Social Justice Burnout: Engaging in Self-care While Doing Diversity Work

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**Summary of Dilemma**

Some scholar-activists find balancing personal and professional demands to be an attainable challenge; whether due to judicious and mature life management, personality, privilege, spiritual or religious guidance, sociocultural pressures and supports, or some combination thereof, some individuals can manage their workloads without toxic levels of stress. This chapter is not for them. It is for those of us who have bottomed-out, more than once, due to personal and professional over-commitment, fear, and mismanagement. It is for those of us who have teetered between the extremes of enmeshment with work and plans to entirely retreat from our careers. This chapter, we hope, will help social justice scholars suffering from burnout better understand the nature and prevalence of our condition and to begin to envision a way forward.

At the Nag’s Heart retreat that gave rise to this book, I (the first author, Asia), came prepared to discuss the dilemma of feeling unqualified in my diversity work, and the complications of doing work with oppressed populations from a position of privilege. In the last year, I had begun to question my legitimacy to discuss and engage with social justice research in the classroom, the community, and beyond. I felt like I was failing on multiple levels and I didn’t know what to do next. Many examples come to mind. In one instance, a colleague and I had written, and collected signatures on, a faculty statement asking our university administration to resist federal pressure to “out” undocumented students. This was shortly after Trump was elected President of the United States and he had promised to terminate Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA). We hand-delivered the letter to our university president and provost but never heard back. In another instance, a student[[1]](#footnote-2) texted me to say that border patrol agents were on campus, and asked for help investigating and problem-solving. I never got back to her and, when I saw her at a social justice march a few months later, I felt disgusted with myself. I was also feeling like an imposter for doing research on Latinx/Hispanic college students as a White woman at a Hispanic-Serving Institution. I wondered if I should try, at the very least, to get a Graduate Certificate in Latin American and Caribbean Studies. I felt like I was missing opportunities and letting people down left and right, and the collective actions I was involved with kept hitting dead ends.

I envisioned that sharing these issues with the Nag’s Heart group would result in some concrete suggestions such as improving my efficacy as a scholar-activist, or furthering my expertise in the feminist and critical race literature. I steadied myself for constructive criticism, and envisioned a raft of new work assignments to get me on the right course. Surprisingly, the scenario functioned as a canary in the coalmine, notifying my colleagues that I was on my way to burnout- a psychological syndrome consisting of exhaustion, depersonalization, and inefficacy due to chronic emotional and interpersonal job-related stress (Freudenberger & Richelson, 1980; Maslach, 1976). Instead of telling me to enroll in additional classes, or take on additional service positions, the Nag’s Hearters told me I was already working too hard or, at least, seeing my work in a skewed way. I was experiencing an undue and self-defeating level of personal disappointment and frustration.

Early in our experience at the Nag’s Heart retreat, I (second author, Leah) shared with Asia that I felt spread very thin in my life and work; for example, at the time of Nag’s Heart, I had accepted most of the diversity positions at my college, including: Faculty Fellow for Equity and Diversity Programs, Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies minor co-convener, director of a general education course on diversity and inequality (which included course development, assessment, and managing 35 sections of a course), and active membership in the Title IX committee, Diversity Action Committee, the Minority Faculty Staff Association, and the Faculty and Staff Pride Association. These positions formed merely a portion of my service, as I also heavily contributed to four non-diversity committees on campus and to national psychological associations, and served as a member of two editorial boards for academic journals.

Starting in 2016 and beyond, both campus and national climates in the U.S. made social justice activism feel more urgent to me than it had in the past. As a result, I started to place a tremendous amount of pressure on myself to engage in my diversity work and to carry heavy regret when I was unable to fulfill my commitments. For example, in one diversity position I held, I started what I had hoped would be a series of conversations among professional staff about the campus climate. But I only held the first session because I stepped down from the position after recognizing my overburdened schedule. Especially because that first conversation was very generative and folks expressed vulnerable moments of discrimination, I actively still experience guilt a year later. As a “solution” to avoid carrying the guilt of not following through with another initiative, I spread myself so thin across my commitments that I developed a chronic stress-induced health condition.

**Faculty Reflection**

Ultimately, the Nag’s Heart group counseled both of us to engage in this collaborative chapter on self-care and burnout. This process of writing and re-writing gave us the opportunity to learn about burnout in an academic sense, but also to engage in introspection about our motives and payoffs for overwork in the context of social justice and to reflect on what self-defined self-care might actually look like.

Given the personal nature of this topic, we begin with a short description of who we are and what led to our involvement in this work. I (Asia) am a White, heterosexual, cisgender, married woman with two small children, and I (Leah) am a White, queer/lesbian, cisgender woman, in a queer relationship, and I have two small children. As scholars, we both hold tenure-track/tenured positions in the psychology department at our universities, as well as core and affiliate appointments with a host of programs, departments, and centers. In ways both small and large, our involvement in social justice work as teachers, researchers, advocates, and mentors totals over twenty years each. Our engagement in social justice work includes efforts with communities we belong to (e.g., women, mothers, LGBTQ+), as well as allyship with communities we are not members of (e.g., Latinx people, women experiencing homelessness, Black women). Social justice work shapes our identities, blurring the fictional border between our ‘academic’ and ‘activist’ selves (Askins, 2009). Both inside and outside the classroom, we assume roles and responsibilities as social justice advocates and educators.

**Context and Intersectionality**

Both personal motives and systemic factors contribute to our burnout. Our own personal fulfillment in engaging in social justice work and our desire to be productive influence our workload. At the same time, institutional contexts increase our commitments and strain, particularly contexts that rely on our “expertise” as members of marginalized groups and ask us to perform unnecessary or unreasonable labor.

**Motivations for engaging in social justice work.** Researchers document numerous motives for engaging in diversity work (e.g., Russell, 2011), many which echo our own experiences. More obvious motives include the feeling of accomplishment that comes from improving practices and policies, the joy of sharing in students’ self-discovery and expansion, avoiding negative outcomes for ourselves and loved ones, the intrinsic pleasure of learning, and a sense of belonging and purpose. One of my (Asia's) main motivations is the joy of seeing students gain insights and empowerment through research on issues of power and oppression that affect them personally. From an outsider's perspective, my publication history may look a bit confused and disorganized, ranging from work on gay men employees to social class stigma to the sexual scripts of Hispanic college students. But I know what motivated each and every topic: the interests, needs, and expertise of a specific grad or undergrad student collaborator. And one of the most deeply meaningful outcomes of diversity work for me (Leah) is witnessing the moment when students, faculty, and/or staff gain a true and deep awareness of the lived experiences of a systemically marginalized group for the first time. Their palpable shift towards critical awareness and motivation to engage in social action drives my passion to continue this work.

At the same time, latent motives driving our work can lead to over-commitment and burnout (Gorski, 2018): personal resentments, guilt, the desire to be “productive” or worthy, the knowledge that the voluntary selection of social justice involvements is itself a privilege, and the irrational fear that the success of some movement or action rests solely on our shoulders. For example, one challenge I (Asia) experience in stepping back from work is the knowledge that retreating to my spacious and safe suburban home is not an option for many others. Also, I (Leah) experience painful choices over nurturing social justice work versus nurturing my own children. When I engage in institutional activism at the end of the work day, I wrestle with whether or not to devote my limited remaining time to caring for my children. I know that this choice is a privilege, in that I can choose to walk away from the work, but others cannot choose to walk away from systemic inequities. I also know that my children miss me terribly.

**Marginalized identities.** Aside from personal motives, systemic factors lead those who do diversity work to experience over-commitment and/or burnout. For example, diversity work in university settings relies heavily on the volunteer efforts of already marginalized and undervalued scholars and students. In addition, faculty hires and other committees disproportionally ask marginalized scholars to serve as stand-ins for a “diversity perspective” and to provide the checks and balances on campus climate (Ahmed, 2012), which result in systemically overburdening marginalized faculty (Hirshfield & Joseph, 2012). Thus, when overly relying on those personally affected by diversity issues to do this labor, universities support and maintain the systemic inequalities these efforts intend to address.

**Gratuitous labor.** Few structural incentives (e.g., promotions or bonuses) exist for serving on diversity and inclusion committees, for infusing social justice into one’s syllabi, or for mentoring underrepresented students (O’Meara, 2016). For example, I (Asia) was on 27 dissertation committees during my time on the tenure track, in large part to speak to issues of gender, race, power, and oppression present in the dissertation content. As an untenured professor, I was also a founding, six-year member of my university’s Strategies and Tactics for Recruiting to Improve Diversity and Excellence (STRIDE) committee, which worked to increase the hiring, retention, and promotion of underrepresented faculty through institutional change. These efforts, which were an order of magnitude greater than average, did not translate into comparable professional rewards, making them unpaid (albeit internally-rewarding) labor.

In addition, activist work related to social issues involves substantial emotional labor, or managing one’s and others’ emotions as part of one’s work-related responsibilities (Hochschild, 1983). Emotional labor leads to energy depletion and emotional exhaustion- core elements of burnout. This burden can lead to a sense of isolation from mainstream society (Kovan & Dirkx, 2003), especially if activists experience backlash when they engage in their efforts (Gorski, 2018; see Wagner & Garrett-Walker, this volume). Given my high levels of activism, I (Leah) worry that others will only see me as causing trouble, and, at times, I feel isolated from those who are not directly involved in this work. Furthermore, strain from diversity work compounds other daily stressors that I experience. For example, due to the fact that I cannot be out about some of elements of my identity, I regularly experience strain from actively concealing elements of my lived experience. Activists who belong to marginalized communities often contend with activist burnout as well as “battle fatigue,” which results from facing personal prejudice and discrimination on a daily basis (Quaye et al., 2017; see also Rios et al., this volume).

Finally, members of social justice circles tend to engage in self-martyrdom, where denial of self-care becomes a part of the culture of activism (Gorski & Chen, 2015; Plyler, 2006; Rodgers, 2010). In an examination of burnout among Amnesty International workers, for example, Rodgers (2010) found that workers perceived burnout as an expected sacrifice as part one’s devotion to the cause. They also perceived displays of personal strain as self-indulgent and reported an absence of open discussions about burnout. In the past, I (Leah) participated in this culture by not sharing experiences of burnout with colleagues and by not communicating burnout when taking on new diversity responsibilities.

Taken together, due to intrapersonal, systemic, and cultural factors, scholar-activists who do social justice work are vulnerable to burnout. Burnout can result in poor physical and psychological health (Ahola et al., 2017), strained partners, coworkers and relationships, and reduced work performance (Bakker et al., 2004). Activist burnout also threatens the success of social justice movements more generally (Gorski, 2018; Gorski & Chen, 2015).

**Best Practices**

To address the burnout we describe in our dilemmas, we reflect on self-care strategies at the individual, social, and institutional levels. For us, the word “self-care” first conjured images of hand-waiving system-justification, as corporations and governments have successfully co-opted the term “self-care” to increase profit and to off-load responsibility for the welfare of citizens, respectively (Ward, 2015). Today’s celebrity corporate shills eagerly define self-care as a superficial and commercial endeavor (e.g., “the new Aveeno™ hydrating facial”; Gilbert, 2017). Yet the concept of self-care has deep and radical roots and it is necessary for scholar-activists to continue their work (Nadal, 2017).

**Defining self-care.** The term “self-care,” contrary to our first reactions, actually derives from 20th century literatures in philosophy and medicine. Today, scholars generally define self-care as “engagement in behaviors that support health and well-being” (Lee & Miller, 2013, p. 96) that can prevent and reduce burnout, as well as empower individuals to appreciate and promote their own health in various arenas (e.g., physical, psychological, social, spiritual, and professional health). Scholars disagree, however, over whether to conceptualize self-care as a process or as set of activities and skills (Dorociak et al., 2017; Lee & Miller, 2013).

Current research on self-care in the context of job-related burnout focuses on those in high-stress human service occupations, such as doctors, therapists, and social workers. Professional self-care in these contexts consists of a balance between work and other life arenas, and can include participation in professional development, receipt and cultivation of professional support, and cognitive strategies to manage challenges (Dorociak et al., 2017). At the individual level, self-care can take the form of asking for help, taking vacations, spending time with friends, engaging in physical activities, getting adequate sleep, and slowing down (Adler et al., 2017). At the relational and group level, self-care includes sharing stories, normalizing reactions, encouraging others, witnessing, ‘caring with,’ and using humor (Adler et al., 2017; Lopez & Gillespie, 2016).

Self-care, as it relates to activist work, includes the additional recognition that one’s work occurs in a societally oppressive context. Thus, beyond neo-liberal notions of self-care, which hold the individual solely responsible for and capable of caring for herself (Ward, 2015), care for the self serves as an act of resistance against oppressive systems (Lorde, 1988). For example, in their podcast Morris and Wortham (2017) described activist self-care as a means “…to actively push back against systems that break you down and institutional ways of not being cared for.” Thus, activist self-care includes all actions taken to restore and support vitality and balance in a system designed to deplete activists and discourage activism (Lorde, 1988). In an issue of *The Clinical Psychologist*, Norcross (2009) describes self-care as “sharpening the saw” (p. 1), a corrective action essential for sustained effectiveness over time. Indeed, in our estimation, self-care goes beyond remediation by amplifying one’s strength and precision in future social justice work.

For scholar-activists, we group our recommendations for engaging in self-care into three levels: individual, social, and institutional.

**Individual self-care**. Self-care at the individual level includes the ways scholar-activists change their own behaviors to engage in better safekeeping of one’s mind, body, and spirit. For example, by engaging in mindfulness, scholar-activists gain active and purposeful awareness of the present environment. Gorski (2015) found that mindfulness practices helped activists reduce burnout by decreasing the pressure to address all social injustice immediately, reducing the stress and anxiety that result from activism, and reducing guilt for engaging in self-care. Although these may be helpful to some, we qualify recommendations of self-care at the individual level with the acknowledgment that some require economic advantage (e.g., high-quality healthcare, vacations, and fitness memberships; Plyler, 2006), and replicate oppressive practices (Gorski, 2015) and will thus not be available or healthy for all. For example, economically-privileged White people in the US have appropriated yoga and meditation in the name of self-care. Activists should engage in acts of self-care that are critically-oriented and draw explicit connections between self and community (see Gorski, 2015).

For those who are used to doing for others and not themselves, this may be easier said than done. For example, inspired by this chapter, I (Asia) endeavored to practice individual self-care by starting a bi-annual self-care day for my research lab. On one occasion, I purchased watercolors and canvases for lab members, who painted and had snacks on the university lawn. Colleagues from Nag’s Heart, however, helped me to see that this activity did not meet the definition of individual self-care; I did not get to tend to my own wants and needs on these days. Instead, I spent time organizing the day for others, consistent with a social or collective form of self-care, which we will describe below. Based on a colleague’s suggestion, my new individual self-care tactic is to ask myself “do I want to do this, or do I feel that I should?” before agreeing to engagements, to facilitate awareness of whether the activity promotes individual self-care.

**Social movement self-care**. In addition to promoting one’s own welfare, scholar-activists can encourage self-care within their social movements. Despite the culture of self-martyrdom, research suggests that activists long for spaces to discuss burnout openly and without judgment (Gorski & Chen, 2015). To change this culture, activists can demonstrate that self-care facilitates social justice goals. For example, activists can explain that self-care challenges dominant cultures of the Protestant Work Ethic, which emphasize self-sacrificing, workaholism, and individualistic success at the expense of others (Gorski & Chen, 2015). As a challenge to the Protestant Work Ethic, activists could emphasize the need to slow down and address one’s needs, while promoting an environment in which all activists meet their self-care needs. For example, during a months-long social justice effort in my hometown, the other activists and I (Leah) took turns providing space for each other to reclaim neglected elements of our lives that we had put aside (e.g., time with children, exercise, leisure). Part of this effort involved simply validating for each other that we deserve to take time for these elements of our lives. We also slowed down our efforts and took turns with responsibilities, which involved the hard work of recognizing that our goals would take longer to achieve. Activists can pair this frame with explaining that self-martyrdom places an extra burden on marginalized people and corresponds with increased turnover and other negative consequences for groups (e.g., Rodgers, 2010).

**Institutional self-care**. The last level of scholar-activists’ self-care occurs at the institutional level, which involves implementing policies and actions within organizations. Institutions, such as colleges, universities, and professional organizations, should take responsibility for understanding burnout as a workplace hazard, and proactively take steps to ensure the well-being of their workers (Maslach, 2017). Indeed, a recent meta-analysis found that individually-focused interventions were not sufficient to alleviate severe burnout (Ahola et al., 2017). Institutional solutions include creating self-care events on campus, such as holistic health assessments or paid work breaks, and making space so that workers receive protected time in which to participate in such activities during the workday.

Institutions can also support self-care of workers, by preventing burnout in the first place. In particular, institutions can address the practice of overburdening those who engage in diversity work, particularly the volunteer efforts of marginalized scholars and students (Ahmed, 2012; Hirshfield & Joseph, 2012). To do so, institutions should 1) engage in efforts to better distribute diversity and related service responsibilities across campus (O’Meara, 2016); 2) better value community-engaged scholarship (e.g., O’Meara et al., 2015); and 3) promote an institutional culture where colleagues support each other’s activist scholarship efforts (e.g., Lopez & Gillespie, 2016). In addition, institutions must find ways to measure and reward activist and community work. This may include course releases, valuing activist work as service, and rewarding diversity work at different stages of career development, such as during the promotion and tenure process (Quaye et al., 2017). In addition, scholars can advocate for institutional change by writing about the challenges and opportunities inherent to social justice teaching, and sharing that writing (such as this chapter) with stakeholders who have influence over faculty workloads. At the moment, I (Asia) am Lead Guest Editor for an issue of *American Psychologist* on “public psychology,” soliciting papers that describe how community-engaged scholarship involves unique challenges and opportunities across all domains of psychological work. We hope to include papers in the issue that examine how a public psychology framework challenges normative models of hiring, promotion, and evaluation, both inside and outside of academia, and suggests new ways forward. Published papers on this topic are one step towards legitimizing our work at the institutional level.

Efforts at structural change could also take the form of advocating for policies to reduce burnout. These efforts could take place at many levels, including at one’s university, relevant consortiums and societies, and/or with local and national representatives. For example, most universities have policies for maintaining fair and equitable workloads. These policies outline opportunities for workload amendments for faculty in response to graduating Ph.D. students, mentoring honors theses, receiving grants, publishing books, or other activities. Faculty who are engaged in social justice work may consider proposing amendments to their workload assignment policies that help recognize their contributions to service and engagement through workload shifts.

Although scholar-activists argue that institutions must facilitate self-care and reduce risks for burnout, an implicit dilemma in this argument concerns how to encourage institutions to do so without creating further responsibilities (and therefore more burnout) for scholar-activists to facilitate these institutional changes. One solution requires allied scholars to take the lead and step in for those from marginalized groups. Additionally, those already in administrative positions should develop their awareness of scholarship on systemic factors involved in burnout and self-care and use their positions and power to incentivize structural change. By the same token, administrators should recognize burnout as a campus climate concern and integrate solutions into diversity strategic plans. Scholar-activists’ considerations of whether to add this further institutional activism should abide by the same principles as any other form of activism: that scholar-activists permit themselves to set limits on their responsibilities, that self-care is necessary and not self-indulgence, and that, before taking on more responsibilities, scholar-activists should consider whether the activism is personally nourishing or whether it sets one on the path for burnout.

**Conclusion**

As for ourselves, we persist on the path to expanding our identities as scholar-activists to include recurring self-care at personal, social, and institutional levels. As social justice work remains a marathon, not a sprint, engaging in self-care helps to ensure our sustained efforts. Moreover, practicing self-care enables us to model a more sustainable life as scholar-activists for our students and mentees, who must be willing and able to carry this work into the future. Finally, by sharing the workload with our social movements, allies, and administrators, we will expand our impact, reach and recruit additional allies and activists, and share the fulfillment that comes from using scholarship to improve the lives of oppressed people and groups around the globe.

**Resources**

Gorski, P. C. (2015). Relieving burnout and the “martyr syndrome” among social justice education activists: The implications and effects of mindfulness. *The Urban Review, 47*(4), 696-716. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11256-015-0330-0

This resource offers research on the benefits of mindfulness on relieving activist burnout, while also contextualizing mindfulness within U.S. colonialist practices of coopting yoga and meditation and addressing neo-liberal tendencies to value the self in terms of productivity.

Plyler, J. (2009). How to keep on keeping on: Sustaining ourselves in community organizing and social justice struggles. *Upping the Anti, 3*, 123-134.

In this resource, Plyler interviews several longtime activists on the factors that sustained them through decades of social justice work, providing solutions both at the individual and the community/movement levels.

Nag’s Heart. (n.d.). https://www.nagsheart.com/

Nag’s Heart is a collective that organizes small-scale conferences to “replenish the feminist spirit” (Nag’s Heart, n.d.). These conferences emphasize self-care within social justice contexts, particularly for (but not limited to) individuals in higher education contexts.

Ortiz, N. (2018). *Sustaining spirit: Self-care for social justice.* Reclamation Press.

Drawing from her Mestiza community’s spiritual traditions, Ortiz provides both reflections on self-care and concrete strategies for activists in social justice movements.

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1. We have made every effort to protect the identities and maintain confidentiality of students and anyone else involved in the examples shared within our chapter. We refrained from using descriptions that could individually identify a person. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)