"WE HAVE NOTHING TO LOSE BUT OUR CHAINS": ACTIVIST
SUSTAINABILITY FOR BLACK WOMEN AND GENDER NON-BINARY RACIAL
JUSTICE ACTIVISTS IN THE BLACK LIVES MATTER MOVEMENT

by

Kalia D. Harris
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"We Have Nothing to Lose but Our Chains": Activist Sustainability for Black Women and Gender Non-binary Racial Justice Activists in the Black Lives Matter Movement

A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts at George Mason University

by

Kalia D. Harris
Bachelor of Science
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Spring Semester 2019
George Mason University
Fairfax, VA

DEDICATION

This is dedicated to those whose lives were taken by U.S. police violence and white supremacy:
Michael Brown
Travyon Martin
Natasha McKenna
Sandra Bland
Freddie Gray
Vonderitt Myers
Mya Hall
Aiyana Stanley

… and countless others. Your lives have inspired so many of us to act.

This is dedicated to each and every Black Lives Matter activist.

I dedicate this thesis to the Black women who paved the way for me:
Tyesha Harris, Katie Mozzelle Preston, Denise Harris, Gail Harvey, Gayle Junius, Emma Robinson

...and to the Ferguson community. For standing up and speaking out when you could have stayed inside. Your anger and passion sparked a movement. I will be forever grateful.

To young Black activists and scholars, our voices matter. Our lives matter.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

BFSD .... Black Feminist Sustainability Development Theory
BLM ....Black Lives Matter
BFP .... Black Feminist Possibility (theory)
BQBF ....Black Quare Battle Fatigue
BYP 100 ....Black Youth Project 100
RBF ....Racial Battle Fatigue
QBF .... Queer Battle Fatigue

ABSTRACT

"WE HAVE NOTHING TO LOSE BUT OUR CHAINS": ACTIVIST
SUSTAINABILITY FOR BLACK WOMEN AND GENDER NON-BINARY RACIAL
JUSTICE ACTIVISTS IN THE BLACK LIVES MATTER MOVEMENT

Kalia D. Harris, MAIS

George Mason University, 2019

Thesis Director: Dr. Wendi Manuel-Scott

This study focused on the obstacles that Black women and gender non-binary racial
justice activists (ages 18-32) face to their full participation in Black Lives Matter
activism and the ways that they sustain themselves. Using a phenomenological approach,
interviews were conducted with five Black women and gender non-binary racial justice
activists in the Black Lives Matter movement to examine how they got involved in BLM
activism, what obstacles they face to their full participation in activism, and what self-
care strategies they use to sustain themselves within their activism. The findings of this
study support Black feminist scholarship and expand upon understandings of activist
burnout by confirming that Black queer activists experience racial battle fatigue. This
study challenges current literature on racial battle fatigue and activist burnout, suggesting
that the simultaneous and interlocking systems of racism, sexism, homophobia, and
heterosexism must be included in any analysis of burnout.

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

"It is our duty to fight for our freedom.
It is our duty is win.
We must love each other and support each other.
We have nothing to lose but our chains."
-Assata Shakur, Assata: An Autobiography

The Movement for Black Lives is a grassroots racial justice movement that is rooted in the collective and individual experiences of Black people in the United States and all over the world (Clayton, 2018; Garza, 2017; Shor, 2015). Often referred to as the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, it both illuminates and encourages active resistance to the continued dehumanization and mistreatment of Black people through systemic racism, namely state violence (Clayton, 2018; Garza, 2017; Shor, 2015). The movement, which is an overarching ideology with many organizational components (including over 40 chapters worldwide), was founded by three Black queer women: Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi (Clayton, 2018; Garza, 2017). Both within and outside of racial justice organizations, Black women racial justice activists have been leading the way from the streets to college campuses to the hallowed halls of our nation's judicial and legislative bodies. However, these activists face challenges to their full participation in racial justice activism (Corrigal-Brown, C., Snow, D., Quist, T., & Smith, K., 2009; Gorski 2018a; McAdam, 1986).

Racial justice activists of color face many unique obstacles pertaining to their activism, such as racism from their white counterparts, activist burnout, and systemic racism and sexism in their everyday lives (Gorski, 2018a; Gorski, 2018b; Gorski & Chen, 2015; Gorski & Erakat, 2019). The specific challenges that Black women racial justice activists, ages 18-32, face within the Black Lives Matter movement must be critically examined in order to increase their ability to create sustainability practices as activists.

Background

Following in a centuries' long tradition of engaging in racial justice work, many Black women, particularly queer and LGBTIA+ women, have been on the frontlines of the Black Lives Matter movement (Stor, 2015). Racial justice activists of color face challenges with everyday structural racism (oftentimes referred to as "living while Black") both inside and outside of their activism (Gabbidon & Peterson, 2006; Gorksi, 2018a). Feminist activists of color in feminist movements have described struggles with white feminists' co-option of their work (hooks, 1984; Jonsson, 2016) as well as struggles within activist spaces that cater to white feminist's feelings rather than adequately addressing anti-Black, anti LGBTQIA+ practices of activists (Srivastava, 2006).

Since its origins in 2013 following the acquittal of George Zimmerman for the murder of Travyon Martin, the Black Lives Matter movement has focused primarily on systemic racism, state violence, and the dehumanization of Black people. Co-founded by three Black women, the international organization has grown to over forty chapters in total (Garza, 2017). The deaths of Michael Brown, Sandra Bland, Freddie Gray, and

Natasha McKenna inspired many people to act. Garnering the attention of the mainstream media, Black Lives Matter utilized both online and offline techniques to engage in disruptive and oftentimes direct-action tactics against racial injustice. They effectively used the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter to solicit attention and engagement on social media platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook.

Significance

Scholars have begun to examine the history of the Black Lives Matter movement (Altman, 2015; Chernega, 2016; Ince, Rojas & Davis, 2017; Lebron, 2017); how activists are differently policed based on their identities (Davenport, 2011), how activists are using social media to engage in public discourse about race and justice (Clayton, 2016; Demby, 2015; Ince et al., 2017), and how black racial justice organizers are utilizing a black queer, feminist lens within their activism (Carruthers, 2019). Clayton (2016) examined the historical significance of the Black Lives Matter movement and conducted a historical comparative analysis with the Civil Rights and Black Power movements. Chernega (2016) focused on the origins of the movement, racialized policing of Black communities (generally) and Black activists (specifically), and the impact of the movement on the 2016 presidential election through a comparative analysis with former movements for Black liberation in the United States. Ince and colleagues (2017) examined the history of the movement and how the way that activists used social media to frame a movement narrative. The existing scholarship on the Black Lives Matter movement acknowledges that Black queer women and gender non-binary folks founded and lead the movement, but there is limited scholarship regarding the lived experiences of these activists.

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Carruthers (2019) details through a Black, queer feminist lens the ways in which Black Lives Matter activists are engaging in their activism. Scholarship that critically examines and illuminates the specific lived experiences of Black women activists, both cisgender and transgender, and gender non-binary individuals the Black Lives Matter movement is just emerging. As a result, the experiences of these individuals are significantly misunderstood. However, the experiences of Black women activists are quite different from that of their male and masculine identified peers and must be investigated as such. This study aims to fill the lacuna in the scholarship on Black women and non-binary racial justice activists in the Black Lives Matter movement by centering and critically examining the obstacles these activists' experiences as it pertains their racial justice activism, as well as their activist sustainability practices.

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to examine obstacles that Black women and non-binary racial justice activists face within the within the BLM movement and the ways that they sustain themselves. The following four research questions informed the structure of the phone interviews with five Black women and gender non-binary racial justice activists.

1. What obstacles do Black women and non-binary activists face that prevent them from full participation in their racial justice activism?

2. Has their participation in activism had any particularly negative impact on their well-being?

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3. What keeps Black women racial justice activists engaged in their activism?

4. What benefits do Black women racial justice activists receive from their activism? What inspires them to keep going?

This study is situated within scholarship on activist sustainability and activist burnout, and its impact on racial justice activists, specifically. Research on the Black Lives Matter movement is incorporated in order to understand the historical context of the movement, as well as to better understand the activists' involvement and engagement in the movement.

Theoretical Framework

Black feminism is a theoretical framework that recognizes that the ways in which Black women experience their identities (such as race, class, gender and gender expression, and sexuality) and the ways that they participate in their race work are deeply interconnected. The genesis of contemporary Black feminism was articulated by the Combahee River Collective in the "Black Feminist Statement" as one that is inherently connected to movements for liberation of all Black people (Combahee River Collective, 1995). Scholar Patricia Hill-Collins (1995) calls on us to see Black women's contributions as distinct and inherently valuable. Hill-Collins (1995) asserts "Black women's political and economic status provides them with a distinctive set of experiences that offers a different view of material reality than that available to other groups" (p. 339). Within that, it is important to note that experiences of Black women politically and economically are not monolithic. As such, Black women are able to

engage and participate in politics and race work differently depending on their identities and access to resources. Hill-Collins pays homage to the everyday Black women who engaged in acts of daily resistance in order to create a foundation for more visible Black feminist activism (Hill-Collins, 1995, p. 339). This differentiation can be seen in the multitude of ways that Black women have expressed their political activism relative to their class, gender identity, enslaved status, and sexual orientation, among other identities throughout our history in the United States.

Participants in this study represent the multiplicity of identities that Black women racial justice activists in the United States possess. Several terms will be used to describe the young Black women racial justice activists and their experiences. Recognizing the complexity of the fullness of Black women's identities and gender fluidity, the term "Black women" will include cis-gender, transgender women, as well as gender non-binary individuals who have previously identified as a Black woman within their racial justice activism. This is a complicated and debated topic in both academia and activist communities. Gender, Organizational, and Queer studies scholarship has explored the dynamic, multiplicitous, and fluid nature of gender, rejecting the gender binary of masculinity tied to maleness and femininity tied to femaleness, or woman-ness (Butler, 1988; Linstead & Brewis, 2004; Linstead & Pullen, 2006). Feminist scholar Judith Butler depicts gender performativity as one that is informed by one's needs for survival in a compulsory heterosexual society (Butler, 1988). In understanding gender fluidity theory and the process of becoming that is associated with gender expression, we can

contextualize the experiences of gender non-binary individuals who have previously identified as Black women.

Black feminist scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991) expanded the framework of Black feminism by introducing the concept of "intersectionality" to describe how Black women's layered identities as both women and Black people of color are marginalized (within discourse and larger discourse) and inextricably linked to one another. These identities derive from social relations, history, and interlocking operations of systems of power (Combahee River Collective, 1995; Crenshaw, 1991; Davis, 1995; Harris-Perry, 2011; Hill Collins, 1995). There is a distinction between "Black woman's standpoint" (how Black women think and what they do) and "Black feminist thought" (Hill Collins, 1995). Black feminist thought stems from Black women's consciousness of overlapping oppressions (racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class) based on identity (Combahee River Collective, 1995; Hill Collins, 1995; Lorde, 1995). King (1988) refers to how Black women develop and navigate a "multiple consciousness" as it relates to this intersection of racism, sexism, and classism in their lives (p. 32).

Unlike eurocentric masculinist approaches to knowledge-validation, Black feminism recognizes knowledge from "everyday" Black women as valid sources of intellect (Cooper, 2017; Davis, 1995; Hill Collins, 1995; May, 2014). Black feminist epistemological approach asserts that surviving in a violent society is an act of resistance (Clarke, 1995). The experiences of Black feminist scholars illustrate how rearticulating a Black women's standpoint through Black feminist thought can be suppressed by a hetero-cis-white-male controlled knowledge-validation process (Cooper, 2017; Lorde, 1995).

Katherine McKittrick (2006) asserts that sites of resistance exist as oppositional geographies to the geographies of domination. In her book, *Demonic Grounds*, McKittrick (2006) asserts that Black women's lives, histories, and experiences exist within these oppositional geographies of resistance. It is precisely within these geographies of resistance that Black women have imagined the impossible and generated possibility through their historic traumas and pain.

The Anna Julia Cooperian approach to conceptualizing Black feminist thought requires a "commitment to seeing the Black female body as a form of possibility" and centering it as a means to "cathect Black social thought" (Cooper, 2017 p.3; May, 2014). This is commitment to seeing Black women's bodies and experiences is what I term "Black Feminist Possibility theory". Black Feminist Possibility theory is critical to understanding why Black woman-identified activists persist in their activism despite obstacles, by reimagining the Black female body as a site of creation, possibility, and resistance. There are three tenets of Black Feminist Possibility theory: politics of respectability, culture of dissemblance, and using community organizing as a method of resistance (Cooper, 2017). First, Black women have engaged in the politics of respectability. Politics of respectability, a term coined by scholar Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham (1993), is a self-presentation strategy deployed by Black women to distance themselves from stereotypes of Black women along the boundaries of race, gender, and class to way to fit in with society (Camp, 2002; Cooper, 2017; Higginbotham, 1993; White, 2001). Second, Black women have used the "culture of dissemblance", described by Darlene Clark Hine (1995) as a "cult of secrecy" by which

Black women could mask the innermost portions of their lives from the public eye (Clark Hine, 1995; Cooper, 2017). Third, Black women have historically used community organizing as a method of resistance. From utilizing overt and covert resistance tactics during enslavement (Camp, 2002) to organizing in the Civil Rights and Black Power movements (Greene, 2016), Black women activists have always been a crucial part of Black liberation movements (Curry, 2012; Harris-Perry, 2011).

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

<u>Black Lives Matter Movement</u>

The Black Lives Matter movement is a contemporary racial justice movement in the United States that can be traced back to its origins in August of 2014 after Michael Brown was murdered by Ferguson police officer Darren Wilson (Altman, 2015; Clayton, 2018; Garza, 2017; Taylor, 2016). While the death of Travyon Martin and subsequent acquittal of Darren Wilson is where the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter originated, the Black Lives Matter movement garnered significant public attention after the death of Michael Brown (Altman, 2015; Taylor, 2016). Black Lives Matter activists began disrupting campaign events during the 2016 presidential election and questioning political candidates on matters of race (Altman, 2015; Garza 2017; Taylor 2016), created grassroots organizing campaigns focusing on justice for victims of police brutality (Altman, 2015; Taylor, 2016), and bringing attention to intersection of racism and police brutality in the United States (Dreir, 2015, Shor, 2015).

The #BlackLivesMatter hashtag was made popular on social media networks by those responding to the non-indictment of George Zimmerman for the murder of 17-year old Travyon Martin in Florida (Ince et al., 2017; Cobb, 2016; Day, 2015; Taylor, 2016). Since then, the movement has garnered a massive social media response, including high levels of online engagement from online users and other activists on mediums such as

Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook (Demby, 2015; Ince et al., 2017; Ross, 2015). Further, scholars have examined the use of social media by activists as an educational information source (Cox, 2017). One of the unique aspects of this racial justice movement its use of social media to engage larger audiences (Demby, 2015).

While the movement has largely focused on police brutality, it addresses a variety of different issues that affect Black people such as educational and economic inequalities (Day, 2016), housing discrimination (Taylor, 2016), and the ongoing dehumanization through systemic racism and oppression (Clayton, 2016; Day, 2015; Taylor, 2016). As a largely decentralized movement, each chapter focuses on addressing different issues that impact communities on the ground. In the District of Columbia, there are Black Lives Matter campaigns focused on decriminalizing sex work and access to healthy food (Black Youth Project [BYP100], 2019); the Bay Area has campaigns focused on gentrification and displacement (Maharawal, 2017); and Chicago has campaigns focused on ending youth incarceration and political corruption (Black Lives Matter Chicago, 2019; Hinton, 2018). Out of what was for some just a passing moment, Black queer women racial justice activists saw possibility and seized the opportunity to build a movement that would galvanize others to action. Sites of oppression such as Ferguson, Washington D.C., the Bay Area, and Chicago have been transformed into sites of resistance by Black women who used their bodies as sources of possibility and creation.

Activist Burnout and Racial Battle Fatigue

Black queer women activists have been transforming sites of oppression into sites of resistance and possibility. Audre Lorde depicts this possibility as one that comes out of a need for survival (Lorde, 1984). Activists who are engaged in this work over a long period of time experience adverse effects such as activist burnout and racial battle fatigue.

Activist Burnout

The concept of activist burnout was initially articulated Freudenberger (1974) who first described "vocational burnout" as not just a state of temporary fatigue or exasperation, but a chronic and debilitating condition that threatens persistence (Gorski 2018a). This definition has since been expanded upon by other social justice scholars who explore a multitude of social justice perspectives to conceptualize activist burnout theory (Bernal, 2006; Gorski, 2018a; Gorski & Chen, 2015; Gorski & Erakat, 2019). As Gorski (2018a) explains, activist burnout has been defined by Rettig (2006) as "the involuntarily leaving activism or reducing one's activism", which has the potential to destabilize social justice movements over the long haul (p. 16).

Social justice activists face unique struggles such as state violence in retaliation to their activism (Cox 2011; Gorski 2018a; Gorski & Erakat, 2019; Jones 2007), unequal power dynamics within movements (Plyler, 2006), and deep emotional connections to their activism that increase their chances of burning out (Gorski 2018a; Gorski & Erakat, 2019; Maslach & Gomes, 2006). Research by Gorski and Erakat (2019) and Gorski (2018a) showed that the activists experienced burnout as a result of a deep sense of

responsibility to social justice, and physical and economic vulnerability as a result of their activism. As such, causes of activist burnout has been theorized around three main tenets: internal causes of burnout, such as deep commitment to social justice (Gorski, 2018a; Maslach & Gomes, 2006), increased awareness of social justice issues (Gorski, 2018b; Maslach & Gomes, 2006), and internal pressures that activists put on themselves (Gorski, 2018a; Gorski & Chen, 2015; Gorski & Erakat, 2019; Rodgers, 2010); external causes of burnout such as threats of state retaliation (Cox, 2011; Gorski, 2018a; Gorski & Erakat, 2019; Jones, 2007); and in-movement causes of burnout such as in-fighting (Barry & Dordević, 2007; Gorski, 2018a) and marginalization within movement spaces (Gorski, 2018a).

Racial Battle Fatigue

Racial justice activists of color face challenges with everyday structural racism (such as "living while Black") both inside and outside of their activism (Gabbidon & Peterson, 2006; Gorksi, 2018a). Decades of scholarship demonstrate the measurable impacts of institutional racism on the overall health of people of color over time (Arnold, Crawford, & Khalifa, 2016; Gorski 2018b; Smith, 2004; Smith, Allen, & Danley, 2007; Smith, Hung, & Franklin, 2012). Racial Battle Fatigue is defined as the accumulative impact of experiencing institutional racism while simultaneously fighting cumulative lifetimes of racial macro and microaggressions (Gabbidon & Peterson, 2006; Gorski, 2018b; Smith et al., 2011; Smith, Yosso, & Solórzano, 2006). Racial battle fatigue presents through symptoms like depression, insomnia, stress and anxiety, and

hypertension that can be fatal when left untreated (Gabbidon & Peterson, 2006; Gorski, 2018b; Smith, et al., 2006, p. 301; Watkins, Green, Rivers, & Rowell, 2006).

A study of Oaxqueñas activists leading indigenous Mexican women's resistance to neoliberalism (Talcott, 2014) showed that engagement in racial justice activism is directly related to and motivated by experiences with trauma due to oppression. This notion has been supported by Szymanski and Lewis (2015) who studied 269 Black racial justice activists and found that those who experienced high levels of racial injustice are more likely to participate in activism than those who experience lower levels. Davenport, Soule and Armstrong (2011) coined the term "protesting while Black" based on their study of 15,000 protest events in the United States which showed that Black activists were more likely to draw police presence and be subject to direct police intervention than their white counterparts. Activists of color in feminist movements have described struggles with white feminists' appropriation of their work (hooks, 1984; Jonsson, 2016; Lorde, 1984) as well as struggles with spaces that prioritize white feminist's feelings over adequately addressing concerns about racism among activists (Srivastava, 2006). The Combahee River Collective cited white women's minimal efforts to understand and combat their own racism as a major stressor within their activism work (Combahee River Collective, 1995). Finally, Emejulu and Bassel (2015) found that women of color activists are oftentimes characterized as "victims" which hinders their ability to be fully recognized.

Activist Sustainability

Activist sustainability, or persistence, are the conditions that give rise to an activists' sustained participation in activism without involuntary interruption due to activist burnout (Cox, 2009; Gorski 2015). Activist sustainability is directly correlated to the extent that activists understand the interconnection between their everyday lives and their activist lives (Gorski, 2018a; Gorski & Erakat, 2019; Rettig, 2006). Activist sustainability has been theorized around three main overlapping conditions (Bunnage, 2014; Gorski, 2018b; Mannarini & Talò, 2011): (1) *individual factors*, such as things happening in activists' lives (especially their access to resources) (Gorski, 2015; Putnam, 2000; Rosenstone & Hansen, 1993); (2) *interpersonal factors,* such as social networks and collective identity that reinforce attachment to activism; and (3) *organizational characteristics*, where organizations prioritize self-care of its members and communication (Gorski, 2015; Bernal, 2006; Norwood, 2013; Mannarini & Talò, 2011). Bunnage (2014) defines activist retention as "the likelihood of, and process by which activists decide to continue their work" (p. 433). Activist retention is one of the most critical ways to measure the success of activism and existence of activist sustainability (Bunnage, 2014).

Individual factors, such the absence of personal constraints (or obstacles) within present life circumstances and past histories can determine how difficult activism will be for a person at a given point (Corrigal-Brown et al., 2009; McAdam, 1989). Activists' commitment to change can depend on their perception of how fulfilling, effective, and useful their work is (Downton & Wehr, 1997). Cuzán (1990) uses the Resource

Mobilization theory to argue that mobilization is reliant on structural conditions such as access to resources, connections with other groups, and dependence on organizational and structural support (Brown 2006; Williams, 2002). Biological constraints do not always hinder participation, but lack of access to money, knowledge, and resources can decrease full participation in activism (Corrigil-Brown et al., 2009; Putname, 2000; Rosenstone & Hansen 1993).

Collective experiences and social networks are interpersonal factors that connect individuals and reinforce persistence of activists through a shared identity (Bunnage, 2014; Corrigall-Brown et al., 2009, Mannarini & Talò, 2011). There is a strong connection between collective identity and continued participation in activism (Bunnage, 2014; Corrigall-Brown et al., 2009). The development of social networks connected to one's identity increases the likelihood that an activist will continue within their activism even as the consequences associated with activism increase (Bunnage, 2014; Downton & Wehr, 1997).

Activist organizations and social movements must be committed to activist self-care and sustainability in order to help activists cope with the stress of their activism (Bernal, 2006; Barry & Dordević, 2007; Norwood, 2013; Mannarini & Talò, 2011). Within their study of 278 community justice activists, Mannarini and Talò (2011) found that high stressors in organizations were highly predictive of activists leaving their activism. The extent to which organizational leadership incentivizes its activists to participate and how it communicates with its members and manages conflict within the organization are key components of a strong structure that promotes activist retention (Bunnage, 2014). As the

Black Lives Matter movement continues to grow, there has been a call for increased

networks (social and emergency response), as well as an increasingly sophisticated

infrastructure to support its growth (Foran, 2015).

Positionality Statement

I identify as a Black, American-born, heterosexual, cisgendered woman from a

working-class background. I am a first-generation college student. As a graduate student,

I have had the benefit of access to higher education. In addition, I also identify as a racial

justice activist and have been involved with the Black Lives Matter movement for five

years. I am passionate about this issue due to my personal involvement the BLM

movement. I have personally experienced full-fledged activist burnout at least once in my

activist career. I recognize the privileges I hold, as well as the risk of over-identifying

with the participants and projecting my experiences as a Black woman racial justice

activist unto their narratives.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

Utilizing a phenomenological approach, my research investigates common themes through the lived experiences of the participants. Phenomenological research seeks to capture rich descriptions of personal lived experience and meaning about the phenomenon from those who experience the phenomenon (Finlay 2009). Creswell (2013) argued phenomenology is especially effective when examinations of a phenomenon can better inform policy and practice (Gorski, 2018a). Using this approach, I conducted semi-structured interviews with five Black women and gender non-binary racial justice activists to answer the primary research question: How do Black women racial justice activists in the United States describe obstacles to full participation in their activism and ways to sustain themselves?

Participants

In order to identify participants for inclusion in the study, I created a flyer (see Appendix A) and shared it with online social media networks, (Facebook, Twitter and Instagram) that focused on or had users who identify as racial justice activists within the BLM movement. I used applicable online hashtags, such as #BlackLivesMatter, #SayHerName, and #BLM to reach potential participants. I included two required criteria on the digital flyer in order to be eligible to participate in the study. First, each participant had to identity as being a Black woman or gender non-binary individual within the ages

of 18-32. I selected this age range based on research on a large study on Black Millennials in America named the "Black Youth Project" which was conducted to analyze the experience of Black millennials. This study became the basis of the national youth-based activist group, Black Youth Project 100 [BYP 100] under the leadership of Cathy Cohen. In alignment with BYP 100, this age group was selected but to include those who are just entering college, the range was adjusted slightly. Second, each potential participant identified as a racial justice activist within Black Lives Matter movement. The definition used in this study for racial justice activism is: "intentional action aimed to decrease and/or eradicate racism and its negative effects" (Szymanski, 2012, p. 343-344).

I asked all interested participants to fill out an online demographic survey, which included an Informed Consent form (see Appendix B) and pre-screening questions. The pre-screening survey included demographic information and short answer questions which prompted participants to describe their experiences as Black racial justice activists. Through the targeted sampling strategy, nine respondents completed the online survey. After filtering out participants that did not meet the two required criteria, seven respondents remained. I reached out to the seven eligible respondents via email, four of which agreed to participate in the interview. In order to ensure a geographically diverse sample, I used a purposeful snowball sampling tactic. I encouraged the four initial participants to reach out to other BLM activists within their networks, particularly in different areas of the United States, who were eligible and potentially interested in the

study. Through this purposeful snowball sampling strategy, one additional racial justice activist was identified and agreed to participate in the study.

Data Collection

Interviews of 60-90 minutes were conducted via telephone (audio call) and audio recorded. A semi-structured interview protocol consisting of open-ended questions elicited participants' narratives about their racial justice activism. The interview protocol (see Appendix C) was informed by existing scholarship on Black feminist theory, activist burnout and racial battle fatigue theory, and activist sustainability. The interview questions were framed around four key themes: (1) the background and nature of their racial justice activism; (2) obstacles to full participation in their activism; (3) negative and positive impacts of BLM activism on their well-being; (4) ways that they sustain themselves in their activism. Though these topics were oftentimes discussed simultaneously throughout the interview, there were specific questions associated with each topic outlined in the interview protocol.

Analysis

Interviews were audio-recorded with consent of each participant in order to capture the fullness of their experiences, and then transcribed in order to analyze the findings. In order to maintain trustworthiness as a lone researcher, I followed Ezzy (2002)'s recommendation to initially code as the interview data was being transcribed. Once transcribed, data was both manually and electronically "pre-coded" using highlighting, circling, and underlining according to Layder (1998)'s method in order to capture rich participant passages and quotes that were particularly striking. The

transcribed interviews were then reviewed and manually organized into significant

themes (Creswell, 2007). For the purposes of this study, a significant theme is an

experience that has been described by two or more participants. Out of 189 total codes

identified within the data, 24 significant themes emerged. These significant themes were

then organized into nine major concepts (Creswell, 2007; Lichtman, 2006). Significant

themes within each major concept were reorganized and reanalyzed several times to draw

more specific connections between participant interviews and the literature.

Participant Backgrounds

Jaiden, age 25, identifies as a cis-gendered Black woman who works as a

community organizer in an urban city where her family has lived for over five

generations. After getting involved in racial justice activism during her college years,

Jaiden continues her work as a paid economic and child care justice community

organizer. Jaiden is heavily involved in a Black feminist racial justice organization and

focuses most of her activism efforts on direct action and training and facilitation of other

activists.

Simone, age 26, identifies as a gender non-binary individual who began their

involvement with the Black Lives Matter movement as a college student. After moving

from their college town to a large city, they became involved as an intern with the Black

Lives Matter organization. Through their involvement with racial justice activism, they

became involved in a Black feminist racial justice organization. Simone channels their

activism efforts through direct action, training and facilitation, and creating spaces of

resistance for queer and trans people of color. Their issues of interest include fat acceptance and body justice.

Jordan, age 24, identifies as a gender non-binary activist who began their involvement in the Black Lives Matter movement after the death of Michael Brown. Through their activism, Jordan has led many direct actions around state violence in their community. As a result of their activism, Jordan has had legal troubles stemming from a direct action. These struggles caused Jordan to disengage in their activism completely. Currently, they are studying Psychological & Brain Sciences at a predominately white institution.

Ciara, age 24, identifies as a cisgender woman who is a full-time graduate student completing her Masters' degree at a predominately white institution. Ciara focuses her activism within higher education, as she is currently completing a thesis around citizenship for Black American-born individuals.

Tanya, age 32, is identifies as a femme who got involved in the Black Lives Matter movement through student activism. After graduating with their Bachelors' from a historically Black university, they were diagnosed with bipolar disorder and suffered with subsequent employment discrimination within the education field as a result. While working through unemployment, Tanya remains heavily involved in a Black feminist racial justice organization. They focus primarily on political education and training of activists, though they have been involved in direct actions in the past. Tanya's issues of interest include queer and trans inclusion and state violence against Black women and girls.

Table 1 Participant Backgrounds

Name	Gender Identity	Age
Jaiden	Cis-woman	25
Simone	Non-binary	26
Jordan	Non-binary	24
Ciara	Cis-woman	24
Tanya	Femme	32

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

This study produced rich, ethnographic data that revealed the complex experiences of social justice activists A majority of the participants' triggers for getting involved in the Black Lives Matter movement were traumatic events such as the loss of parents, or fatal car accidents resulting in the loss of several immediate family members. All participants cited the deep grief associated with the deaths of Mike Brown and Trayvon Martin as a reason that they got involved in the movement. When asked to describe why they got involved in the movement, Jordan said:

> I found out about Mike Brown and uh, I went outside. And I never came back in and so I attribute me being in the movement to the fact that I was there for Mike Brown and the fact that Mike Brown saved my life. That was my giving back for Mike Brown, really.

A majority of the participants initially got involved in racial justice activism through student activism on their respective college campuses. While some participants got involved through racial justice student groups and academic coursework, others (such as Jordan) got involved in activism outside of the university setting.

<u>Obstacles to Participation</u>

Lack of access to resources

While engaged in racial justice activism within the Black Lives Matter movement, the participants cited many obstacles to their full participation in activism. All of the participants encountered financial obstacles to full participation: affording the cost of rent, medications, transportation, and daily living expenses. A majority of participants described the "balancing act" associated with affording basic needs and negotiating their ability to participate in (largely unpaid) community organizing work. When asked about financial obstacles to participation in activism, Simone said:

> You know it's like from day-to-day, I have all these different causes that come up and [whether] someone is experiencing violence in the Black neighborhood, or there's a new gentrification building, or there's just you know, just these different events and things and I have to make a decision of "I want to support this", however when I jump on to this I know that this is going to be 30 hours of unpaid labor.

Simone discussed the expectation of working for free as a significant challenge. Simone's financial hardships are compounded by the misperceptions that other activists and community members hold. They mentioned the "struggling activist" stereotype, in which Black activists are expected to be resource-poor in order for their activism to be seen as genuine.

You have a stereotype of like the struggling activist […] because you're supposed to give of yourself so much. And so, for me, I believe that the movement for Black lives includes my Black life.

For Jaiden, paid community organizing was her primary source of income, which affected how authentically she could engage in her activism. Jaiden cited generational differences in organizing styles as a major obstacle to her participation in activism within the workplace. Being the youngest in her office, Jaiden found that her organizing priorities and values vastly differed from her co-workers and supervisor. When asked about these challenges, Jaiden said:

I have some problems in the workplace. I have to be around certain things because I'm an economic justice organizer. So, my organizations' approach to organizing is not the same as they all don't operate through the same Black queer feminist lens that I've become accustomed to […]. Oftentimes I am forced to be in white spaces and forced to be around police. We often go to Capitol Hill and Capitol Hill police are always present and they like to swarm. So, I've figured out how to manage that especially with working with older white folk who don't see an issue with police presence in the same way.

As a working-class graduate student, Ciara faces challenges with access to resources such as transportation, healthy food on a consistent basis, and time to engage in her activism. While navigating power dynamics within the classroom, Ciara struggles to meet her basic needs outside of the classroom. As a result, she is not able to fully engage in her activism in the ways that she would like to. When asked to describe these obstacles, Ciara said:

Yeah, so for me it's just, I have everything I need to be, I don't have enough to do

everything I want to do…and even though we are in these social justice spaces,

there's still power dynamics, there's still white teachers who don't value, I think,

a Black woman's perspective all the time so you have to play the game.

Each of the participants faced issues with access to financial resources. Despite

their financial obstacles, the majority of the participants continued to persist within their

activism. The participants balanced living expenses (rent, food, medication,

transportation) and costs associated with their activism (traveling, tuition, conference and

training fees), along with any unexpected expenses from emergencies. Some of the

participants dealt with chronic unstable employment, which caused additional financial

uncertainty and stress. For all the participants, financial obstacles were not a primary

reason for burnout, but remained a significant contributing factor.

Exclusion of Queer Leadership

Being a non-binary queer activist in a predominantly Black community in the

southern midwest, Jordan has faced challenges with heterosexism, homophobia, and

misogyny in their racial justice activism. Despite the fact that the Black Lives Matter

movement is a queer-led movement, Jordan and their queer peers faced stark pushback

from non-queer activist counterparts. These challenges were particularly apparent when

they began taking on leadership positions within the movement.

So, then there's this idea of queerness, right? And what it means to be a queer

leader and who follows you and who doesn't...and so we've got a lot of pushback

on being queer and how the "gay agenda is infiltrating the movement". And the

idea that sexuality isn't a part of this movement. And it's like well yeah it is, even

if Mike Brown wasn't gay, he was straight and that's his sexuality. So yes, it's part

of the movement. It's like we had a lot of tension around that. We've got a lot of

hate for being-- I wanna say... at this point, I was identifying as a woman-- but we

got a lot of hate for being queer-identified women that were leading this

movement and that really impacted the spaces that we could show up in because

there was a lot of folks who like straight wanted to fight…and how does it feel to

be on the front line with folks who are supposed to be on your side and you don't

know if they gon' fuck you up or if the police gon' fuck you up?

Jordan's reflections illuminate how the exclusion of their queer identity deeply impacted

the ways that spaces and ways that they were able to show up as a BLM activist. Due to

this exclusion within movement spaces, Jordan had a difficult time being accepted as a

BLM leader. As Jordan shares, there were serious threats to Jordan's safety from both

the police and their homophobic activist peers. While the threats from the state were

mainly in retaliation for their activism, the threats from Jordan's (mostly Black) activist

peers came as a direct result of homophobia and heterosexism.

Simone describes challenges with respect and validation as a non-binary, femme-

presenting activist. They explain how their identity causes a perceived lack of "general

trust" in them from other organizers and community members until they are validated

through close proximity to males or masculinity.

I've had experiences really needing to advocate for myself with other male-

presented people, or masculine of center people speaking over me within the

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movement and people outside of the movement. [And] having to work to gain

trust because I present as a woman. I've had experiences with someone [when] I

was tabling for an event and a man came up to me and you know, asked about the

movement and how I joined and I told him my story and even though I told him

my story he goes "Oh, do you have a boyfriend that got you into this?" And I'm

like "no" and he was like "really? You're just so smart and focused" and this was

a Black man! And I realized that he could not comprehend the idea that I could be

a […] powerful activist and organizer and intelligent without having a proximity

to a male.

Both of the gender non-binary participants (Jordan and Simone) described the

exclusion of their queer leadership within both all-Black and interracial organizing

spaces. Largely due to misperceptions about their identities from other organizers and

community members, both of these individuals have faced mistrust of others and

concerns for their safety. As a result, Simone felt that they have had to continually

advocate for themselves in order to gain trust and respect. In the interviews, Simone

depicted the movement space as one that allowed for their gender identity to develop

further. Conversely, Jordan revealed how homophobia and heterosexism from fellow

organizers were significant obstacles to their engagement and leadership in the

movement. Both participants stressed the desire for increased understanding around

gender identity from their cisgendered organizing peers.

Direct actions & legal repercussions

A majority of the participants engage in direct action as their primary form of racial justice activism. They cited a number of challenges associated with direct actions: physical and mental impacts, fear of police violence, and legal repercussions. Jaiden shared her experiences with police, harsh weather conditions, and the impacts of attending protests instead of class.

Um, I've been chased by the police on several occasions, popped up on the news, neglected finals, definitely went outside in […] freezing weather, almost froze my toes off. I wish I knew that's absolutely not the only work that needs to get done.

Simone described the arduous conditions of a long occupation that they were a part of in which activists were protesting for over 16 hours and were battling extreme physical exhaustion as a result.

I remember I did an occupation in 2016 and we had did what we came to and folks were like "well we've been here for 16 hours, people are exhausted" and we were trying to discuss if we should just leave.

Jordan has faced significant legal challenges associated with their engagement in protests. After facing jail time for their misdemeanor charges, Jordan was forced to disengage in their racial justice activism and focus on the legal implications of their protest.

In my particular instance, I caught charges. Um, so the state came for-- the state came for me and my and my co-founder in particular and uh, hit us with heavy charges and tried to throw the book at us um...for our highway action [and] for behaviors that we... engaged in on the highway. And so, that really took us out the

game because my co-founder got a felony charge and I got a misdemeanor charge.

So, [my co-founder] was looking at a certain amount of time in jail and I was

looking at four years. And so... We really, we really had to calm down.

Jordan spoke about how navigating the criminal justice system became their main focus, which completely halted their activism. They described the negative impact of emotional exhaustion associated with receiving criminal charges as a form of state violence on their well-being.

So, state violence...it happens in activism in such a different way especially when

you become politically targeted. Um, and what it looks like--what that state

violence looks like as you're going through the process of these charges and then

dealing with them in terms of your lawyers. And um, in terms of […] the

recommendations they give and how you negotiate those recommendations. Just

really like...seeing that your life really isn't in your hands… it's in the hands of

this prosecutor who definitely doesn't give a fuck about you, and the hands of this

[lawyer that] you barely know but you paid and hope they got enough knowledge

to get you together, you know. And so, um... I think that that's just a different type

of warfare. I think it's a type of mental warfare that really fucking exhausts your

body. And I don't think we talk about that enough at all.

Organizing and participating in protests as a primary form of engagement is

something that the majority of the participants have in common. While these tactics

oftentimes garner public attention and escalate organizing campaigns, they can also have

detrimental impacts on the activists who participate in them. The participants shared a

number of challenges associated with participating in protests: physical and mental impacts, fear of police violence, and legal repercussions. All of these challenges presented as significant obstacles to their full participation in their racial justice activism.

Mental Health

Many of the participants described navigating mental health challenges as an obstacle to their full participation in activism. In addition to dealing with anxiety, depression, bipolar disorder, and other conditions in their personal lives, these activists also navigate their mental health within their engagement in activism. Dealing with both anxiety and depression, Simone noted the burden of constantly choosing others over themselves.

> You know, I suffer from depression, um and anxiety. So, being someone with a disability and also fighting for other people. You know, how many times I am choosing others and not choosing myself. It really took a toll on me.

A majority of the participants cited anxiety as a mental health challenge that affected their full engagement in activism. Jaiden described how her anxiety causes her to have a constant fear of making mistakes as an activist.

> My anxiety…uh….it definitely…. messes me from time to time because of the fear that I'm going to mess something up and…I've been like that my entire life. It's like 'aw man, what if I try this and mess it up?' so, it sucks being in activism and while my supervisor and I might not see eye to eye all the time, we've had several conversations where she feels like she has to reassure me that failure is a

part of success, which is crazy because I know that…but in the back of my mind it's like "aw man, if you mess this up, you really mess this up."

Tanya illustrated how her challenges with bipolar disorder became an obstacle to her activist leadership after her peers expressed safety concerns about being around her in organizing spaces. This presented significant challenges in regard to her ability to be an effective leader and organizer.

Having bipolar disorder, I've had manic phases like on [organizing] trips, I've had people file reports against me, you know, because they thought I'd get a break.

Jordan and Simone spoke explicitly about their experiences with grief, depression, and suicidal ideation. When asked about the impact that their activism had on their well-being, Simone said:

The stress […] it's hard to discuss because it's hard to even define because […] when I joined in Ferguson I was in deep grief. And the movement, like the people that I met gave me some solace in that. However, still being in it, I've had to go…I've gone through a couple of things. Yes, it has had a detrimental impact on my well-being. I've had, you know, whole emotional breakdowns where I felt like I couldn't do this anymore. I felt like I didn't wanna be here…anymore.

A majority of the participants described their challenges with mental health as a significant obstacle to their participation in their activism. These experiences range from experiencing anxiety and fear, experiencing manic phases, to dealing with depression and

suicidal ideation. All of the participants who mentioned mental health challenges described the delicate balance between fighting for themselves and constantly fighting for others.

Activist Sustainability and Self-Care Strategies

Many of the participants reported benefits derived from their engagement in activism. All shared that they had increased networks and access to new forms of knowledge. Jordan and Ciara shared that they have had academic benefits, including increased professional networks as a result of their activism. Jordan described some of the benefits of their activism and how their experience as an activist has enhanced their ability to engage in the classroom setting.

> I think I gain a lot of connections. I think that I get a lot of respect. I think that -- I think I gained a lot of knowledge. I think that especially in the classroom bring a different... I'm gonna bring a different perspective because not only am I reading the theory that you assigned to your class, but I also have to practice behind it, and I can also tell you how some of this shit looks in person. And from a racial lens.

Ciara illustrated some of the complexities associated with the academic benefits of being an activist. She perceives that it is "trendy" to be an activist in popular culture, and as a result, she is navigating those perceptions and the academic success that comes with the work.

> Obviously, I cannot deny […] that I get academic success, and I would say to some degree professional success from being entrenched in racial justice.

Especially in this era where it's almost sort of like this weird sort of trend to be an

activist? Which is a whole 'nother topic, one of those capitalist activists. I guess,

from almost that respectability politics type of way.

Many participants noted the impact that generational trauma has had on their

development and healing as Black women and as Black activists. Simone shared that

their engagement in the movement has given them the communication skills necessary to

work through intergenerational trauma with their family.

Being in the movement has helped me to learn how to talk to people and how to

work through that. I know that being in the movement, I have been able to process

a lot of my own family trauma and generational trauma and really be able to work

on relationships within my family. That's something I wouldn't have known how

to navigate if I wasn't in the movement.

Each of the participants cited specific things that sustain them within their activism. For

Jaiden, learning more about her culture and meeting others who have similar interests

deeply sustains her within her activism. During our conversation, she described a time

when she transformed her time volunteering in predominantly Black school library into

engaging the students in dialogue about community organizing and racial justice. She

said that the acknowledgement and gratitude that she received from those students

encouraged her and helped her to keep going within her activism.

Sometimes my activism and organizing don't always allow me the opportunities

to do those things [that I want to do] but it's just provided me with a confidence to

tell people about these things and sharing what I believe, and seeing the

opportunities open up for me definitely keeps me going. It's definitely, uh, helped

with my self-care, cause even when I feel down like I'm not doing what I should

be doing or other people—like I'm doing this, this, and that, and it's difficult

cause I'm like "aw man, like I'm not doing enough" but just hearing from my old

students like "you read that book, you told me about this, or you just sat and

listened to me". Like, that just tells you that what I'm doing actually matters.

Ciara cites her rage and general dislike for anti-Blackness as what keeps her sustained

within her work. Her desire to stay authentic to herself and her values motivates her as

well.

I think, just, kind of just being angry. Just being annoyed. I think, I've really just,

I don't appreciate anti-Blackness. And I don't…I'm not one of those people. You

know, everyone chooses their battles. So, you have to know what context you're

in and to know about your safety, but I'm not one of those people that's just going

to be agreeable, just cause.

Simone is sustained through their supportive networks and their unwavering belief that

justice will be achieved. When asked about what sustains them in their racial justice

activism, Simone said:

I believe that we are going to win. So those are the things that keep me going. I

really think it is having a network of support. Um, having people that are part of

my community that genuinely care about me as a person and not what I contribute

is really important and one of the reasons why I continue in that. And then, it's

also that I want to earn the respect of future generations as Mary Hooks said in the

Black Lives Matter Mandate for Black People. I think I have one life to live I do want to spend it avenging the suffering of my ancestors and earning the respect of future generations. So, I feel like I have a responsibility to do so. And, it does bring me joy.

All of the participants engaged in self-care strategies to sustain themselves and their activism. For many of these activists, generating strategies to take care of themselves came as a result of experiencing various challenges and obstacles within their activism. The most self-care common strategy was learning boundaries and how to say "no". For most of the participants, this included knowing when to scale back their commitments or completely disengaging in their activism altogether. Jordan spoke about how their experiences with activist burnout and racial battle fatigue caused them to completely disengage in their activism as a form of self-care.

I think at the moment you feel like you don't want to do this shit no more and you feel like it's wearing your spirit. I say drop the shit. And come back. It's always gonna be here. It's always gonna be something to organize and fight around and argue about and show up for and riot about...but the moment you feel that fatigue, take yo ass in the house.

Overcommitting to responsibilities and tasks is a common issue that many of the participants struggled with. While some of the participants noted that they do in fact overcommit, they also mentioned feeling like a "mule" that constantly receives and completes endless work. Simone found that decreasing the amount of time they spent on

organizing projects by half to focus on their personal needs was a vital self-care decision in order to be most healthy within their racial justice organization.

> I've cut down the projects I work on a lot from spending forty hours a week to trying to only spend twenty hours a week. […] And, so from 2014 to when like the movement was my, every day, ate slept, breathed the movement, to now, where I'm [making sure] that I have a life outside of the organization is the healthiest thing I can do for myself and the organization.

Both Ciara and Jaiden associated reading black feminist texts with their self-care practice. Jaiden described how reading Black feminist embodied discourse as a self-care practice sustains her in her activism because it speaks to her identities as a Black woman.

> It's just reading about how Black women are like "yo, if we ain't gonna do it, ain't nobody else gonna do it? We can't side with white women because if we always side with white women, then we are betraying our Blackness. But if we side with Black men, we are betraying our womanhood." And Black women fucking did it, and were just like "you know what? I'm gonna just do it myself." So, I'm like, yo, like that's pretty dope! So, that definitely plays into my self-care. It's just reading how dope other Black women are.

Tanya focuses on spiritual work as a form of self-care. She has a physical space called an "ancestor altar" that she has dedicated to the memory of slain victims of police violence and freedom fighters.

> Definitely spiritual work. That is the reason why I'm here and do things and why I will keep going is my spiritual practices and connections to something greater

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than this earth and so having an ancestor altar but also my walls are covered with

Natasha McKenna and Harriet Tubman and other, you know, other freedom

fighters. And so just standing in their footsteps and really thinking about and

taking seriously that is not the time to be on the fence.

Three participants stated that having access to a good therapist with an understanding of

intersectionality is an essential part of their self-care practice. All of them stated there is a

need for Black racial justice organizers to know that they are not alone in their

experiences as activists. When asked to elaborate on this notion of loneliness as an

activist, Jordan said:

I think a lot of times we feel alone especially as leaders and organizers. Like

"other people aren't going to relate" and that's just not the case.

When asked what knowledge that they had now they wish they knew back when

they first got into racial justice activism, the participants shared many lessons learned.

One of the most common responses from participants was that there are many ways to

engage in racial justice activism outside of attending (and oftentimes overcommitting to)

direct actions, including facilitation and training, political education, and movement

support. Another was the notion that finding a supportive community and fostering

authentic relationships as a vital part of sustaining themselves within and outside of their

activism. When asked to share about this, Tanya stated:

I've found the community and the friendship where if we hang out, [social

justice] is what we talk about […]. This is what we get joy out of doing is

speaking and imagining and being frustrated and feeling you know? Like, making time to feel and making time to be with people who care about those same things? I've said it already, that matters so, so much because otherwise you'll become isolated and you will not know how to trust anyone and you will become bitter and you'll just kind of go into yourself … and that's what a lot of Black people have done in order to survive, you know what I mean?

Jordan and Simone both articulated an important self-reflection, they had both planned their lives as if the movement would never slow down, or as if the goals of the movement would be achieved in a short period of time. When asked to elaborate on this, Simone said:

Whirlwind tasks, in 2014, and then again in 2015 and then again in 2016, like main society had huge whirlwinds around Black Lives Matter and around the trauma that we receive and so, it felt like that moment was never going to end. And, because of that, I did, and I know that other folks made decisions around our lives as if that moment was never going to end. And, it did. It definitely did. The whirlwind around Black Lives Matter um, had a paused moment and has been in a paused moment. And that has really given space to other movements um, which is what society does though, right? Gave space to the movement around immigration, gave space to feminism, right? And so, important to know that. If I would have told myself that. I would have also told myself to make sure that the spaces that I'm joining and the people that I'm meeting…making sure they truly

bring me joy. And, Erika Totten, who is the co-creator of the BLM [DC Chapter]

had said "We don't have time to rush" and I really love that because I think there

a lot of parts of my development and of being an organizer that I try to rush, and I

just or, the world is trying to rush me.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, several of the participants mentioned the idea of

getting involved in things that genuinely bring them joy as a self-care practice. Whether it

is consciously engaging in social justice issues that they are most passionate about or

participating in activities that have positive impacts on their well-being, these activities

must bring joy as a way of sustaining themselves. Some participants, like Jaiden, found

that when they were not engaged in activities that brought them joy they were resentful

and more likely to experience burnout.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

The findings of this study support existing literature around activist burnout, racial battle fatigue, and marginalization of Black women within racial justice movements. However, due to the current gap in the literature around the lived experiences of Black millennial women and non-binary racial justice activists, I situate my findings as an intervention to the cis-heterosexual framing of existing scholarship, discuss implications for future research, and review limitations to the study.

Activist Burnout and Racial Battle Fatigue

While there is limited research on how activist burnout manifests in Black activists, particularly racial justice activists, the causes of activist burnout illuminated in this study support existing understandings of activist burnout in many ways. Activist burnout, which is classified by social justice scholars as an accumulative and long-term condition, can be so debilitating for activists' physical and mental health that they completely disengage from work involuntarily that they were once fully invested in (Cox, 2011; Gorski, 2018a; Gorski & Chen, 2015; Gorski & Erakat, 2019; Maslach & Gomes, 2006). Existing scholarship has asserted that activist burnout has three main causes: internal causes, external causes, and in-movement causes (Gorski, 2018a; Gorski & Erakat, 2019). Participants in this study dealt with internal causes (e.g. strong emotional ties, emotional and physical exhaustion, financial hurdles, intense personal commitments

to BLM racial justice work); external causes (e.g. state repression, legal repercussions, and police violence); and in-movement causes (e.g. differences in organizing philosophies and marginalization) of their burnout, which is consistent with existing scholarship (Gorski, 2018a; Gorski & Erakat, 2019).

The findings also support existing scholarship asserting that the most impactful burnout comes as a result of how activists treat one another (Gorski, 2018a; Gorski & Erakat, 2019; Maslach & Gomes, 2006; Plyler, 2006). As Gorski (2018a) found in his study of both white activists and racial justice activists of color, the participants seemed to expect to face internal and external causes of activist burnout. This study confirmed other burnout literature (e.g. Rettig, 2006; Gorski, 2018a), which asserted that activists expect to experience hostility from those who are hostile to the movement, but not from activists within the movement. As such, in-movement causes of burnout were less expected, and more negatively impactful to the activists in this study. Participants detailed negative interactions with their activist peers that caused them to disengage completely from their activism, even if just temporarily. Furthermore, participants who described positive interactions with their activist peers shared that these peers sustained them within their activism.

This study complicates the existing framework of activist burnout theory, which has given limited consideration to the interaction between activists' lives outside of their activism and their lives within their activism (Gorski, 2018a). Though Rettig (2006) asserts that activist persistence is directly related to how activists understand this very interaction, existing burnout scholarship has not explicitly explored this connection.

Through studying Black women and non-binary racial justice activists, it is abundantly clear that the participants' lives outside of their activism are deeply and directly connected to their lives as activists. The present study challenges the conclusions of Gorski (2018a)'s study that the activism of racial justice activists of color is more generally informed by the impact that racism has on their lives. I suggest that activist burnout theory must consider the interlocking impacts of racism, sexism, heterosexism, and homophobia within its discourses. This study has expanded upon existing understandings of activist burnout and battle fatigue, positing that the activism of millennial Black women and non-binary racial justice activists is informed by the impact that racism, sexism, classism, homophobia, and heteronormativity have on their lives.

Smith (2004) defines racial battle fatigue (RBF) as the accumulative impact of experiencing racism (Gorski, 2018b). Racial battle fatigue literature is mostly focused on activists of color within higher education. The present study supports racial battle fatigue scholarship, which suggests that activists of color, particularly Black activists, experience a combination of both activist burnout and racial battle fatigue as a result of their racially marginalized identity. Participants in this study identified challenges with structural racism in their day-to-day lives as a significant obstacle to their participation in activism and a major contributing factor to their burnout. These findings support other studies on activists of color who have attributed their burnout to both conditions related to their activism and racial battle fatigue (Smith, 2004; Gorski, 2018; Gorski & Chen, 2018).

While the findings of this study confirm observations about racial battle fatigue, it challenges activist burnout theory as a whole. Despite what many scholars of activist

burnout theory claim, my research suggests that it has not taken a truly intersectional approach, interrogating the simultaneous and interlocking impact of sexism, homophobia or heterosexism on activists' engagement. In failing to take this approach, activist burnout theory has not adequately grappled with all of the causes of activist burnout and its impacts on activists. This study asserts that the multiple, simultaneous, and interlocking oppressions of sexism, homophobia, racism, and heterosexism are significant contributing factors to activist burnout for Black queer racial justice activists.

Queer Battle Fatigue

As non-cis-heterosexual males, the participants of this study described challenges not only with the accumulative impact of experiencing racism, but also with sexism, homophobia, and heterosexism. These findings expand current understandings of the concept of "battle fatigue" and causes of activist burnout for Black women and gender non-binary racial justice activists. I define queer battle fatigue (QBF) as the accumulative impact that experiencing sexism, homophobia, and heterosexism has on the lives of activists. Gorski and Erakat (2019) asserted that coping with racism within movement spaces for racial justice activists of color exacerbated their racial battle fatigue and significantly contributed to their burnout. Participants in this study demonstrated that coping with sexism, homophobia, and heterosexism within movement spaces exacerbated their QBF, increasing the likelihood of burning out. The present study suggests that the marginalization of queer Black activists both within activism and outside of activism (i.e. racism in interracial spaces and homophobia) may exacerbate QBF, particularly if they don't have access to a supportive community.

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Participants recognized that their gender identity and sexual orientation intersected with other aspects of their identities. Further, they detailed the detrimental impact of misrecognition and misperceptions of their multiple marginalized identities on their ability be fully recognized as leaders within the Black Lives Matter movement. The majority of the queer participants expressed challenges with exclusion of their queer leadership as a significant obstacle to full participation in their racial justice activism. While their contributions and sacrifices were readily accepted and appreciated as members outside of leadership positions, once they were given leadership positions, there was pushback and backlash. Additionally, the negative impact of queer battle fatigue contributed to their activist burnout, causing some of the participants to disengage temporarily or permanently from their activism.

This study's findings support existing queer scholarship which has examined the experiences of activists of color with marginalization and exclusion within the LGBTQIA+ movement (Alimahomed, 2010; Pastrana, 2010). Alimahomed (2010) observes how queer activists of color originally faced challenges with exclusion, which has since transformed into being relegated to invisible queer "subjects" within the movement. Further, how those activists utilize invisibility as a form of resistance within the queer movement (Alimahomed, 2010). The present study illustrates how increased visibility associated with leadership within the movement for queer activists can come with increased incidents of homophobia and heterosexism.

Black Quare Battle Fatigue

I assert that Black quare battle fatigue (BQBF) describes the interlocking accumulative impact of experiencing racism, sexism, homophobia, and heterosexism on Black queer activists. Participants of this study have demonstrated that queer battle fatigue, racial battle fatigue, and activist burnout are oftentimes experienced simultaneously by both Black women and gender non-binary racial justice activists. Black quare battle fatigue articulates the contemporaneity of these experiences, while also interrogating their racialized and sexualized nature.

Black quare battle fatigue theory is an expansion upon E. Patrick Johnson (2001)'s literature around the Black quare theory. Through acknowledging Black enslaved peoples' legacy of creating strategies of resistance and survival, E. Patrick Johnson (2001) illustrates how Black queer individuals have continued on it that legacy within quare theory. Johnson (2001) asserts quare theory as one that centers the knowledge and experiences of queer people of color, particular Black queer people. "Quare", as compared to "queer", refers to the explicit connection between sexuality and Blackness that is not a component of traditional queer theory (Johnson, 2001). It is in understanding this crucial connection between sexuality and queerness, and Blackness that lies the foundation for Black quare battle fatigue theory.

Johnson (2001) utilizes Muñoz's (1999) concept of "disidentification", which describes how people of color survive in an inherently racist society through their engagement with and within oppressive institutional structures. In using this concept, Johnson (2001) explains how Black queer people have been utilizing performance as a

strategy of survival, but also as an assertion of agency and ultimately, resistance. In describing Black quare performativity, Johnson (2001) said:

> Performance practices such as vogueing, snapping, ''throwing shade,'' and ''reading'' attest to the ways in which gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and transgendered people of color devise technologies of self-assertion and summon the agency to resist. (p. 13)

Black quare theory articulates the multitude of experiences that Black quare people face, while articulating that Black quare identities and experiences are not monolithic. Additionally, it asserts the myriad of ways that they have negotiated and navigated their identities in order to survive in an oppressive society (Johnson, 2001). Further, Black quare theory challenges the racist, capitalist, and heterosexist nature of traditional queer theory, which has historically marginalized and erased the contributions and experiences of Black quare people within its discourses (Cooper, 2017; Lorde, 1984; Johnson, 2001).

Crenshaw (1991) presents intersectionality as a framework for understanding how Black women's layered identities and marginalized experiences are derived from interlocking systems of oppression (i.e. racism, sexism, heterosexism, capitalism), and are linked to one another. Black quare battle fatigue utilizes Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality to assert that Black quare racial justice activists experience BQBF as a result of multiple interlocking systems of oppression. The findings of this study assert that Black quare activists face specific challenges as a result of their multiple marginalized identities, including exclusion of queer leadership, homophobia, and threats to personal safety. As a result of experiencing Black quare battle fatigue, at least one of

the participants of this study experienced activist burnout, resulting in complete and indefinite disengagement in their racial justice activism. Hill Collins and Bilge (2015) expand on this definition of intersectionality, asserting that intersectionality requires social action. The present study demonstrates that research on social justice activists requires intersectionality in its truest form: acknowledging the multiple, interlocking oppressions faced by activists to give way to informed social action.

Black Feminist Sustainability Development Theory

The findings of this study challenge the idea that self-care is a remedy for racial justice activists who experience activist burnout and battle fatigue as a result of their activism. In contrast, this study supports existing Black feminist scholarship which finds that Black women and non-binary individuals are a product of a long, racist, and sexist history within the United States. As a result, they have been forced to create strategies of resistance in order to survive. Black women and Black quare racial justice activists have been deploying strategies of self-care and resistance dating back into the era of slavery in order to sustain themselves within their activism or simply their survival (Cooper, 2017; Davis, 1995; Johnson, 2001; McKittrick, 2006).

Participants in this study described that they got involved in the Black Lives Matter movement as a result of a traumatic event. For some of the participants, the traumatic event was defined as the death of either Trayvon Martin or Michael Brown. For others, the traumatic event referred to events that occurred in their own personal lives, compounded with the death of Martin or Brown. After getting involved in the BLM movement, participants engaged in activism in a variety of ways: academia, direct action

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and protest tactics, facilitation and training, and political education. During their

engagement in the movement, each of the participants described obstacles to their full

participation in their activism. These obstacles, such as lack of access to resources, state

repression and legal repercussions of activism, and mental health, contributed to racial

battle fatigue, queer battle fatigue, Black quare battle fatigue and ultimately, activist

burnout. As a result of experiencing RBF, QBF, BQBF, and activist burnout, the

participants generated self-care strategies (i.e. learning boundaries, disengaging

completely, being around other Black people, identifying activities that bring joy) to

sustain themselves as activists. I posit that Black Feminist Sustainability Development

(BFSD) theory (see APPENDIX E) describes the process of developing activist

sustainability strategies through their multiple consciousness, as well as the trauma and

obstacles associated with BLM organizing as a Black woman or non-binary activist.

While self-care is generally framed as a preventative practice, the participants in

this study described not having access to information about self-care until they were at

the brink of complete activist burnout. In order to fully understand how millennial Black

women and non-binary racial justice activists are engaging in self-care, it is critical to

understand what obstacles they are facing that cause them to burnout and seek out self-

care. The findings of this study highlight the importance of identifying obstacles to full

participation in activism for those with multiple marginalized identities because fully

understanding these obstacles can allow for additional sustainability practices be

developed. A distinctive aspect of this theory is that the sustainability practices generated

by the participants are a direct result of their experiences with trauma, racial battle

fatigue, queer battle fatigue, and activist burnout. Audre Lorde (1995) calls for us to recognize self-care not only as an act of survival, but also one of political warfare. As such, BFSD is a framework for understanding how Black women and non-binary quare BLM activists take care of themselves as a form of resistance.

The Black Feminist Sustainability Development theory requires that one sees Black women and non-binary activists' bodies and experiences within activism as a site of possibility, rather than solely oppressed and marginalized, as noted within Anna Julia Cooper's Black Feminist Possibility theory. Though these activists face seemingly insurmountable obstacles to full participation in racial justice activism, the majority of them persisted. That activist persistence is a testament to their sustainability strategies and self-care practices, as well as their inherent desire to live authentically as themselves as Black women and non-binary individuals.

Implications for Future Research

As discussed earlier on, there is limited research on activist burnout, racial battle fatigue, and the experiences of Black women and non-binary racial justice activists within social movements. Further research on the obstacles that Black activists, particularly women and gender non-conforming, face to full participation in activism is critical to the field of study; both in understanding what factors impact activist burnout and what strategies activists are generating to persist despite obstacles to their participation. The experiences of Black women and non-binary activists are unique and must be critically examined as such. Future research on activist burnout and racial battle fatigue should interrogate the conditions that lead to burnout for Black activists, in

particular. Additionally, further research on the challenges that Black non-binary and

queer activists face with queer battle fatigue, homophobia, and heterosexism within both

mixed-race and all-Black racial justice organizing spaces is needed to fully understand

that phenomenon. Future research might also take a look at the development of

understanding of one's gender identity within the movement, as both of the non-binary

participants in this study evolved within their gender identity as a result of their

involvement in the movement.

Limitations

There were some limitations associated with this study. First, five participants'

lived experiences are not enough to generalize the experiences of all U.S. Black women

and non-binary racial justice activists. Though qualitative methods allow for analytical

depth in understanding participants' lived experiences, small sample sizes do not allow

for its findings to be applied broadly. A study with a larger sample size involving more

women and non-binary participants from various geographical and class backgrounds

would provide a more generalizability. Second, this study focused on the experiences of

both Black women and non-binary racial justice activists within the Black Lives

Movement. Further research could focus solely on the experiences of Black non-binary

racial justice activists with racial battle fatigue, queer battle fatigue, black quare battle

fatigue and activist burnout, rather than studying it alongside the experiences of Black

cis-women. Third, the majority of the participant sample geographically resided in the

larger D.C. metropolitan area (DMV) during the time of the interviews. Several of the

participants participated in racial justice activism in different areas of the country or were

raised elsewhere. However, their experiences could be informed by their experiences at

their current geographical location, or others that they interact with in that location.

While there are several limitations to this study, its design provided an in-depth picture of

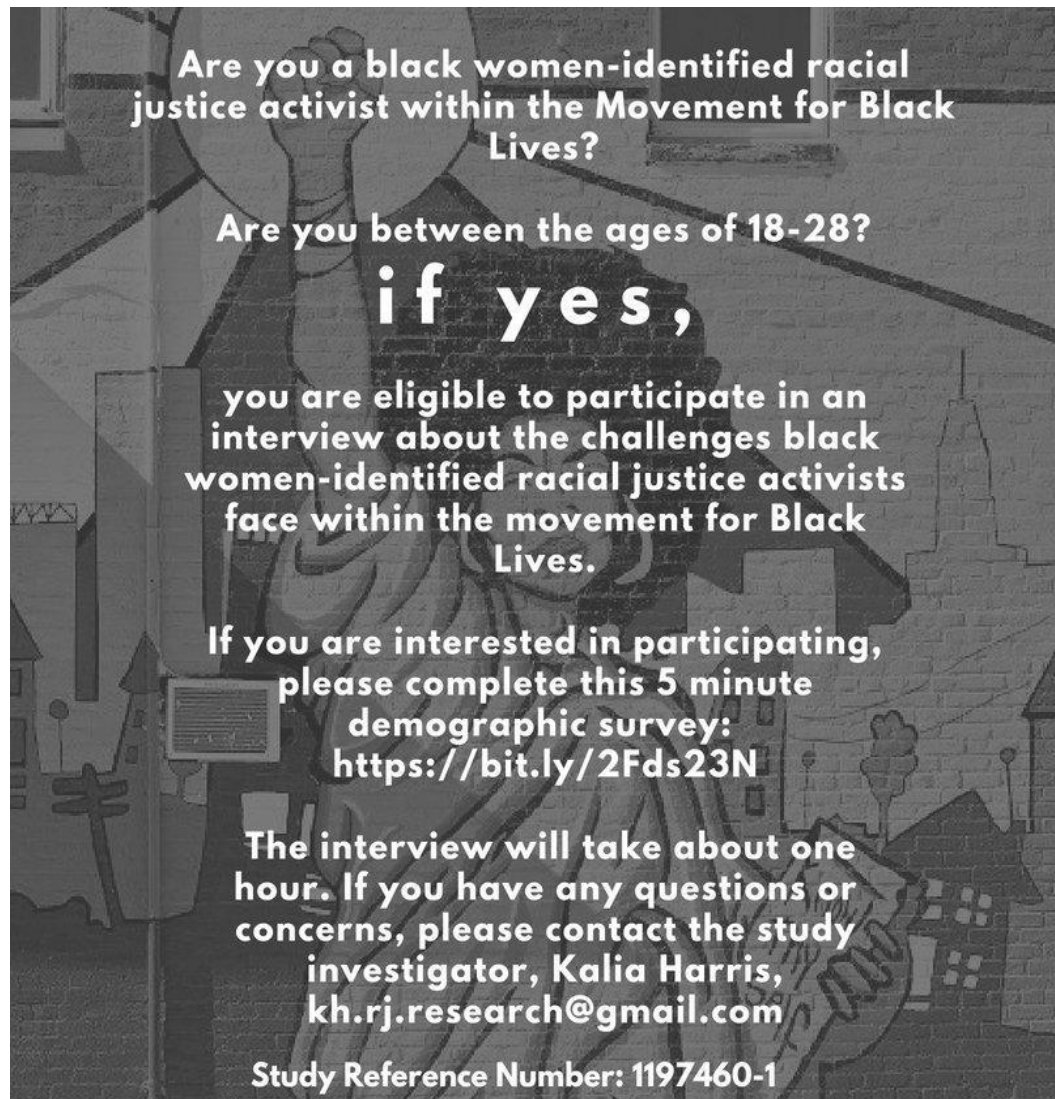the participants' experiences that can be explored in future research.

CONCLUSION

Originally, I began this research with the desire to understand how Black women and non-binary individuals were sustaining themselves within their activism in the Black Lives Matter movement. The purpose of this study was to examine the obstacles that Black women and non-binary racial justice activists within the Black Lives Matter movement face to full participation in activism. Five Black women and non-binary Black Lives Matter activists shared their experiences through semi-structured interviews. From their narratives, several themes emerged that illustrated the participants' experiences with activist burnout, racial battle fatigue, queer battle fatigue, and black quare battle fatigue and, in turn, their sustainability practices. Each participant faced unique obstacles to their participation in racial justice activism: financially, mentally, socially, and legally. The majority of participants described experiencing activist burnout, racial battle fatigue, queer battle fatigue and/or Black quare battle fatigue as a result of the negative impacts of their involved in racial justice activism In addition, the participants faced racism, sexism, classism, heterosexism, and homophobia both within their personal lives and their activism. Despite these obstacles, each participant generated self-care strategies to sustain them within their activism over the long haul. In a time where Black Lives Matter activists are dying, going missing, or burning out from activism, it is important now more

than ever to learn from the experiences of Black women and non-binary Black Lives

Matter activists in order to sustain ourselves within our activism.

Participant Recruitment Flyer

Are you a black women-identified racial justice activist within the Movement for Black Lives?

Are you between the ages of 18-28?

if yes,

you are eligible to participate in an interview about the challenges black women-identified racial justice activists face within the movement for Black Lives.

If you are interested in participating, please complete this 5 minute demographic survey: https://bit.ly/2Fds23N

The interview will take about one hour. If you have any questions or concerns, please contact the study investigator, Kalia Harris, kh.rj.research@gmail.com

Study Reference Number: 1197460-1

APPENDIX B

Informed Consent

RESEARCH PROCEDURES

This research is being conducted by Dr. Angela Hattery and Kalia Harris at George Mason University. The purpose of this study is to examine the obstacles to full participation in racial justice activism and sites of inspiration for Black youth women, femme, and non-binary racial justice activists within the Movement for Black Lives in the United States. If you agree to participate, you will first be asked to complete the demographic survey below, which will take less than five minutes to complete. If selected as a participant, you will have the opportunity to participate in an interview that will take approximately an hour and a half. With your permission, I will audiotape and take notes during the interview. The recording is to accurately record the information you provide and will be used for transcription purposes only. If you choose not to be audiotaped, I will take notes instead. If you agree to being audiotaped but feel uncomfortable at any time during the interview, I can turn off the recorder at your request. You may also stop the interview at any time. During the interview, you will be asked about the nature of your racial justice activism, how you became involved in the activism, the challenges you have experienced while engaging in racial justice activism, and how you sustain your activism and engage in self-care.

RISKS

There are minimal risks associated with this study, although I am asking you to share some personal and confidential information about your experiences. You do not have to answer any questions you are uncomfortable answering, and you are free to withdraw from the interview at any time for any reason.

BENEFITS

There are no direct benefits to you other than to contribute to research around Black youth femmes/women racial justice activists in the contemporary movement for Black lives.

CONFIDENTIALITY

The data in this study will be kept confidential. Interview transcriptions will be locked on a password-protected computer in my office at George Mason University. Personal identifiers such as email addresses will be removed from data set when data collection is complete. A pseudonym will be chosen for you after transcription. While it is understood that no computer transmission can be perfectly secure, reasonable efforts will be made to protect the confidentiality of your transmission.

PARTICIPATION

Your participation is voluntary, and you are free to withdraw from the study at any time. There is no penalty for not participating in this study. You must be 18 or older to participate.

CONTACT

This research is being conducted by Dr. Angela Hattery and Kalia Harris at George

Mason University. Dr. Hattery may be reached at ahattery@gmu.edu and Ms. Harris may

be reached at kh.rj.research@gmail.com for questions or to report a research-related

problem. You may contact the George Mason University Institutional Review Board

(IRB) Office at 703-993-4121 if you have questions or comments regarding your rights

as a participant in the research.

This research project has been reviewed by the Institutional Review Board at George

Mason University, Fairfax, VA.

Pre-Screening Demographic Survey

Thank you for taking the time to complete this short demographic survey. This section is intended to collect demographic information from interested participants. We will not use any of the information you provided to identify you in the study. You are free to withdraw from this any time.

1. How do you describe your racial identity?

2. How do you describe your gender identity?

3. How old are you?

4. How long have you been involved in racial justice activism?

5. How many hours per week would you estimate you spend on activism?

6. Would you consider your work to be associated with the Movement for Black Lives/Black Lives Matter movement?

7. On a scale of 1-10, how often do you have trouble making ends meet financially? (i.e. paying bills, feeding yourself/family, etc.)

8. Can you briefly describe challenges that you have experienced as a woman-identified racial justice activist?

9. What is your email address?

Interview Protocol

→ Introduction to be done before you turn on the recorder:
→ Thank you for participating in this study on the challenges that Black youth femmes and women activists' experiences within the movement for Black lives. This interview should take about one and a half hour. Your participation is voluntary and confidential. I will not share your name or any other information that would allow people to identify you. You are welcome to end your participation at any time. There is no penalty for ending your participation.
→ Is it okay if I record this interview?
→ Before I begin recording, I would like to collect some demographic information. It will not be connected to your interview, but it will help to describe the diversity in the sample of people I've interviewed.

Part 1: Background
1. Talk a little bit about the racial justice activism you do.
   a. Are there particular racial justice issues on which you focus most intently? Why are these issues particularly important to you?
   b. Are you involved in any racial justice organizations?
      i. If so, can you describe some of work that the racial justice organizations you are a part of? (Prompt with: Educational? Direct Action? Social?)
   c. What forms does your activism tend to take within the movement and/or organizations you're involved in? (Prompt with: "Protests? Demonstrations? Education campaigns? Teach-ins? Direct Action?")

Part 2: Obstacles to Participation
1. (Some research suggests that ... there are obstacles to full participation in activism) Do you feel like there are obstacles that prevent you from fulling participating in your activism? (Prompt with: "financial obstacles, family obligations, physical obstacles"?)
   a. To what extent do you feel these obstacles prohibit you from fully participating?
      i. If these obstacles didn't exist, do you feel that you would participate in your activism differently. If so, how?

Part 3: Impact on Well-being
    1. Has your participation in activism had any sort of negative impact on your well-being? (Prompt with: "Your psychological or emotional well-being? Your physical well-being?") If so, how, specifically, has it affected you?

    2. Has the impact on your well-being ever caused you to scale back or disengage from activism at least temporarily?

Part 4: Activist Sustainability
    1. Given the challenges that you face as an activist, what helps keep you going?

    2. How do you attend to your own well-being as it relates to your racial justice activism? Have any self-care strategies made you a better activist? If so, how?

    3. What benefits would you say you derive (get) from your participation in racial justice activism? (Psychological benefits? Academic benefits- if in school? Social benefits? Professional benefits? Other benefits?)

    4. Have you ever had mentoring or training on how to cope with emotional, physical, and psychological toll that doing racial justice activism can take on activists?
        a. If so, what was the nature of the mentoring or training? Has it been effective?
        b. If you could attend a workshop on how to sustain yourself as an activist, what would be helpful to learn at the workshop?
    5. What do you know now that you wish you knew back when you first started getting into racial justice activism?
    6. Do you have anything else you'd like to add?

Thank you for participating.

Black Feminist Sustainability Development Theory
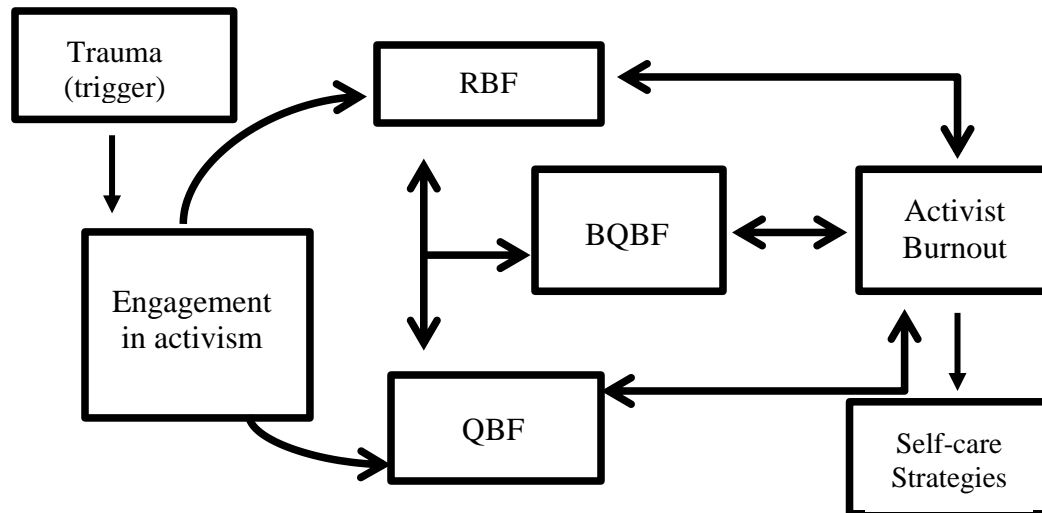
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