "be more compassionate toward myself," "prioritize whatever I need like sleep or quiet time," and otherwise taking care of themselves. "I don't have to beat myself up about that," Ellen insisted, capturing the ethos of many of the participants' reflections.

All participants who described this sort of experience connected their self-care to their effectiveness as activists. They were not using mindfulness as a way to avoid the difficulties of activism, but rather to prepare themselves to better navigate those difficulties. "What good am I in [the racial justice in education] movement," Kara asked, "if I'm making myself exhausted and miserable and not standing up boldly?"

Slowing Down and Seeing the Big Picture

One instigator of burnout among social justice activists is self-inflicted pressure to make a difference (Pines 1994). Activists recognize the scope of injustice and suffering, which heavies their emotional load (Maslach and Gomes 2006). Many of the participants shared this experience and explained how, as a result, they poured unsustainable amounts of energy into their activism at an equally unsustainable pace, not only risking burnout, but also causing themselves to lose sight of the bigness of their tasks.

Eight of the activists described how mindfulness practices helped them, in Hortense's words, to "slow the brain down" and remain grounded so that they would not lose themselves in the chaos of the daily grind of their activism. Mindfulness helped Christopher, for instance, realize that "If you're going to run a marathon there has to be a point in time when you slow down. You can't just keep running at a sprint pace…" As with many of her fellow participants, Ellen learned to be more patient with herself, recognizing the size of the problems she was trying to address:

> I've learned that patience actually keeps me involved in making change and also keeps other people involved with me. And that came from a lot of my time with yoga. So I just don't end my day or my week or my year as frustrated as I did for probably the first half of my career.

Mindfulness practices helped others mitigate burnout by coming to terms with the fact that they could not change the world singlehandedly. It helped them acknowledge the enormous scope of their activist goals. Kara shared that when

> I feel like…my hours of work aren't having the impact I hoped they would, I need to remember that I'm just one fish in a huge sea… And there have been fish before me and there'll be fish after me, but it's important to keep swimming.

Ellen agreed, describing how, thanks to her mindfulness practices, she

> finally accepted…that [educational justice] is really a big picture thing…and everything is interconnected. It's really large and I am but one part of this large thing. … It's not something that has a concrete solution and is going to be solved by just working in a linear way as fast as I can.

This recognition helped to protect her, like many of the participants, from activist burnout.

Managing Stress and Anxiety

According to Patrice, mindfulness relieved the stress and anxiety of her activism, helping her "restore some balance" and avoid burnout. Stress and anxiety are related to the emotional fatigue that often precedes full-scale activist burnout (Maslach and Gomes 2006; Plyler 2006) and they were among the most common symptoms of burnout described by the participants of this study. Nine participants, including Patrice, described how their mindfulness practices helped them to manage or, in some cases, largely repel the stress and anxiety that once had contributed to their activist burnout.

Bethany described how mindfulness "gives me peace internally," helping her deal more effectively with the emotional chaos of activism. Christopher, whose stress and anxiety had devolved into depression, shared that mindfulness practices gave him "an incredible sense of relief because I feel like I'm more in control of my life, more in control of myself." Gwen added, simply, "I've always had a lot of anxiety. When I do this, I don't have anxiety."

Several participants described how mindfulness, by keeping them focused on what is happening in the moment both inside and outside of themselves, helped them develop what Gwen called a "constant awareness loop." They were able to catch and address mounting stress before they were overcome and rendered less effective as activists. Heidi explained how she learned the importance of taking the time "to meditate and relax instead of feeling shattered or depressed." Echoing, again, the sentiment that tending to her own needs was not self-indulgence, but rather part of her activist commitment, she continued: "Certainly the feeling of grief and frustration with the system is still present, but without me taking time [for self-care], I feel I'm very fragmented in my activism."

Impacts on Activism

In addition to helping the participants fend off burnout, and aside from keeping them engaged in their activism, mindfulness, they insisted, made them more effective activists. Their mindfulness practices (1) helped them become clearer and more thoughtful—more *mindful*—about their activism, (2) gave them a stronger spirit of peace and nonviolence to apply to their activism, and (3) prepared them to connect more compassionately with people with whom the interacted during the course of their activism. All 14 participants described how mindfulness strengthened them as activists in at least one of these ways.

Strengthening Clarity and Thoughtfulness

Eight participants described how engagement with mindfulness practices helped them approach their activism with more clarity and thoughtfulness by allowing them to be fully present and more clear-minded in their activism. Bethany, synthesizing the reflections of many of the activists, explained, "Because I feel my head is clear I can think better, I can reflect on what I do." Patrice agreed, insisting that meditation is "this thing that we can do that helps us not just manage [the wear and tear of activism] better, like reducing stress levels, but also that actually brings some insight and some clarity [to our activism]."

The added clarity of mind, allowing her to be more fully present in her activism, helped Heidi in a more specific way. "It helped me," she explained, "to finally release my ego, especially during difficult times in activism." This sentiment was repeated by several participants who described letting go of their egos, recognizing the interconnectedness between themselves and people with whom they disagreed and, as a result, being more focused and less distracted by negative thoughts in their activism. "I don't want to be a reactionary," Cathy commented. "I want to be proactive and thoughtful [in my activism]." Yoga, she said, helped her do that.

Another outcome of the ways in which mindfulness practices helped participants gain clarity and thoughtfulness was that it cultivated in them a sense of humility. This humility increased their ability to take feedback openly, not just about their activism, but about their ideologies. It helped them, in Kara's words, by "dissipating the defensiveness" when somebody who identifies with a cause is challenged about their levels of consciousness and commitment. Kara continued:

> And only when [the defensiveness] dissipates am I able to think through the feedback in a way that's clear and allows me to integrate it into how I'm going to move forward and be a better racial justice ally.

Bolstering a Spirit of Peace and Nonviolence

Plyler (2006) noted that one especially troubling cause of activist burnout was in-fighting among activists. The educational justice activists interviewed for this study observed the same phenomenon. So when they spoke of mindfulness practices elevating their abilities to bring a spirt of peace and nonviolence to their activism, they were referring both to their activist approaches and to their interactions with fellow activists. Seven participants described how mindfulness helped them in this regard.

Meditation helped Hortense to "create peaceful energy and not contribute to the violence" that her activism was meant to quell. Allison found through mindfulness the strength to let go of the anger that had been driving her activism and perhaps even doing violence to other educational justice activists with whom she worked. Silent walks and aikido "calm that anger down," she explained, "and they make me a better person, which is critical for being a good activist."

Stella synthesized the mindfulness-informed awareness of many of the activists:

We have to do our activism in ways that align with the outcomes we seek. So if we seek peacefulness and anti-violence we have to engage in peaceful and anti-violent means for activism. And when I use the word 'anti-violence' I don't just mean physical violence. I mean relational violence and violence against the earth…

Speaking to the impact that such a shift had on her activism, Ellen shared:

All of a sudden I was accomplishing as much as I was before but in a less harried way. I wasn't stepping on my own toes or other people's feelings to make things happen. I was doing things in a much more gracious way toward myself and toward others. That really helped.

Connecting More Compassionately

Speaking about her yoga practice, Ellen shared,

It helps me if I believe we are all interconnected…So my feelings, my beliefs, their feelings, their beliefs are all part of one. And so how am I to be angry at that which I am already part of?… [My yoga practice helps me to] not divide myself from people who I don't think the same as, but to go into that space because I actually believe we are already connected.

Nine participants felt similarly, that their mindfulness practices helped them become more effective activists by strengthening their abilities to connect more compassionately, not just with fellow activists, but also with people whose interests or ideologies their activism was meant to disrupt.

Mindfulness allowed Jennifer to "stay open to [others'] experiences" and "receive stories in a more compassionate way." Allison shared a similar experience: "I have found that meditation is very helpful for me to simply be a less judgmental, kinder, more compassionate person toward people, many of whom are the perpetrators of harm."

This spirit of compassion led to stronger relationships with fellow activists and even created previously unimaginable spaces for dialogue with people whose ideologies they desperately wanted to change. Stella described how yoga and meditation allowed her to "connect more meaningfully with people, and that allows me to learn from them and creates openings for others to learn from me about topics they may not have been willing to learn about before."

Discussion

Although the participants had varied lived experiences with burnout, and although mindfulness practices impacted them in a wide variety of ways, this study points to a sort of shared essence of the phenomenon among educational justice activists of engaging with mindfulness practices in order to recover from activist burnout. Among their shared experiences were several impacts of mindfulness on both their burnout and on their activism more broadly. Unanimously, for example,

mindfulness practices helped participants avoid or recover from burnout and, beyond bolstering their activist sustainability, helped them, at least according to their perceptions, to become more effective activists. Additionally, although previous scholarship on activist burnout identified the need for activists to break through the culture of selflessness in activist communities and attend to their own well-being (Rettig 2006; Rodgers 2010), and although some previous scholarship examined how certain conditions within activist movements and organizations might mitigate burnout (Kovan and Dirkx 2003; Nepstad 2004), the findings, beyond providing a description of the essence of the impact of mindfulness on educational justice activists, may also provide the first evidence of the impact of a specific kind of activist self-care.

It is important to note, though, that the effectiveness of mindfulness practices for the participants of this study, while a promising finding, should not be taken as a suggestion that all activists would benefit to the same degree from adopting these practices. The point is not that all activists should take up meditation or join a yoga studio. However, emerging from this phenomenological study is, perhaps, the beginnings of evidence that the adoption of specific self-care activities that are suited to individual activists can have a substantial mitigating impact on activist burnout. For Bethany self-care through mindfulness was simply about "giving me peace internally," which, in turn, helped her rebound from bouts of burnout. For Patrice it was about "restor[ing] some balance." For Heidi, an educator-activist whose activism revolves around incorporating animal rights and other social justice themes into school curricula, mindfulness shifted her notions of what it meant to be an effective activist:

> For example after watching [a film about animal abuse] it's hard not to be like, 'OK, what am I doing right now? Why am I not doing something? What can I do in this moment?' But taking the time to admit that and to meditate and relax instead of feeling shattered or depressed… Certainly the feeling of grief and the frustration with the system is still present, but without me taking time to go for or a run or sit or listen to music or those types of things, I feel like I'm being very fragmented in my activism and the approaches I take. I'm all over the place. I'm just not as effective, I think, as when I take the time to really let my brain digest all of the information. I need to … take a look at where I can best serve the community.

It might be true that any form of self-care would have bolstered the effectiveness of the participants by helping them cope with burnout. As mentioned earlier, although little scholarship has been done to assess the impacts of specific activist burnout interventions, some scholars and individual activists (e.g., Kovan and Dirkx 2003; Nair 2004) have observed positive effects from initiatives meant to support the well-being of activists. However, particularly when considered against existing mindfulness scholarship, the overlapping experiences of the participants of this study suggest that much of what they experienced through mindfulness, and particularly that which helped strengthen their activism, may have been uniquely the kinds of outcomes associated with the adoption of mindfulness practices. Many of the impacts of mindfulness cited by the participants reflected the commonalities

between social justice and mindfulness proposed by Hick and Furlotte's (2009). Several participants noted, for example, a greater recognition of human interconnectedness and a softening of "us" (activists) and "them" (oppressors) dualisms—a shift they acknowledged as key to strengthening their activism. Participants also described a variety of ways their consciousness about their roles as activists and the nature of social change grew from mindfulness practices, reflecting the "consciousness-raising" connection described by Hick and Furlotte (2009).

These observations suggest that mindfulness practices might be particularly well-suited for helping activists more clearly see the deleterious effects of the culture of martyrdom and to mitigate in-fighting and tension within educational justice movements by fostering more compassionate relationships among activists and more compassion for themselves. Heidi explained,

> Absolutely, I gain so much joy and value in my life from the activism that I do, but at the same time, at the end of the day, if I'm exhausted or depressed or I can't stop crying or I'm sick, I can't be an activist. I can't do what I need to do. And so I think that that mindfulness component is important.

More research on mindfulness or any approach to self-care for educational justice activists would help clarify these connections.

Other findings offer additional depth to Hick and Furlotte's (2009) work and even, perhaps, to scholarship on the broader effects of mindfulness. For example, several participants described how mindfulness helped them nurture in themselves greater levels of humility and how that humility made them more effective activists. Stella described how her mindfulness practice helped her "step into a more humble and curious space and build more—much, much more—constructive learning relationships with the people I come into contact with." This finding provided interesting insight into how activists might apply mindfulness principles such as non-duality or the rejection of false us/them binaries to their activism. It calls to mind Thich Nhat Hanh's (2005) spiritual guidance for peacemakers, particularly his notion of interbeing: that nobody can do violence to anybody else, even in the name of justice, without also doing violence to themselves. Peace and justice come through peaceful and just relationships. For activists accustomed to being driven by anger and by drawing a clear line between the oppressive "them" and the justice-oriented "us," mindfulness helped them find the humility to shift their view.

Most significantly in regards to policy and practice within educational justice movements and organizations, the findings provide hope and the beginnings of evidence that the high rates of burnout—estimated by Klandermans (2003) at 50–60 %—plaguing social justice movements are not unchangeable. This is important for all social justice movements, but might be especially timely when it comes to educational justice, given the tightening grip of neoliberal and corporate interests on all levels of US education and the power behind all manner of local, state, and federal education initiatives that are serving those interests and doing terrible damage to the most marginalized students. Because burnout can have such deleterious effects, not just on individual educational justice activists, but also on their movements, it is incumbent upon those of us committed to educational justice—and particularly upon educational justice movement and organization

leaders—to create cultural, social, and physical space for self-care. Educational justice conferences and symposia should include conversations, including official sessions, on self-care strategies—perhaps even workshops on mindfulness.

There are, of course, barriers to such progress. One is how mindfulness practices like yoga and meditation, because they so often have been coopted by economically privileged white people in the US, often are associated, particularly with people trained to rail against that sort of cooption, with privilege. Several participants spoke to their own hesitance adopting mindfulness practices for this very reason. Kara, for example, shared how she once rejected yoga and meditation as "white middle class female indulgence." This has to do, in part, with what the participants of this study observed in educational justice circles as a persisting culture of martyrdom that rejects any talk of self-care, but it also reflects a commitment on the parts of some activists not to contribute to cultural appropriation. It is important to recognize, and help activists recognize, that there are authentic and critically-oriented spaces to cultivate mindfulness—it does not have to be about joining a pricey yoga studio or registering for a meditation retreat. There are movements, led by social justice collectives like Decolonizing Yoga and by individuals like Heather (2014), to learn and teach mindfulness in ways that, in the spirit of Hick and Furlotte (2009) and Nair (2004), draw clear, spirited connections between the self-care of mindfulness and the community-care of social justice. Future research might examine how demystifying and decolonizing mindfulness practices might make them more appealing and accessible to educational justice activists who have been hesitant to consider them as part of a self-care routine.

Compelling areas for future research abound. Does the amount of time devoted to mindfulness practices or the specific type of mindfulness practice adopted relate to the impact of mindfulness on the sustainability of educational justice activists? In what ways, if any, do people who used mindfulness practices to help themselves recover from burnout and return to their activism attempt to wrap their mindfulness practice into the cultures of the activist movements or organizations in which they are involved? What other types of self-care approaches lead to positive outcomes for the activists who adopt them?

Conclusion

Self-care, whether through mindfulness practices or another approach, is critical to the sustainability of educational justice movements. The activists interviewed for this study, all of whom had adopted mindfulness practices in order to mitigate the effects of activist burnout, reported important benefits from those practices, from helping them deal more effectively with stress and anxiety to helping them connect more compassionately with fellow activists. Challenging the notion that tending to their well-being was mere self-indulgence, the participants unanimously described their mindfulness practices as central to their effectiveness in educational justice movements. Based on these findings, I challenge leaders in educational justice organizations and movements to take the initial steps toward eliminating the

deleterious culture of selflessness and creating space for explicit conversations about activist burnout and well-being.

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