

Abstract

The Intersections Project sought to uncover what emerged in artwork and conversation among six intersectional activists in St. Louis, Missouri. The research methodology nested grounded theory as a mode of deep listening within an overarching participatory action research model. The Intersections Project was composed of two artmaking and dialogue meetups, an informal group gathering, individual interviews, and a documentary that shared the project with the wider community. Participants used individual and group artmaking to form connections and develop multi-layered meaning from their experiences as intersectional activists. This information was used to develop a theoretical model on the development and sustainment of intersectional activism that described intersectional activism as a process of continual learning supported by community. Using critical and constructivist lenses, this research furthers intersectional discourse among social movement activists and fills a gap in the literature at the crossroads of activism and psychological health, as well as intersectional art therapy.

Introduction

Instruction on how to therapeutically treat the social location of trauma is still growing. As editor of the book, *Art Therapy for Social Justice: Radical Intersections*, Talwar calls for this gap to close, stating, “Art therapists must understand how deep-seated inequalities - social, economic, and political -- have shaped the psychological makeup of the people they serve, and examine the role of the arts and social action in the delivery of mental health services” (2019, p. 3). Motivations for the Intersections Project included supporting intersectional activists’ well-being, developing a theory on the development and sustainment of intersectional activists, and supporting the overall sustainability of social justice movements.

Literature Review

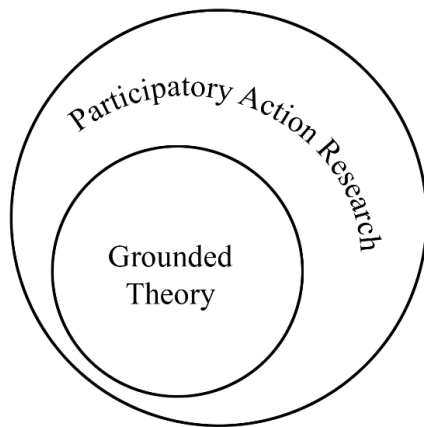


Activist burnout is an equal or greater threat to the success of social movements than external resistance alone (Downton & Wehr, 1998; Gorski, 2015; Maslach & Gomes, 2006; Plyler, 2006; Rodgers, 2010). Sustained activism was found to be primarily dependent upon the quality of connection between activists and their movement community (Downton & Wehr, 1998; Plyler, 2006). In fact, internal group climate was the primary feature that determined activists’ sustained involvement far over the gain or loss of movement goals (Gomes, 1992).

A healing justice framework re-centers the role of healing as a part of liberation to create a

collective climate that supports the needs of group members (Healing Justice, 2018). Intersectional art therapy can help support the individual well-being of activists and forward the work of social movements through its ability to facilitate meaning-making and connection (Talwar, 2019). Digital storytelling creates a platform for deep listening, empathy, and politicized education through public viewing (Reynolds & Hammound-Beckett, 2012).

Methodology



The study nested a grounded theory analysis within an overarching participatory action research framework.

Participants consisted of six intersectional activists from St. Louis, Missouri who met for two artmaking and dialogue sessions at a community center. At the first session, participants described themselves through their individual artwork. At the second session, participants made a group sculpture that described their development and sustainment as activists, resulting in a theory.

Transcripts were coded for themes to allow categories to emerge from the data. Results were validated utilizing a coding comparison, thick descriptions, participant checking, and triangulation of the data threads.

Video taken of the sessions and individual interviews will be developed into a short documentary to share the knowledge and wisdom of intersectional activists with the wider community.

Results

Themes: identity, activism, facilitation/process, resonance, art materials/metaphor, named emotion, values, intergenerational, and humor

Values: Participants valued understanding activism as a process along a spectrum which stands in contrast to binary, linear ways of understanding and experiencing the world. Participants valued being aware of privilege, the consistent application of intersectionality, sharing from a place of individual experience, and continual learning.

Emotions: Most emotional experiences participants discussed in the meetups were unpleasant, while most emotions participants described having in the meetups revolved around community and connection.

Facilitation: The group adopted a shared facilitation style described as *emergent strategy*.

Stresses in Intersectional Activism: Public visibility is a significant strain for activists with intersectional identities because in addition to the inherent vulnerability of public activism, intersectional activists may not be fully seen or understood by viewers. Participants named the challenging impact of navigating public visibility, working with intense emotions, moving through cycles of energy expenditure and renewal, and the strain of individuals coming at an aspect of themselves made visible through public activism while much more complexity exists.

Artmaking: The Intersections Project showed how using artmaking to deeply listen to intersectional activists can generate a sense of resonance and being more fully seen. As artmaking and dialogue progressed in the making of the group sculpture, multilayered meaning evolved, and new interpretations were made.

Theoretical Model on the Development and Sustainment of Intersectional Activism: Through continued conversation, the group sculpture that was initially constructed as a scene depicting observers, the media, and activists as separate entities turned into a cyclical process of development. The process begins with observation and involves a journey through a difficult process of generating awareness before engaging in activism. The model depicts a supportive community surrounding activists that radiates outward to those engaging in generating awareness and observers who are just beginning to see new aspects of oppression. The key to intersectional activist development is to be engaged in a constant learning process that listens well to people's lived experiences at multiple intersections and integrates that knowledge into the methods and goals of intersectional movements. This involves becoming awake to the interrelationship between oneself, others, and systems, and engaging in strategies for transformational change.

Discussion

The Intersections Project confirmed findings that activists whose identities are connected to the social justice causes they address are susceptible to burnout due to the emotional labor they provide (Goodwin & Pfaff, 2001; Gorski & Chen, 2015). However, the factor participants discussed more so than emotional labor was the impact of public visibility. Continued research and practice exploring specific strategies to protect, support, and sustain intersectional activists engaged in public activism is needed.

Participants consistently referenced community as a central support for their wellbeing and continued engagement in activism. This echoes Nepstad's (2004) findings that described how material, emotional, and family support enabled activists to overcome challenges to long-term movement participation.

Practitioners in the creative arts therapies and trauma-informed facilitators skilled in navigating emotional expression can provide attunement to the ways intersectional activists share themselves through words, images, and movement. Art therapy is one way intersectional activists can form connection and community that supports their ability to remain engaged in activism as long as desired.