STUDIES IN SOCIAL JUSTICE

Volume 18, Issue 3, 628-647, 2024

"It is just so emotionally and mentally consuming to be a community organizer": The Emotional Labour of Anti-carceral Activism

JAIME SNOW
Carleton University, Canada

JENNIFER M. KILTY
University of Ottawa, Canada

CHRISTINE GERVAIS
University of Ottawa, Canada

ABSTRACT *Social justice activism can be an emotional enterprise. While many people become involved due to feelings of anger and frustration about a particular unjust socio-political issue, we contend that these feelings exist in tandem with those of love and care for others (or for a specific community of belonging) and that it is this combination of emotions that helps sustain the desire to work toward positive or transformative social change. We mobilize Hochschild's (1979, 1990, 2012) concept of emotional labour and extend the literature on the emotional labour of racial justice activists by attending to the emotional and affective politics of grassroots, volunteer, peer-based, and unfunded anti-carceral activist groups in the City of Ottawa, Canada. As most research examines emotional labour in the context of paid social and health care work, our examination of grassroots unpaid activism is a unique contribution. We draw on the qualitative accounts of 25 representatives from 13 Ottawa-based activist groups that were gleaned through focus group interviews held over the course of seven evenings, which provide insight into their emotional motivations for anti-carceral activism, their experiences of emotional burnout, and the strategies they employ to manage the emotional impacts of this work.*

KEYWORDS anti-carceral activism; emotional labour; affective politics; burnout; Canada

Correspondence Address: Jaime Snow, Department of Law and Legal Studies, Carleton University, Ottawa, ON K1S 5B6; email: jaimesnow@cmail.carleton.ca

ISSN: 1911-4788

Introduction

People often become involved in social justice activism because of their personal connection to an unjust socio-political issue, their associated feelings of anger and frustration or their desire to advocate for positive social change (Gould, 2009; Kleres & Wettergren, 2017; Rettig, 2006; Srinivasan, 2018). Emotions are thus central to the mobilization, function, and sustainability of social justice activism. Activists mobilize their personal emotional responses to create affective attachments that influence their emotional relationships (Brown & Pickerill, 2009) and networks of solidarity that encourage sustainable long-term social justice participation (Elnakib & Turner, 2023; Gould, 2009; Kim & Schalk, 2021; Rodriguez, 2022).

While certain feelings and emotions can motivate people to become involved in social justice activism, this kind of work has also been described as a form of emotional labour (Humphrey, 2022; Jacobsson & Lindblom, 2013; Reger, 2004; Rodriguez, 2022; Williams et al., 2019; Wyatt & Ampadu, 2022). Research on emotional labour has largely focused on the emotion management strategies and experiences of paid workers in public service and health care (Benesch, 2020; Lee & Madera, 2019; Mesmer-Magnus et al., 2012), thus overlooking the experiences of unpaid activists. Given this lacuna, we mobilize Hochschild's concept of emotional labour (1979, 1990, 2012) and extend the literature on the emotional labour of racial justice activists (Gorski, 2019; Gorski & Chen, 2015; Humphrey, 2022; Kim & Schalk, 2021; Williams et al., 2019; Wyatt & Ampadu, 2022) to examine the experiences of grassroots, unpaid anti-carceral activists working in Ottawa, Canada.

We begin by reviewing the literature on emotional labour in the activist context. We then turn to a description of our methodology. In the analysis section of the paper, we examine how focus group participants describe their emotional motivations for engaging in anti-carceral activism, the emotional burnout they experience, and the strategies they identify as helping to counteract and cope with the emotional burdens of this work. We conclude by highlighting how emotional engagement and an ethic of care have the potential to address structural inequalities and sustain social justice efforts.

Emotional Labour in the Activist Context

Emotional labour (Hochschild, 1979, 1990, 2012) involves the conscious and unconscious management of emotions (Gross, 1999) across different spaces, communities, institutions, and cultures to meet particular social conventions. There is a substantial body of literature that explores how emotion shapes different forms of service work, notably healthcare, social work, policing, and teaching (Benesch, 2020; Lee & Madera, 2019; Mesmer-Magnus et al., 2012). Hochschild (1979, 1990, 2012) defines service jobs as occupations in which organizations exercise control over their employees' emotional activities as

they engage with the public. By extension, in requiring this emotional labour of employees, organizations produce emotion cultures which enforce framing (i.e., how we ascribe meanings to situations), feeling (i.e., internal emotions), and display (i.e., outward emotional performatives) rules. These rules dictate how one should feel and what the acceptable and unacceptable forms and intensities of emotional displays are within particular social contexts (Allen & Augustin, 2021; Hochschild, 1979). As a result, emotional labour requires employees in service jobs to manage their internal feelings and emotional performances to align them with work-related expectations (Hochschild, 1979, 1990, 2012).

Emotional dissonance can occur through surface acting, when an emotional display does not mirror one's internal feelings (Hochschild, 1979, 1990, 2012). While surface acting refers to an individual's performance and suppression of certain emotional displays to reflect broader social conventions, deep acting necessitates regulating one's internal feelings (Hochschild, 1979, 1990, 2012). Hochschild (2012) outlines three strategies of emotion regulation: cognitive, bodily, and expressive. While cognitive strategies reflect an attempt to change ideas or thoughts, bodily strategies illustrate one's attempt to change embodied manifestations of feelings and emotions (e.g., increased heart rate, pain, or tension in the pit of your stomach). Expressive strategies reflect attempts to change one's feelings through gestures (e.g., facial or bodily expressions) (Mesmer-Magnus et al., 2012).

Like service work, social justice movements are informally governed by feeling rules and are often characterized by deep acting (Hochschild, 1979, 1990, 2012), which encourage the development of affective bonds and collective identities among activists (Goodwin et al., 2001; Gould, 2009). These affective bonds facilitate the adherence to feeling rules, which in turn can generate or transform one's pre-existing emotions (Reger, 2004). For example, Reger (2004) contends that the organizational structure of activist groups often enables one to transform personal emotions (e.g., frustration and anger) into "a collectively defined sense of injustice" (p. 206). Aligned with Hochschild's (1979, 1990, 2012) suggestion that emotional labour is not always a negative experience, activists' collective adherence to feeling rules can promote feelings of pleasure or pride, leading to sustainable social justice environments (Davis et al., 2023; Lorde, 2017).

Despite the gratification that comes from social justice activism, movements experience high activist turnover rates due to emotional exhaustion and burnout (Allen & Augustin, 2021). As activists are frequently involved in "maintain[ing] awareness of large and overwhelming social problems" (Maslach & Gomes, 2006, p. 43), an increased investment in emotional labour renders activists particularly susceptible to "stress, self-inflicted pressure, and social isolation" (Gorski & Chen, 2015, p. 389). Allen and Augustin (2021) find that unpaid volunteers, much like passion-motivated activists, experience overwhelming stress related to emotional self-regulation and emotional dissonance that causes some to lose hope in their work. Research documents

the different psychological costs of emotional labour, including feelings of inauthenticity, disengagement, emotional dissonance, and diminished physical and mental health. One of the most common psychological harms that can manifest is a feeling of burnout, or rather an overwhelming experience of mental fatigue (Brown & Pickerill, 2009; Gorski & Chen, 2015). Rodriguez (2022), referring specifically to anti-carceral activists, warns that although all activists are "emotionally invested – to some degree – in the work to progress toward a non-punitive society, not all are affected to the same degree" (p. 284). Emotional labour and burnout are especially pronounced for BIPOC activists and those with a personal connection to the cause at hand,[1] for example, anti-carceral activists who have experienced criminalization (Humphrey, 2022; Rodriguez, 2022). These experiences are often exacerbated due to intransigent institutional arrangements that perpetuate forms of silencing, oppression, and othering (Gorski & Chen, 2015). Indeed, the emotional experiences of anti-carceral activism, including violent interactions with police, and the associated "stress of unavoidable front-line racial battles in historically white spaces" (Williams et al., 2019, p. 2) cause undue emotional exertion (Humphrey, 2022). To cope with emotional burnout, many activists engage self-care strategies and seek in-movement support (Gorski 2019; Wyatt & Ampadu, 2022).

Activism, like self-care, can support healing from the effects of injustice, highlighting the importance of care to sustaining participation in activism and avoiding burnout (Elnakib & Turner, 2023; Wyatt & Ampadu, 2022). This support stems in part from an ethic of care that is foundational to the development of caring bonds among activists as it sustains hope, joy, and love (Davis et al., 2023; Rodriguez, 2022) and can be a means of survival (Ticktin, 2021). For activists from marginalized social groups, radical self-care is an especially important tool that allows them to maintain their health and wellness while resisting oppressive systems that threaten their survival (hooks, 1993; Lorde, 2017; Wyatt & Ampadu, 2022). Emotional labour, therefore, can also describe the emotions required to build and sustain the hope that stems from a deep emotional investment in social justice (Rodriguez, 2022). This ethic of care is similar to mutual aid in that it stresses "the importance of forming and working to maintain healthy relationships among activists as a mechanism to foster a more sustainable movement" (Kilty & Orsini, 2024, p. 12). Given the significance of such an optimistic outlook, we retain a more comprehensive conceptualization of emotional labour to ensure that we remain attentive to both the obstacles and opportunities it generates in the activist context.

[1] BIPOC is an acronym for Black, Indigenous, and other persons of colour.

Methodology

This article is born from a broader carceral studies research project (see Felices-Luna & Nault, 2023; Kilty & Orsini, 2024; Morris et al., n.d.) that examines how anti-carceral activists challenge the logics of carceral power, resist carceral expansion, and offer alternatives to confinement that better address the needs of criminalized people in the city of Ottawa, Canada.[2] The research team for the larger project consisted of seven colleagues from the Department of Criminology at the University of Ottawa,[3] who jointly secured a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada Insight Development Grant. The team collaborated to design the focus group facilitation guide and took turns as focus group facilitators and notetakers. Collaborative analysis was encouraged, although team members were free to analyse the dataset and to produce independent publications, with the caveat that they be shared with other team members and participants.

After receiving approval from the University of Ottawa's Research Ethics Board, the team contacted Ottawa-based activist groups to solicit their participation in a series of focus group interviews. A total of 25 representatives from 13 different activist groups agreed to participate and were paid $100 for each of the seven focus group nights they attended, each of which lasted between two and three hours.[4] The team conducted virtual focus groups (on Zoom) due to the COVID-19 lockdown measures in place at that time across seven evenings in October 2020 (n=4) and October 2021 (n=3). The two sets of focus groups were held a year apart to allow the team time to transcribe and distribute anonymized versions of the first sets of transcripts to participants, who were encouraged to provide clarification and feedback on the points they made. The team then met to discuss and identify areas of interest that required additional investigation and to devise the facilitation guide for the second round of focus groups.

It is important to note that the three of us are white, cisgendered, heterosexual, and able-bodied women with financial security. While a few participants occupy similar social locations, most are racial minorities who are working class or experience financial insecurity, and some are members of the

---

[2] Ottawa is the nation's capital and the fourth largest city in Canada, with about one million residents. Ottawa Police Services, which employs 1,400 officers, exceeded a $400 million budget in 2023. Ottawa also has additional policing resources provided by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, a national force, and the Ontario Provincial Police. Ottawa is no stranger to political protest, making international headlines in 2022 following a month-long "convoy protest" that paralysed the city centre.

[3] The team consisted of five women and two men; six identify as white and one as Latinx.

[4] These 13 groups include: Asilu Collective; Coalition Against More Surveillance; Criminalization and Punishment Education Project; Drug Users Advocacy League; Herongate Tenant Coalition; Hit the Streets; Horizon Ottawa; Ottawa Black Diaspora Coalition; Ottawa Sanctuary City Network; Ottawa Street Medics; Overdose Prevention Ottawa; and two organizations that wished to remain anonymous.

LGBTQTSIA community. Despite these differences, there was a level of trust among researchers and participants because many research team members (including the three of us) are involved in the local activist community. That participants had existing knowledge of the kinds of activism and critical social inquiry the researchers engage in eased both recruitment and focus group facilitation. There was a mutual level of comfort and a degree of rapport among participants and among participants and researchers that encouraged group dialogue.

To create a more democratic, egalitarian, and inclusive space for participants in which they felt safe to discuss personal experiences of anti-carceral activism, we structured the focus groups like a sharing circle (Hunt & Young, 2021; Lavallée, 2009).[5] For example, participants were asked not to interrupt one another or to engage in "crosstalk," and we asked each participant to comment on each question posed, although they were able to "pass" if they felt they did not have anything further to contribute to a particular discussion. By taking turns speaking, the circle method promotes active listening, personal reflection, and more equitable opportunities for participants to contribute (Lavallée, 2009). With 25 participants, this method also helped solidify the main points being made, with consensus emerging over time as participants nuanced their commentary.

The potential limitations of the virtual and focus group formats include hindering the development of rapport and thus the full disclosure of participants' views and experiences, and limiting the analysis of non-verbal communication (Felices-Luna & Nault, 2023). Accordingly, future studies could expand on our insights by facilitating in-person individual and focus group interviews to maximize the sense of comfort that proximity and privacy may afford. Pandemic-related restrictions also thwarted our plans for community engaged research, which would have involved establishing community advisory committees to optimize collaboration between participants and the research team in all phases of the study (e.g., facilitation guide design, facilitation, analysis, knowledge translation and dissemination). Nevertheless, we strove to ensure that our adaptations remained aligned with social justice practices by revising the focus group guides according to participant feedback and including some participants in facilitation and knowledge translation and dissemination opportunities.

Despite these potential limitations, we take up Cvetkovich's (2010, pp. 6, 12) point that focus groups can generate a space in which participants connect emotionally as they relay their varied lived experiences, especially as the circle method facilitates personal reflection and the development of a safe social and relational context (Hunt & Young, 2021; Lavallée, 2009).[6] We found that

[5] Circle methods originate in Indigenous scholarship and cultural practice.
[6] Future studies should provide opportunities for participants to discuss the emotions they experienced as activists and research participants that they were uncomfortable sharing in a group format to examine those "feelings in the gaps" and "what was not said" by participants (Cvetkovich 2010, p. 12).

connection and collective thinking emerged quickly in part because many of the participants, despite working for different grassroots organizations across a range of social justice causes (e.g., harm reduction, tenant rights, immigration policy, policing, etc.), know one another through their activist efforts. In this sense, participants see one another as allies to their varied causes.

Given the small size of the organizations from which we recruited, we do not provide demographic information about participants, because that detail might reveal aspects of their identities that could threaten their anonymity. Rather than imposing a pseudonym, which, if appropriately gendered, would also jeopardize anonymity, we identify participants by number. Some readers may view this as impersonal. While our decision is not ideal, it is the best way to preserve anonymity and confidentiality.[7] Given the use of focus groups, complete anonymity could not be guaranteed as participants would know each other's first names and would see one another on screen, although it was part of the oral consent process that participants agreed not to reveal their peers' identities.

In terms of analytic strategy, we coded verbatim transcriptions of the focus group interviews using a reflexive approach (Braun & Clarke, 2019, 2022) to develop a thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun et al., 2015). This method is grounded in a qualitative epistemology that recognizes interpretation as subjective and that "prioritizes a more flexible and fluid approach" to the analysis of focus group data (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 13). While focus groups are useful for appreciating how a group interacts and how it collectively develops understanding of a social issue, this method also allows researchers to examine how opinions and experiences vary across the group and whether and how participants alter their stances as they are presented with alternative views – particularly those born from personal reflections (Braun & Clarke, 2019, 2022; Hunt & Young, 2021; Lavallée, 2009). We analysed the data to determine how participants feel and what shared values they hold about anti-carceral activism.

In terms of our analytic process, we first read the transcripts to better understand the broader empirical content of the data. Second, we used inductively generated codes (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun et al., 2015) to describe participants' statements. Third, we refined and combined the codes to identify nine themes that relate to the emotional and affective politics of anti-carceral activist work, three of which we discuss herein as they speak most directly to the emotional labour involved in this work: (a) emotional motivations for anti-carceral activism; (b) burnout; and (c) strategies that aid in managing the emotional impact of anti-carceral activist work.[8] Fourth, we reviewed the transcripts again to ensure that the themes accurately reflected

---

[7] The same identifying numbers are used across our research team's publications. Therefore, regardless of the author(s), participants can identify themselves.

[8] With another team member, the second author published a paper exploring the role of anger, fear, and hope in anti-carceral organizing (Kilty & Orsini, 2024), and the three of us are currently finalizing a third paper that explores the emotions associated with performative activism.

participant responses and searched for discrepant cases. Finding none demonstrates that participants found common ground and expressed collectively shared understandings of the emotions and affective politics involved in doing anti-carceral work. Fifth, we named and defined each theme after establishing its nature and scope. Finally, we selected quotes that best reflect the points made in relation to each theme. In what follows, we examine our three key themes: emotional motivations for participating in activism; emotional burnout; and strategies that aid in managing the impact of performing emotional labour while doing anti-carceral activism.

Emotional Motivations for Activism

As anti-carceral activists are affiliated with emotionally laden causes that are marked by wide-spread human suffering, having an emotional connection to the cause is often central to activist recruitment, long-term commitment, and sustained engagement within social movements (Gorski & Chen, 2015; Humphrey, 2022; Jacobsson & Lindblom, 2013; Rodriguez, 2022; Smith, 2017). In fact, many activists become involved in social movements as an emotional response (e.g., shock, grief, anger, frustration) to current social conditions and injustices (Gould, 2009; Srinivasan, 2018). Emotions orient and inspire action within local, national, and global anti-carceral movements, which demonstrates how one's feelings of approval or disapproval of the socio-political status quo is connected to one's moral principles (Kleres & Wettergren, 2017).

Moral shock, which results from exposure to emotional or shocking events, plays an integral role in personal motivations to participate in anti-carceral work (Jacobsson & Lindblom, 2013). This shock feeds into a sense of collective injustice that functions as a precondition for participation and acceptance in many activist networks. As participants explain, exposure to emotion-evoking events may inspire individuals to seek connection with others experiencing similar feelings. These emotional bonds not only work to justify the difficult feelings the individual is experiencing, but also lead to what we identify as an "emotional alignment" with a particular counter-narrative or cause. Activist 3 is a good example. They explain:

> What brought me to activism really was when we found out that, we were, my entire family, under the thumb of the surveillance state and the carceral state for a very long period of time. When they had wrapped up an investigation into my brother, which turned into them wanting to arrest him, and them having him arrested at my mother's house while we were sitting down drinking tea. They didn't knock on the door when they came for him. They used what is now known as a forced dynamic entry, otherwise known as coming in and opening your doors with flashbangs, smoke grenades, battering rams, semi-automatic rifles, an army of SWAT team police officers that are dressed like paramilitary police officers. Their objective was to shock and confuse and to disorient everybody, every member of my family that

> was in the house at the time of the arrest of my brother. And it was one of the most shocking, terrifying, scariest moments of my life, which has literally changed the course of history in my life.

This participant's story reveals a traumatizing personal relationship to criminalization that prompts both moral emotions and an intimate emotional connection to injustice that encouraged them to participate in anti-carceral activism. Activist 3's personal exposure to the violence of policing as it arrived on his doorstep not only engendered feelings of moral shock at how the "surveillance state and carceral state" operates, but also fear of that state. These feelings led to a sense of outrage that their entire family was surveilled and to the participant becoming involved with the local group "Coalition Against More Surveillance."

According to Haidt (2003), the more emotional a moral agent is – i.e., the higher their degree of emotionality around a particular subject – the more likely it is that they will behave and demand that others behave in a moral fashion. Haidt (2003) divides the principal moral emotions into two large and two small joint "families" that reflect the different ways in which moral emotions can move people to action:

> The large families are the "other-condemning" family, in which the three brothers are contempt, anger, and disgust (and their many children, such as indignation and loathing), and the "self-conscious" family (shame, embarrassment, and guilt) … the two smaller families [consist of] the "other-suffering" family (compassion) and the "other-praising" family (gratitude and elevation). (p. 855)

Unlike Haidt's (2003) "disinterested elicitor," a term he uses to describe an event that provokes our emotions even when it has little to do with personal welfare, many participants, like Activist 3 above, were drawn into activism through traumatizing personal experiences with the criminal justice system. These emotional experiences led them to engage in calls for action to benefit marginalized groups. As Rodriguez (2022) finds, one's likelihood of engaging in social justice activism is partially determined by one's degree of emotionality, which is intensified by personal proximity to the cause.

While social movement commitment requires acting on one's emotions, activists must also manage them according to the framing, feeling, and display rules of the groups and networks with which they are organizing (Hochschild, 1979, 1990, 2012). Therefore, sustained motivation for activism requires a conscious reorientation from dominant emotional regimes to those that shape the activist organizational context (Kleres & Wettergren, 2017). For our participants, it is feelings of urgency about particular issues or causes that demarcate this context. As Activist 20 describes,

> These are issues that are constantly there… that we wait until something horrible happens so we can organize around it… There should be urgency in us, all the time. There's so much bad things happening and I understand we can't possibly hold all of the horrible things of the world on our shoulders but there is urgency and if we

> don't, I strongly feel that if we don't feel that urgency we're not gonna be able to do much.

This quote shows that Activist 20's motivational feelings of urgency are directly connected not only to the anger, contempt, and disgust of the other-condemning family, but also to the shame, embarrassment, and guilt of self-conscious family, and to the compassion of the other-suffering family (Haidt 2003). Activist 20 also demonstrates that although cases of criminal injustice, state violence, and harm (e.g., racial profiling, police involved deaths, deaths in custody, crimmigration and deportation, the opioid crisis) may receive some public attention, for marginalized communities these devastating events are tragically commonplace (Maynard, 2017; Williams et al., 2019). In this way, traumatizing experiences with the criminal justice system can be simultaneously destabilizing and motivating as individuals mobilize their own feelings and emotions to encourage others to participate in anti-carceral organizing.

Experiences of injustice also contribute to the radical emotion culture of anti-carceral groups, supporting the formation of strong affective attachments to collective action and providing individuals with an appropriate setting in which to channel their anger in ways that help to actualize social change (Kilty & Orsini, 2024; Srinivasan, 2018). For example, Activist 19 contends that,

> Being radical has nothing to do with the cameras and the attention. It has to do with the release of rage and a representation of love and like a real fight for sustained and tangible liberation. And so I think that it's been really hard to be in the city of Ottawa where people talk so much about what's happening on the news and how amazing what people are doing in the States is, [yet] when we're trying to make actual and concrete change in the city, those radical ways [are lost] because Ottawa is very much a city that needs radical change.

Activist 19's sentiments that anti-carceral activism enables the release of rage against unjust state systems and institutions and is a representation of love and hope for sustained social change are widely shared by our participants. This quotation also calls out the passive liberalism that characterizes Ottawa, which participants noted is filled with citizens who understand the importance of social change (per the congratulatory sentiments shared about American anti-carceral activism), but who do not engage in or support the radical acts that would facilitate it. The federal government employs well over 100,000 people within the Ottawa region. Given the presence of three branches of policing (municipal, provincial, and federal) and the municipal politics infrastructure for the nation's capital, it is perhaps unsurprising that it is difficult to sow the seeds of radical activism in this location.

While anger and frustration often provide a basis for participation in anti-carceral activism (Kilty & Orsini, 2024), activists also engage in emotion work to sustain the affective motivation that is required for long-term participation (Kleres & Wettergren, 2017), which takes its toll. Participants noted that

emotional labour creates vulnerability for increased stress and social isolation that is commonly described as "burnout" or activist fatigue (Humphrey, 2022).

Burnout

Activist burnout is described as a chronic experience of feeling overwhelmed by the stressors associated with organizing and the backlash that many experience in doing this work, which can lead to the deterioration of one's emotional, mental, and physical health, and, for some, the decision to disengage (Allen & Augustin, 2021; Gorski, 2019; Gorski & Chen, 2015; Rettig, 2006). Notably, activists of colour experience intense emotional connections to racial justice organizing, which elevates their susceptibility to burnout, as does the structural nature of racial oppression (Humphrey, 2022; Rodriguez, 2022). The emotional consequences of this work include chronic frustration, emotional and physical exhaustion, feelings of isolation, and a deep personal investment in and responsibility for securing structural change, despite the socio-political complications that challenge one's efforts (Humphrey, 2022; Rettig, 2006; Rodriguez, 2022).

The literature notes three predominant causes of activist burnout: internal or emotional-dispositional causes; external causes, including both backlash to the movement and structural oppressions and barriers; and in-movement causes that are born from how individual actors treat others working within the movement (Gorski, 2019; Rettig, 2006). We mobilize Gorski's (2019) framework to examine participants' experiences of burnout from activism, slightly modifying his take on in-movement causes because participants emphasized relationships of care and did not discuss tensions amongst activists as sources of burnout. While we retain Gorski's emphasis on the in-movement context, we examine how activists express an ethic of care to support one another and mitigate burnout.

Internal or Emotional-dispositional Causes of Burnout

Participants commonly describe feeling frustrated and emotionally and physically exhausted by trying to secure change in an environment in which others did not understand or refused to acknowledge the racist structural roots of criminal injustices. As Activist 17 explains:

> The leadership in OBDC, we're all Black... so our work is more for our survival, the survival of our communities and families. I think how state power and violence affects us is that we don't see it as work; we see it as something that needs to be done. Burnout is very real. The constant education and teaching is real. The amount of work that we do that's not paid is very real. That's a way state power really monopolizes and uses and capitalizes off Black bodies is that we do all of this education work most of us for free… I feel like it's interconnected – it's part of our

> identity. We don't have a choice is what I'm trying to say... It's really a fight for survival… because if I don't do it, I'm complicit.

Activist 17 reveals the precariousness that many activists of colour experience in terms of finances, time, and energy because of their anti-carceral organizing. Noting that many continue with the work regardless because it is "a fight for survival" further illustrates the sense of urgency noted above. Activist 19 corroborates these points and similarly emphasizes that they engage in activism in addition to their paid employment and other community work:

> In Black organizing… everyone is always burnt out and the cycle is to burn out. We used to have to do all of it ourselves and we, on top of having jobs, and doing other community work, and our personal lives, we were running [and] we ran burnout for the first few years of organizing.

As these two narratives reveal, participants feel an intense sense of personal responsibility that pushes them to prioritize activism over other aspects of their lives, contributing to burnout. Like the racial justice activists in Gorski's (2019) research, our participants feel obliged to do anti-carceral work despite the risk of burnout. As Activist 17 states, failing to engage would make them feel complicit in their own structural oppression, which is an exceptionally heavy emotional burden to bear. Notably, participants of colour were more vocal about the emotional harms of their activism, which they cannot disconnect from their daily experiences of racism. Racialized participants also highlighted that there were differences between what white and BIPOC activists could say and do vis-à-vis the police. For example, Activist 14 states that,

> A lot of the activism I wish I could participate in, as a racialized person, I cannot. It's that fear of, what if I do get arrested and that is on my record, then that stops me from doing the advocacy and work I need to do in the future… A lot of white folks feel very emboldened to do a lot of things… when you [a white participant] said, "grab the police." At no point in my life have I been like "I'm going to grab a police officer" because of the repercussions.

The unequal burden (Humphrey, 2022) that Activist 14 describes reflects Thompson's (2017) argument that white normativity delegitimizes Black feelings of anger, which restricts what racialized activists can say and do, and positions racialized emotional labour as an unseen burden, subsequently increasing the likelihood of burnout.

External Causes of Burnout – Backlash and Structural Oppression

Following Hochschild (2012), much of the research on burnout has been conducted on the service economy and helping professions and considers factors like poor financial support, high staff turnover, and the emotional dissonance individual actors experience due to surface acting as contributing

to burnout (Allen & Augustin, 2021). Interestingly, participants did not report high levels of surface acting and instead experience increased stress due to their efforts to maintain their activist orientations in all aspects of their lives. We suggest that this finding reflects an undiscussed consequence of seeking justice with respect to several interconnected, emotionally charged causes that one confronts regularly. Like Gorski's (2019) racial justice activists, our participants' "commitment made it impossible to quiet their activism at work" (p. 677), where their views were not always appreciated. For example, Activist 15 finds,

> There's kind of this double standard or double speak where in a way you're expected to take on these invisible roles. But if you make them too visible and it becomes a risk to your employer, then you're kind of oppressed and told you're doing the wrong thing, but essentially that's why you were hired.

Activist 15 speaks about how, despite being asked to join their employer's equity, diversity, and inclusion committee, their approach to the work was seen as too radical and threatening to the status quo. In another example, Activist 5 uses formal complaint processes to denounce the structural racism they experience at work:

> I filed a harassment and discrimination complaint at my work. And then I filed it with the Canadian Human Rights Commission because I'm just sick of this shit. And I had to take a medical leave to do it because the stress and like the micro aggressions associated with it are just very real and very taxing. I framed it as a mental health and health and safety issue… I couldn't sleep and my blood pressure went up and my heart rate went up and all that stuff and just know that the mental health issues also impact you physically. [Do] all you can to balance taking care of yourself and avoiding that burnout.

Activists 15 and 5 both speak to the harms that are born from workplace backlash, namely mental health distress, emotional fatigue, and deteriorating physical health symptoms. We suggest that as an external source of burnout, backlash in one's professional life that is connected to one's activism reveals the sometimes difficult to see ways in which structural oppression is (re)produced. As Thompson (2017, p. 460) contends, the expression of rage at social and racial injustice is confined by the limits of liberal democracies that delegitimise Black rage in the context of white supremacy. Both white and racialized participants express this sentiment as they feel disappointed and even betrayed by liberals they thought would be allies, but who did not support their calls to action. For example, Activist 2 reflects:

> How it affects us? We could talk about burnout and how it is just so emotionally and mentally consuming to be a community organizer, especially when there are so many barriers that are being put up as the state reacts to your organizing... It's so emotionally draining to do that, especially [when] you think you are making allies

> within the system, so for example OCDSB trustees,[9] and then those people turn their back on you and it's like this new realization that, yeah, they're working for the state.

This quotation reveals Activist 2's frustration with the lack of support they experienced from state actors who presented themselves as allies to the cause, but who failed to support the material changes that would decarcerate local school environments (removing police from schools). This sentiment of a "bait and switch" was also noted by Activist 19, who addresses the racial dynamics of grassroots organizing:

> Even just engaging in conversations with non-Black folks who are talking about how tired they are and how they don't know what to do. Black folks have been setting the agenda for hundreds of years on how to change our current situation and I have a hard time with how little support that we get in combating state violence and state power.

Activist 19's point that there is frustration with white activists who look to Black activists for guidance, but who then do not support their efforts to combat state power and violence reveals how racialized activists, and those who have lived experience of the injustices they are combatting, carry an extra burden in terms of understanding the scope and extent of structural oppression. This unequal burden can increase feelings of anger and frustration when those with different forms of privilege fail to grasp this or to act as allies, especially when they present themselves as progressive and sympathetic to the cause (Humphrey, 2022; Thompson, 2017). As Activist 11 states,

> I'm exhausted and I feel overwhelmed… unpacking the lies and indoctrination that has been part of the systems and what they feed us... that's been emotionally draining, overwhelming, and I'm angry, and I feel helpless. As an individual there's nothing I can do because the system is set up in such a way that it atomizes us and I'm angry. I'm furious – I want to go and smash things. I want to go yell in people's faces and cause a ruckus, but it's not possible to do that without harming someone else, and it's really forced me to be considerate of those around me.

Activist 11 highlights something unique about our findings. While in-movement causes have been identified as key sources of burnout (Gorski, 2019; Gorski & Chen, 2015), our participants find comfort among their comrades and display clear signs of trying to mitigate in-fighting by, using Activist 11's words, "being considerate." As we elaborate below, participants express solidarity intentionally to avoid the in-movement sources of burnout that are documented in the literature.

[9] OCDSB is the Ottawa-Carleton District School Board. Participants lobbied to have police officers removed from school settings within this Board's jurisdiction.

In-movement Emotion Management: An Ethic of Care

While research suggests that in-movement experiences may be the leading cause of activist burnout (Gorski, 2019; Rettig, 2006), our research shows that there was also an ethic of care among participants. For example, Activist 5 noted:

> I wrote an article [on anti-Black racism in the academy] and I procrastinated because it was an emotional drain. So many people messaged me – "thank you for saying it, we've been holding this in," or "we've wanted to say something but haven't said anything." We need care and we need to care for each other, the people who are doing this work, like everybody here.

Participants spoke frequently about the importance of mutual aid initiatives, which they argue have a more direct impact than do protests and marches. As Activist 5's statement reveals, activists encourage and derive emotional strength from mutual support, which helps to sustain their activism. This finding echoes Elnakib and Turner's (2023) argument that social justice activism can be a form of healing and thus a protective factor against the harms of injustice. Participants mobilized both individual and collective caring strategies to manage the emotional impacts of doing anti-carceral activism. Self-care involved a range of intentions, decisions, and approaches, including exercising agency, setting limits, revising ambitions, applying lessons learned from past experiences, and mitigating potential triggers (Kim & Schalk, 2021). As Activist 15 states:

> You have to take your own personal growth into your own hands in order to be a better leader and even setting boundaries within your own group of what you're not comfortable with. And not having a savior complex; you don't have to always overextend yourself. You can't pull from an empty cup, right?

This quotation emphasizes the importance of both emotional support and setting boundaries to protect oneself from burnout. Suggesting that "you can't pull from an empty cup" reveals that when our participants feel emotionally burnt out, they are unable to contribute effectively.

Similarly, Activist 10 expresses the importance of "tempering expectations" and self-awareness:

> Managing the anger and frustration that comes from the blocks. Tempering expectations even though it's not right, it doesn't feel right. I had to crash and burn several times to understand that that's what was happening. And it's learning how to identify when you're focusing your energy on the wrong direction and ending up harming yourself… I think burnout, given it's the same groups of folks that are putting on events and doing mutual aid… I've muted a lot of, especially on Twitter, just certain words because I'm so sick of like the trauma porn… I know I'm not the only one who feels that way.

While personal strategies are essential in managing one's own emotional wellness, they are simultaneously beneficial to one's organizational and relational capacity to contribute more productively to activism and to the collective care required to sustain that work (Elnakib & Turner, 2023; Kim & Schalk, 2021).

The radical potential of care stems in part from the development of networks of support that transform social movements into networks of care and survival (Elnakib & Turner, 2023; Kim & Schalk, 2021). Lorde (2017) conceptualizes networks of care as a means of self-preservation and survival in the political warfare of transformative social justice movements. Indeed, survival in the face of overwhelming social injustice relies on the experiences of marginalized activists and their "creative critical practices" or networks of care (Kim & Schalk, 2021).[10]

Participants' reflections also align with Hochschild's (1979, 1990, 2012) contention that emotional labour is not always a deflating experience insofar as it can also generate feelings of pleasure and gratification. Such sentiments were evident in one activist's reference to a memorial march for Anthony Aust, a 23-year-old who died when police violently raided an apartment during a no-knock search. Activist 17 states:

> I like the little moments of… real community care, togetherness and… healing – when that happens, I think it's so beautiful… We were very few on the streets, but it didn't feel like that because… we were having fun and chanting… celebrating Anthony altogether [with] moments when we could laugh and joke; we were playing some of his favourite songs. I like… when we're able to heal or practice self-love and care… Today obviously was a very emotional, traumatic day for the family, but we were able to celebrate Anthony and I thought that was so, so, so, so beautiful and that's the moments that… I really enjoyed because this work is really exhausting, very triggering; it's a lot of emotional labour. And when we're able to … find the joy in the pain, or… the joy in the suffering, it's beautiful for me to be a part of.

Interestingly, this activist's focus on joy parallels renowned civil rights activists Angela Davis' and Fania Davis Jordan's recollections of the "immense joy, and laughter and satisfaction" they felt when they "rebelled and resisted" (Davis et al., 2023, 25:00). When "having fun" was woven into the ways in which they challenged injustice, resistance became "occasions for expressions of joy" (Davis et al., 2023, 35:00), which helped sustain their activism over the long term (Elnakib & Turner, 2023; Gorski & Chen, 2015; Jacobsson & Lindblom, 2013; Kim & Schalk, 2021).

Post-event interactions also gave rise to opportunities for collective encouragement. Participants shed light on the intentionality underpinning activists' efforts to offer emotional sustenance in mutually supportive ways,

---

[10] While we agree with these contentions, by acknowledging that micro-level self-care strategies do not address the required structural transformations, we oppose neo-liberal conceptualizations that hold up self-care as an antidote to counteract systemic social injustices.

which helps prolong their commitment to anti-carceral work (Gorski, 2019). As Activist 17 explains,

> There have been moments where we've been all equally exhausted with stuff but have shown up for each other… sending each other food or… trying to take each other out to eat or… going over to each other's house to… be tired together… There's something really beautiful in wanting to be around each other and to… share… space and just want to be happy in whatever we're going through.

This account of extended communal support and its mutually reinforcing benefits illustrates the significant role that a community-care approach can play in prolonging activist engagement. In contrast to the literature's emphasis on how burnout results from one's in-movement (mis)treatment (Gorski, 2019; Rettig, 2006), our findings demonstrate how in-movement interactions can also mitigate burnout and help to manage emotions that may be personally or collectively stifling (Elnakib & Turner, 2023; Kim & Schalk, 2021). This point expands our understandings of "the richness of emotional experience[s]" and the complexities of emotional capacities, including those related to happiness in the context of activism (Cvetkovich, 2010, p. 6).

Conclusion

Our study provides a unique contribution to the broader scholarship on the challenges faced by social justice activists (Gorski & Chen 2015), and to the specific literature on the emotional labour of unpaid activism through the experiential accounts of anti-carceral organizing. While certain emotions, like anger, motivated participants to become involved in anti-carceral activism, other emotional effects, like burnout, were encountered as activists became increasingly involved in the movement. Participants experienced fatigue and strain in part due to their efforts to maintain their activist orientations in all aspects of their lives; this was particularly difficult for activists of colour for whom racism permeated their daily existence. Participants experienced emotional fatigue due to their intensified commitments and physical fatigue when these commitments were so overwhelming that they worked themselves to the point of exhaustion. Increased investment in emotional labour renders anti-carceral activists more susceptible to burnout and social isolation, which may lead some to lose hope in their work and to become cynical toward state institutions and systems. Such outcomes were particularly acute in instances in which justice was not achieved to their satisfaction (Gorski, 2019, p. 681).

Nevertheless, individualized forms of self-care and the creation of in-movement communities of care demonstrate the meaningful and mutually supportive ways that activists try to counteract the emotional impacts of anti-carceral work. Such a recognition constitutes a key contribution to the current literature, which tends to emphasize that emotions such as shock, anger, and grief provide the main, and sometimes the sole emotional motivation to sustain

activist involvement. Our participants also identified how in-movement-generated feelings of hope, healing, love, and joy are inspiring and sustaining both for activist engagement and the development of communities of care within the movement (Elnakib & Turner, 2023; Kim & Schalk, 2021; Rodriguez, 2022).

Our study demonstrates that the emotionally-taxing nature of activism and the mutually-enhancing support that activists provide for one another are markers of the exceptional level of emotional labour that activists invest to advance a more just society. Participants experienced both anger and joy in their anti-carceral work, meaning these emotions must be recognized as part of the collective force that activists mobilize to contest the logics of carceral power and resist carceral expansion. Reflecting literature that emphasizes self- and collective care strategies to mitigate activist-related burnout (Elnakib & Turner, 2023; Kim & Schalk, 2021; Wyatt & Ampadu, 2022), we show how emotional engagement can create collective strength, inspiring the creation of activist networks of care beyond a reliance on the carceral state (Spade, 2020). Communities of care are not only significant insofar as they motivate and sustain individual actors and provide supportive spaces for activism beyond the settler-colonial state; they also have the potential to address root causes of colonial and capitalist-based injustices on structural levels by demanding and modelling social justice (Spade, 2020). In this light, future studies should explore if and how such communities of care among activist groups contribute to structural change over time, and by extension how care and cooperation may serve as ongoing and evolving emotional motivations that sustain resistance and social justice efforts (Spade, 2020).

Acknowledgements

This research was funded by a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada Insight Development Grant, funding reference number 430-2019-0139.

References

Allen, J. A., & Augustin, T. (2021). So much more than cheap labor! Volunteers engage in emotional labor. *The Social Science Journal*, 1-17. https://doi.org/10.1080/03623319.2021.1900671

Benesch, S. (2020). Emotions and activism: English language teachers' emotion labor as responses to institutional power. *Critical Inquiry in Language Studies*, *17*(1), 26-41. https://doi.org/10.1080/15427587.2020.1716194

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in Psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, *3*(2), 77-101. https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2019). Reflecting on reflexive thematic analysis. *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise & Health*, *11*(4), 589-597. https://doi.org/10.1080/2159676X.2019.1628806

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2022). Conceptual and design thinking for thematic analysis. *Qualitative Psychology*, *9*(1), 3-26. https://doi.org/10.1037/qup0000196

Braun, V., Clarke, V., & Hayfield, N. (2015). Thematic analysis. In J. A. Smith (Ed.), *Qualitative psychology: A practical guide to research methods* (pp. 222-248). SAGE Publishing.

Brown, G., & Pickerill, J. (2009). Space for emotion in the spaces of activism. *Emotion, Space & Society*, *2*(1), 24-35. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.emospa.2009.03.004

Cvetkovich, A. (2010). Everyday feeling and its genres. In J. Staiger, A. Cvetkovich, & A. Reynolds (Eds.), *Political emotions: New agendas in communication* (pp. 4-12). Routledge.

Davis, A., Davis, F., & Burnham, M. (2023, January 23). "We can change things": Iconic civil rights activists share 7 decades of fighting injustice. *CBC News*. https://www.cbc.ca/radio/ideas/civil-rights-movement-racial-injustice-angela-davis-fania-burnham-1.6711977

Elnakib, M. M., & Turner, M. (2023). The power of activism as self-care: An autoethnography of the arrest of activists in the wake of the George Floyd protests. *Women & Therapy*, *46*(4), 391-406. https://doi.org/10.1080/02703149.2023.2286056

Felices-Luna, M., & Nault, G. (2023). Espaces urbains contestés: Activisme anti-carcéral dans la ville d'Ottawa. *Criminologie*, *56*(2), 247-270. https://doi.org/10.7202/1107605ar

Goodwin, J., Jasper, J. M., & Polletta, F. (2001). Introduction: Why emotions matter. In *Passionate politics: Emotions and social movements* (pp. 1-24). University of Chicago Press.

Gorski, P. C. (2019). Fighting racism, battling burnout: Causes of activist burnout in US racial justice activists. *Ethnic & Racial Studies, 42*(5), 667-687. https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2018.1439981

Gorski, P. C., & Chen, C. (2015). "Frayed all over": The causes and consequences of activist burnout among social justice education activists. *Educational Studies*, *51*(5), 385-405. https://doi.org/10.1080/00131946.2015.1075989

Gould, D. (2009). *Moving politics: Emotion and ACT UP's fight against AIDS*. University of Chicago Press.

Gross, J. J. (1999). Emotion and emotion-regulation. In L. A. Pervin & O. P. John (Eds.), *Handbook of personality: Theory and research* (pp. 525-552). Guilford Press.

Haidt, J. (2003). The moral emotions. In R. J. Davidson, K. R. Scherer, & H. H. Goldsmith (Eds.), *Handbook of affective sciences* (pp. 852-870). Oxford University Press.

Hochschild, A. R. (1979). Emotion work, feeling rules, and social structure. *American Journal of Sociology*, *85*(3), 551-575. https://doi.org/10.1086/227049

Hochschild, A. R. (1990). Ideology and emotion management: A perspective and path for future research. In T. D. Kemper (Ed.), *Research agendas in the sociology of emotions* (pp. 117-140). State University of New York Press.

Hochschild, A. R. (2012). *The managed heart.* University of California Press.

hooks, b. (1993). *Sisters of the yam: Black women and self-recovery*. South End Press.

Humphrey, N. M. (2022). Racialized emotional labor: An unseen burden in the public sector. *Administration & Society*, *54*(4), 741-758. https://doi.org/10.1177/00953997211037583

Hunt, S. C., & Young, N. L. (2021). Blending Indigenous sharing circle and Western focus group methodologies for the study of Indigenous children's health: A systematic review. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, *20*, 1-16. https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069211015112

Jacobsson, K., & Lindblom, J. (2013). Emotion work in animal rights activism: A moral-sociological perspective. *Acta Sociologica*, *56*(1), 55-68. https://doi.org/10.1177/0001699312466180

Kilty, J. M., & Orsini, M. (2024). Emotions and anti-carceral advocacy in Canada: "All of the anger this creates in our bodies is also a tool to kill us." *Policy & Politics*, *52*(1), 1-20. https://doi.org/10.1332/03055736Y2023D000000024

Kim, J. B., & Schalk, S. (2021). Reclaiming the radical politics of self-care: A crip-of-color critique. *South Atlantic Quarterly*, *120*(2), 325-342. https://doi.org/10.1215/00382876-8916074

Kleres, J., & Wettergren, Å. (2017). Fear, hope, anger, and guilt in climate activism. *Social Movement Studies*, *16*(5), 507-519. https://doi.org/10.1080/14742837.2017.1344546

Lavallée, L. F. (2009). Practical application of an Indigenous research framework and two qualitative Indigenous research methods: Sharing circles and Anishnaabe symbol-based reflection. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, *8*(1), 21-40. https://doi.org/10.1177/160940690900800103

Lee, L., & Madera, J. M. (2019). Faking it or feeling it: The emotional displays of surface and deep acting on stress and engagement. *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management*, *31*(4), 1744-1762. https://doi.org/10.1108/IJCHM-05-2018-0405

Lorde, A. (2017). *A burst of light: And other essays*. Ixia Press.

Maslach, C., & Gomes, M. E. (2006). Overcoming burnout. In R. M. MacNair (Ed.), *Working for peace: A handbook of practical psychology and other tools* (pp. 43-49). Impact Publishers.

Maynard, R. (2017). *Policing black lives: State violence in Canada from slavery to the present.* Fernwood Publishing.

Mesmer-Magnus, J. R., DeChurch, L. A., & Wax, A. (2012). Moving emotional labor beyond surface and deep acting: A discordance–congruence perspective. *Organizational Psychology Review*, *2*(1), 6-53. https://doi.org/10.1177/2041386611417746

Morris, V., Hussein, N., Gelbard, S., & Piché, J. (n.d.). Reimagining safety, advancing visions for a decarceral city: Dispatches from community organizers. *Progressivecity*. https://www.progressivecity.net/single-post/reimagining-safety-advancing-visions-for-a-decarceral-city-dispatches-from-community-organizers

Reger, J. (2004). Organizational "emotion work" through consciousness-raising: An analysis of a feminist organization. *Qualitative Sociology*, *27*(7), 205-222. https://doi.org/10.1023/B:QUAS.0000020693.93609.6c

Rettig, H. (2006). *The lifelong activist: How to change the world without losing your way*. Lantern Books.

Rodriguez, S. M. (2022). Caring in the classroom: The hidden toll of emotional labor of abolitionist scholar-activism. *Contemporary Justice Review*, *25*(3-4), 282-297. https://doi.org/10.1080/10282580.2023.2181287

Smith, A. (2017). Introduction: The revolution will not be funded. In INCITE! (Eds.), *The revolution will not be funded: Beyond the non-profit industrial complex* (pp.1-18). Duke University Press.

Spade, D. (2020). Solidarity not charity: Mutual aid for mobilization and survival. *Social Text*, *38*(1), 131-151. https://doi.org/10.1215/01642472-7971139

Srinivasan, A. (2018). The aptness of anger. *The Journal of Political Philosophy*, *26*(2), 123-144. https://doi.org/10.1111/jopp.12130

Thompson, D. (2017). An exoneration of black rage. *South Atlantic Quarterly*, *116*(3), 457-481. https://doi.org/10.1215/00382876-3961439

Ticktin, M. (2021). Building a feminist commons in the time of COVID-19. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture & Society, 47*(1), 37-46. https://doi.org/10.1086/715445

Williams, A. A., Bryant, Z., & Carvell, C. (2019). Uncompensated emotional labor, racial battle fatigue, and (in)civility in digital spaces. *Sociology Compass*, *13*(2), 1-12. https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.12658

Wyatt, J. P., & Ampadu, G. G. (2022). Reclaiming self-care: Self-care as a social justice tool for black wellness. *Community Mental Health Journal*, *58*(2), 213-221. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10597-021-00884-9