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Burnout in Social Movements

The Roots, The Experience, The Lessons Learned

This paper explores my personal experience of burnout[1]. This is not a topic I intended to write about, but one that grabbed me and demanded attention. Here, I explore the meanings and roots of activist burnout, and what social movement theory might offer to understand this experience. I will argue that burnout is both a public and private issue, and offer constructive suggestions of ways that burnout in social movements can be prevented and addressed.

The Impetus

This paper was born out of a group project for the course 'Contemporary Social Movements'. For the project we were asked to organize a number of actions around an issue at our university, and engage in 'learning-by-doing' by executing our ideas and incorporating the social movement theories we had learned in class into our planning. Initially, I was overjoyed at the opportunity to engage in activism as part of my coursework; unfortunately, this enthusiasm was short-lived. Our group organized two actions, both focused on critical pedagogy at McGill. While I expected

the project to be fun and interesting, I instead found that I was disengaged, frustrated, and cynical about the project, our actions, and our results.

My ongoing pessimistic and disinterested attitude prompted me to begin wondering why my enthusiasm was so low, and, after linking this to other events and recent experiences, to wonder whether I was 'burning out'. These questions lead me to research the phenomenon of activist burnout, and reflect on my own experiences of it.

Involvement in Activism

It is important to understand that this project was not my first involvement in social action. I have been involved in organizing in a variety of capacities for a number of years, but in the past year found myself increasingly invested in high-cost activism[2]. During the student strike, I attended numerous demonstrations, helped with mobilization efforts at McGill, participated in nightly casseroles, and became highly engaged in popular education groups throughout the city. A large portion of my time was devoted to these activities. Simultaneously, I was a member of a number of environmental and political groups on campus, particularly through QPIRG and CKUT. This year, I continued to participate in quite a few of these groups, while also working three part-time jobs and studying full-time. These experiences encouraged me to take this social movements course, and also played a significant role in my reflections on activist burnout.

Biographical Availability

The reasons for this high level of involvement are many, including previous experience, ideological affinity, social networks, and structural availability. In particular, I could be involved in high-cost activism because of my biographical availability, "defined as the absence of personal constraints that may increase the costs and risks of movement participation" (McAdam 1986, 70). This includes my being a student (with a flexible schedule), unmarried and with no children, a Canadian citizen, and new to Montreal (thereby lacking other major commitments). A shift in my biographical availability recently, which I perceive as linked to my burnout, was to go from being unemployed during the last school year to working this year.

Niche Overlap

Another way of understanding my involvement in a variety of SMOs[3] is to refer to Popielarz and McPherson's (1995) description of niches in social space. Social

space is arranged by sociodemographic characteristics on multiple axes. Since people tend to associate with others who have similar sociodemographic characteristics as themselves, those people are also close to them in social space (701). While there are a number of components to this proposition, that which concerns my argument is the concept of niche overlap. Niche overlaps are areas in social space where multiple groups recruit members. This causes members whose identity falls into a niche overlap to "run out of the resources necessary for membership" (715) because of the pressure to participate in many groups. I propose that SMOs, which require members to have certain social networks, value systems, and structural availabilities, often draw on the same individuals for membership, and that these members have increased turnover and burnout.

As a student activist who believes in free education, during the Quebec Student Movement I lay in the niche overlap of many SMOs recruiting members. Additionally, as a queer woman interested in and studying migrant justice, sustainability, and First Nations rights, my identity and interests also made me a potential member for other SMOs and activist causes. This resulted in me "quickly run[ning] out of the time, money, and attention important for voluntary association participation" (Popielarz and McPherson 1995, 704).

Burnout

Not only did my biographical availability allow me to become involved in high-cost activism, as McAdam (1986) proposes, my social location also positioned me in a niche overlap, where I was pulled in many directions at once by varied SMOs whose 'profile' I fit. After the decrease in my biographical availability when I began working, I continued to be involved in most of the SMOs I had previously participated in, spreading myself very thin. Despite attempts to withdraw myself from a number of commitments, I was unable to do so for a variety of reasons: I needed to finish hiring new coordinators for one of my jobs before I could leave; a friend relied on me for babysitting her son while she worked; two organizations that I could have more easily left were those that I enjoyed most and with which I wanted to stay involved.

This led to a slow process of burnout, characterized by disengagement, disinterest, exhaustion, and cynicism. I withdrew from organizations that I had been very involved in, considering this retreat to be partially based on my exhaustion, but also due to structural problems in

organizations with which I was highly involved. For example, I increasingly found that the Alternative University Project (AltU) was overly focused on building institutional structure to formalize its existence; The Plant (a collectively-run art cooperative and living space) was dominated by a few individuals, all male, and left little room for new members or actions; and QPIRG (an organization focused on environmental and social justice research, action, and popular education) was not welcoming enough, and thus only attracted the same small group of students to all events. I almost stopped participating entirely in events such as meetings, demonstrations, workshops, and actions. Additionally, I found my emotional state to be much less consistent than in the past, and began experiencing sudden and very powerful mood swings.

I consider these experiences to fulfil the description of burnout given above, and think that being burned out led to my disinterested participation in our group project for the course. I felt critical of the project and found it emotionally straining on my pre-existing relationships with group members. Seemingly small things, like the fact that much of our organizing was done via e-mail, became very frustrating for me; I felt our organizing process was not well-done, the actions would fail, the project would be worthless, and so what was the point in trying, anyway.

Individual Model

Much literature characterizes burnout as an individual problem. This can be seen, for example, "in the occupational medical setting of some European countries…[where] burnout is an established medical diagnosis" (Schaufeli, Leiter, and Maslach 2008, 205). When categorized as such, burnout is ascribed to a particular individual, based on their symptoms. It is also treated individually and, as Arches (1997, 52) describes, "proposals for what can be done focus primarily on the individual and adaptation, with counselling and self-healing the interventions of choice".

Yet, I found while working through my own burnout, that changes focused solely on myself were not effective in overcoming the roots of the burnout. Giving up commitments made those I had organized with disappointed at my disengagement, and I felt frustrated at no longer participating in what I had considered to be meaningful organizing. I also found that when discussing burnout with friends, many could relate to my experience. I realized that this was a much broader problem—many SMOs were systematically not able to support members and prevent widespread burnout.

Based on these experiences, I do not feel that an individually focused understanding of or response to burnout is appropriate; therefore, I will instead outline a social analysis of burnout.

Social Analysis

Schaufeli, Leiter, and Maslach (2008) argue that burnout in the workplace is due to two factors: a lack of resources for human services work, and a lack of alignment between the values of companies and their workers. They push towards a social understanding of burnout by acknowledging these common trends in organizations, but I think that the work of Arches (1997) is more thorough and useful for this analysis. Arches suggests that burnout is a public issue, created "by tensions between bureaucratization, individualization and professionalization" (1997, 52) in the workplace. Drawing parallels between her analysis and my experience, I will compare the SMOs that I was involved in with the social work workplace that is central to her research.

The commitments with which I felt the strongest frustration and burnout were those that had the least collective components and the most individual, bureaucratic work. A major part of my declining energy was because a number of groups I was involved in decreased the number of meetings, actions and activities focused on hope and building alternatives to mainstream institutions, in order to focus on logistically moving projects forward. This meant a rise in organizing via email, and that meetings became brief, tense, and goal-centred.

I also felt that towards the end of the Quebec Student Movement, some groups, such as AltU and the Popular Education Network, became very focused on creating institutional structures and that all our efforts went into this, rather than organizing workshops, teach-ins, public discussions, skill-shares, and other forms of popular education as we had originally done. Thus, the organizing I was participating in was becoming less process-centred, creative, and dynamic, and more structured and goal-focused. This process in SMOs mirrors the process of professionalization and bureaucratization in social work, where these trends are often seen as significantly contributing to worker isolation, exhaustion, and loss of autonomy (Arches 1991).

In addition to these factors, I believe that the Quebec Student Movement perhaps led to a collective experience of burnout by many activists in the past year in Montreal, which played a key part in the decline of the movement. This is based on my own experience and

on trends I have noticed in friends, in organizing, and in the public presence of the movement in Montreal. It is possibly due to the fact that many students, although biographically available to participate in high-cost activism during the strike, became positioned within niche overlaps, causing them to engage and disengage in varied groups and actions with a high turnover rate. When the strike ended, students' biographical availability decreased (as they returned to class), and after months of protests, meetings, actions, and organizing, many were too exhausted—emotionally, physically, and mentally—to continue being involved in activism to the same extent.

Strategies

I will now address potential strategies for dealing with burnout, moving from individual to social responses, exploring the balance between these methods and the strengths and weaknesses of each.

As described above, the most common mode of individual response to burnout is counselling or the development and practice of self-care methods. These techniques are used both to address burnout once it is occurring and as preventative measures. Schaufeli, Leiter, and Maslach suggest that "preventing burnout is not enough, it is necessary to go further to foster work engagement" (2008, 216). They point to a shift towards positive psychology in the field of burnout that encourages psychologists to consider strengths rather than weaknesses, and look for energy, involvement, efficacy, vigour, dedication, and absorption of workers in their practice. Yet, looking for these characteristics without realizing that they are highly influenced by work conditions again misses the crucial social factors of burnout.

Downton and Wehr (2000), in a study of persistent peace activists in Colorado, find a middle ground between individual and collective responses to burnout. They describe how "persisters were creative in designing their lives so they could be available" (538) as a preventative measure against burnout through over-extending themselves. By this they mean that individuals intentionally maximized their biographical availability. They further argue that organizations have a significant influence on cultivating 'commitment sustaining factors' to "influence the depth of persisters' involvement and their ability to stay active over the long term" (536). Commitment sustaining factors both prevent and respond to burnout. They include developing strong ties to SMOs, balancing between different aspects of their lives, personally benefiting from activism (materially as

well as emotionally), and having space for creativity and innovation in activism. Thus, individuals and the groups they are involved with co-create conditions that foster long-term involvement and preclude disengagement.

Valocchi (2010) also offers a balance between individual and collective responses to burnout in his book *Social Movements and Activism in the USA*, based on a series of interviews with activists in Hartford, CT. He describes how almost all of the activists he interviewed framed their burnout as an individual issue, but argues that it is important to put their individual stories in dialogue with social theory. He critiques their individual focus on burnout but social focus on other issues, writing, "they fail to turn their progressive values onto themselves and ask themselves how communities of activists should take care of one another" (138). The solution he offers is that activists should "spend as much time fashioning plausibility structures[4] and other forms of internal support for themselves and others as they do engaging in the more externally directed battles for social change" (130).

A number of authors in the field of social work offer structural solutions to burnout. Dreikosen puts this bluntly: "an empowered group of social workers, working together to change a system that is oppressive and flawed, is a great deal more productive than several isolated workers blaming themselves for burning out" (2009, 108), and advocates for coalitions of social workers to create systemic change in their profession. Arches (1997) makes a similar argument, and gives more concrete suggestions on how to create this systemic change. She suggests that burnout can be prevented and addressed through forming political support groups of social workers; forming coalitions with the communities in which social workers work; publicizing successes; lobbying the government to change working conditions; participating in public and community education about resource constraints and opportunities; and developing an awareness of alternative, more community-based structures (such as feminist and Africentric models).

Based on these different author's work and research, I wish to take forward with me a few key ideas about burnout prevention and response. The first is that individual actions, while possible, can only go so far. Counselling and self-care respond to the symptoms of a widespread problem, rather than its roots. I can act individually by trying to increase my biographical availability, for example by reducing other commitments, but doing so does not address the fact that there are many others in similar situations and that

this is a systemic problem.

A second lesson is that organizations can play an important role in addressing and slowing burnout. A number of the organizations that I have been involved with could have worked more collaboratively, instead of separately working on the same issues and causing members to burnout faster because of the creation and exploitation of niche overlaps. We could have also focused less on institutional strength, as based in bureaucratic models of organizations, and instead embraced more community-centric models like those Arches (1997) advocates.

Third, the qualitative studies I read about activist commitment and burnout (Downton and Wehr, 2000; Valocchi, 2010) focus on the fact that although burnout can be prevented by SMOs developing strong support and commitment sustaining factors, in reality activists are often forced to create their own strategies, as organizations do not make this a priority. This makes me want to work to ensure the organizations with which I work in the future prioritize strategies that support activists from varied backgrounds. It also signals to me that, to a certain extent, my life must be constructed around my involvement in activism. I am implementing small steps towards this, for example by shifting my employment to be more directly linked to my activism, by changing my academic program to study activism and topics of interest to me, and by learning more about burnout and how to address it.

Conclusion

Writing this paper has been a significant part of my process of dealing with my burnout this year. It has helped me understand that my experience of burnout was not isolated or individual, but was linked to structural factors and social patterns. As members of activist communities, we need to find ways to support one another and ensure that the groups we are a part of are actively combating wide-spread and persistent activist burnout. To address this problem, we must begin to explore, together, how to foster long-term, sustainable commitment.

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1 In this paper, burnout is defined as "a cluster of physical, emotional and interactional problems stemming from emotional exhaustion, perceived lack of accomplishment, and depersonalization related to job stress" (Arches 1997, 51). In this case, 'job' is understood broadly as my activism, following Fillieule's (2010) discussion of the notion of the 'activist career'.

2 High-cost activism refers to participation requiring significant expenditure of time, money, and energy (McAdam 1986). I typify my activist involvement as such because of the high time and energy it requires. The risk level of my involvement varies depending on specific actions.

3 An SMO is "a complex, or formal, organization which identifies its goals with the preferences of a social movement or a countermovement and attempts to implement those goals" (McCarthy and Zald 1977, 1218).

4 'Plausibility structures' are cited by Valocchi as a concept developed by Sharon Erickson Nepstad, and defined as "a set of practices, networks, and relations that provide material, cognitive, and emotional supports for activists doing demanding work" (Valocchi, 2010, 129).