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Surviving the Strain of Youth Organizing: Youth and Organizational Responses

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Abstract

Youth of Color in the United States are often leaders in movements for social justice. Evidence suggests that organizing has a positive macro-therapeutic effect on the mental health of young organizers; however, they can also experience strain and become targets of the very systems they are trying to change. In a community-based participatory action research study, three organizations that train youth of Color in organizing in Brooklyn, New York City held focus groups with youth and adult staff. The focus groups examined the strains experienced by youth organizers and the strategies adult partners use to prepare organizers to maintain hope and well-being. Findings suggest four key emergent strategies: (a) provide an emotional homespace to process the rub between worlds, (b) actively shape the long view on systems change, (c) increase self-care skills and emotional preparation for organizing, and (d) promote healing by building leader(full) communities.

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Introduction

Youth of Color (Black, Indigenous, Asian, Latinx, and mixed-race youth) in the United States, although marginalized in formal sociopolitical spheres, are often leaders in movements for social justice (Franklin, 2014; Ginwright, 2015; HoSang, 2006). Evidence suggests that civic engagement of young people at the local level, or in global initiatives for social change, contributes to their positive development (Ginwright, 2015; Jemal, 2018; Watts et al., 2003; Wernick et al., 2010, 2014). Evidence also suggests that youth experience relief from sociopolitical and economic stressors when they organize (Frost et al., 2019, Ortega-Williams, et al., 2020).

Amidst evidence of the benefits of organizing, there is also emerging recognition of the strains associated with engaging in organizing and sociopolitical development (Brown, 2017; Ortega-Williams et al., 2020). When young people become activists, they also become potential targets of the very oppression they are seeking to end (Franklin, 2016; Wang, 2019). From pro-democracy protests in Hong Kong (Wang, 2019) to the uprisings against the racially-biased police murder of George Floyd in 2020 (Bogel-Burroughs, 2020; Rodriguez, 2020), young people have been exposed to tear-gassing, beating and violence from police, federal authorities, and anti-protestors. As a result, adult and youth organizers can experience deep and understandable grief, despair, intra-group conflict, and burnout (Chen & Linendoll, 2020; Christens et al., 2008; Grinage, 2019; Szakos & Szakos, 2007). Young activists report that, at times, they feel a sense of betrayal and loss of hope that anything can change (Ortega-Williams et al., 2020; Wang, 2019). As researchers embedded deeply in community-based organizations doing intergenerational organizing, we wondered what wisdom youth and adult staff have accrued about how to emotionally prepare young people for the strain of organizing. There is scant literature on how to work with youth to mitigate such strain. Therefore, the central research questions of our current study are: How can adults training and working with youth of Color organizers support them with (1) healing from the strain between their vision of a just world and our current reality and (2) maintaining hope and well-being?

Our community-based participatory action approach used qualitative inquiry that included visual, artistic, and storytelling based data. We intentionally crafted a research team that spanned diverse ages, races, classes, genders,

abilities, and employment statuses. In this paper, we drew from two data sources: (1) findings from a community-based participatory action research study using focus group data with youth ($n = 43$, ages 14–24 years) from three organizations training youth of Color in organizing and (2) three focus group meetings with adult staff and youth at each organization ($n = 10$) to reflect on the findings that emerged from the youth-based focus groups. All three groups were located in Brooklyn, New York City, U.S.A . The particular emotional strains of youth in this study, as well as organizational responses to these social and emotional needs, will be highlighted. Implications for youth development organizations incorporating civic engagement and youth-adult organizing partnerships for social justice will be explored. The term youth of Color will be capitalized as is consistent in the literature within which this study is situated. It is also an opportunity to acknowledge the dignity and humanity that exists in transforming language, rooted in people's struggle against oppression for self-determination.

Literature Review

Positive Impacts of Youth Organizing

Youth organizing is defined as the engagement of young people, including those ranging in age from childhood to young adulthood, in collective action to transform policies, practices, institutions, and programs that impact their lives (Conner, 2012; Fine et al., 2003; Franklin, 2016; HoSang, 2006). In the United States, youth have been organizers in most major social movements (Franklin, 2016; HoSang, 2006).

The social and institutional changes that youth organizers win have an important impact upon their lives. Youth organized to achieve educational reforms that have shifted national discourse on the school to prison pipeline and policing (Fine et al., 2003; Rogers & Terriquez, 2013). Through organizing, young people also gain skills for daily life. Rogers and Terriquez (2013) found that youth organizers were significantly more likely to attend a 4-year college than youth from similar backgrounds who did not engage in organizing. Shah et al. (2017) found that young people engaged in police accountability work share tools with community members on de-escalation tactics that do not require police assistance.

Adultism

While engaging in multilevel change, youth organizers and their adult co-conspirators strive to interrupt adultism, an assumption that adults

are superior to youth and that knowledge flows only from adults to youth (Grosfoguel, 2013; Okun, 2001; Ozer, 2017; Teixeira et al., 2021). Adultism is a way of thinking and acting that is rooted in a legacy of colonialism and white supremacist culture. It is important that adults organizing in partnership with youth root their work in critical youth development theories (Ginwright, 2015; Lerner et al., 2000). The framework and understanding provided by these theories can support them in continually reflecting on their own positionalities within the youth-adult partnership and challenging adultism, as well as their own biases and assumptions about youth and themselves (Ozer, 2017; Richards-Schuster & Plachta Elliott, 2019). The dance that adults play in this work is an iterative, non-linear process of training and mentoring youth and stepping back (Bettencourt, 2020; Richards-Schuster & Timmermans, 2017; Teixeira et al., 2021), and is rooted in a healing justice framework (Ginwright, 2015; Kindred Southern Healing Justice Collective, 2020; Page, 2010).

The Strains of Organizing Upon Youth

The impact of organizing upon youth includes reports of benefits, such as sociopolitical and emotional development; however, there is also evidence of psychological and emotional strain (Anyiwo et al., 2018; Kulick et al., 2017; Ortega-Williams et al., 2020). In a study with youth of Color organizers, participants described a rub between the context of their everyday lives and the experience of safety and connectedness in their community organizing spaces. Youth organizers, who were trained intentionally to grow their knowledge about systems of oppression and how to identify them in everyday living, reported a heightened awareness of racism, sexism, and homophobia. Specifically, youth described tension and emotionally painful encounters with peers and family members who repeated stereotypical and derogatory myths about women and transfolk (Ortega-Williams et al., 2020).

While research has shown that community engagement positively impacts mental health and well-being (Kulick et al., 2017), participation in activism positively moderated the impact of LGBTQ microaggressions on mental health and well-being only for White students. For LGBTQI+ students of Color in this study, LGBTQI+ activism negatively moderated the impact of experiencing more overt LGBTQI+ victimization on depression. Kulick et al. (2017) suggest that engagement in LGBTQI+ activism by students of Color at a predominately white institution may make them more visible targets for both racism and hetero- and cis-sexism, compounding stress and distress. Anyiwo et al. (2018) similarly found that Black organizers also on

predominantly White college campuses had higher reported symptoms of psychological distress.

Healing Justice and Emotional Preparation for Youth Organizers

Black feminist/womanist strategists and organizers have written extensively about the need to transform the personal and political spaces in which Black, Indigenous, Latinx, Asian, and mixed-race people challenge systemic and interpersonal violence, while recovering physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually (Cade Bambara, 1980; Kindred Southern Healing Justice Collective, 2020; Lorde, 1984; Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1981; Page, 2010). The inclusion of emotional and spiritual preparation, rooted in cultural traditions and values, has been an integral part of organizing within the United States and internationally (Blanco et al., 2016; Franklin, 2016). For the scope of this paper, the contribution of the healing justice framework emerging from Black queer feminist radical thought to the emotional preparation of Black, Indigenous, Asian, Latinx, and mixed-race organizers will be presented (Ginwright, 2015; Kindred Southern Healing Justice Collective, 2020; Page, 2010).

Healing justice, as a framework, emphasizes a holistic approach to respond, process, and intervene in generational trauma while combating contemporary social injustice (Page, 2010). Healing justice also surfaces cultural collective practices that can impact and transform the injury from racist oppression, and other forms of subjugation, on organizers' bodies, hearts, and minds (Kindred Southern Healing Justice Collective, 2020). Additionally, as a framework, healing justice addresses how organizing spaces can perpetuate oppression and are also sites of struggle in need of interrupting violent power dynamics (Brown, 2017; Lorde, 1984). Based on this review of the literature, there is scant empirical research focused on how adults training youth in organizing can support the reduction of the strain youth experience from engaging in work for social justice while still healing from marginalization, attempted cultural erasure, and systemic inequities. This study works to fill this gap by drawing on the experiences of three youth-adult organizing partnerships. Our research explores how adults training and working with youth of Color organizers can support youth with healing from the strain between their vision of a just world and current reality while maintaining hope and well-being.

Methodology

Critical qualitative research (CQR) and community-based participatory action research (CBPAR) frameworks (Creswell, 2013; Fine & Torre, 2019; Steinberg

& Cannella, 2012) informed the research design for this study. CBPAR explores local knowledge and insights and considers people to be agents who can uniquely investigate their own situations (Bradbury, 2015). As Black, Indigenous, people of Color and feminist researchers have consistently pointed out, the traditional focus on a community's problems described by outsiders has led to narratives of brokenness. Such narratives are created with no input from communities themselves, leaving out their innovative solutions to challenges and the wisdom gained in the survival of inequity, injustice, and oppression (Fine, 1992; Henderson, et al., 2021; Torre et al., 2008; Tuck, 2009; Tuhiwai Smith, 1999).

The community identified for this project was youth organizers and their adult organizing mentors from three grassroots organizations. All members of the community were engaged in organizing for racial and gender justice. The CBPAR framework allowed us to make the research relevant to what the community perceived as its goals, made the project credible and joined together diverse research participants with a wide variety of knowledge and expertise (Bradbury, 2015).

Our methodology is *critical* and *participatory* because we shared experiences, stories, values, feelings, and standpoints knowing that we stood in a world that was not just or equitable and that the purpose of our research was to create change. We started with the lens and inquiry into how power, oppression, and privilege impacted academic knowledge creation and whose voices have been left out (Fine & Torre, 2019). From the beginning of our meetings together, we shared these values and stories to carve out the questions that were most important to us, particularly the staff and youth of Color. In partnering with the youth organizers and adult trainers as researchers, the research team was able to build upon our own participation and immersion into our organizational contexts to discover and explain the experiences under study (Hutchinson & Lovell, 2013). Rooted in participatory action research methods, we continually sought opportunities to center the voices of the community-based researchers and our findings. We engaged in organizing opportunities, presented at conferences, produced social media posts and hosted a large community share back event at one of the organizations. During the event, we used art, poetry, gallery walks and zine creation to create dialog with the broader organizations and community about what community organizing feels and looks like, and how to support one another in the process. The Fordham University institutional review board approved the study.

The Community-Based Research Team

Three organizations based in Brooklyn, New York City came together from 2014 through 2016 to explore the meaning and impact of community

organizing upon the mental health and well-being of youth of Color, in partnership with two community-based researchers from a mid-sized northeastern university. The organizations were chosen to participate in this study because of their strong community reputations for building youth leadership to engage in social action. Organizing, as defined in these organizations, includes community-based participatory action research, issue development, reflection, political analysis, raising awareness, community building activities, voter engagement, and direct action.

At the Red Hook Initiative youth organizing was incorporated into young adult and adolescent programming where young people ages 19 to 24 learned skills to address issues of systemic injustice in Red Hook, Brooklyn. The Red Hook Initiative is a community-based program that has been in existence since 2002 and actively incorporates leadership from the neighborhood, which is primarily comprised of Black and Latinx residents. At Girls for Gender Equity, youth leadership and organizing are cornerstones of all programing aiming to end gender-based violence and increase gender equity. Girls for Gender Equity is active in initiating and leading a national agenda for Black girls to shift policies, laws, and cultural factors that sustain the harm and devaluation of Black girls in multiple domains of their lives. The Center for Anti-Violence Education partners with teen girls and transgender youth to teach self-care, self-defense, and social justice skills. The Center for Anti-Violence Education has served New York City since 1974, centering those who are most at risk of xenophobic, racist, transphobic, and gendered violence. Youth programs serve primarily girls and LGBTQ youth of Color ages 12 to 18.

Our research team consisted of nine people—four adults and five young people. The adults were a university professor and a staff member from each of the three youth-serving organizations. The five young people were between the ages of 14 and 24 and also represented the three partner organizations. Six members of the team identified as Black, two as white, five as queer, one as gender expansive, and two as living with a disability. The research team added deliberate protocols to ensure youth of Color were centered within the intergenerational and multi-racial research space that we created. For example, youth were encouraged to speak before adults during meetings and facilitation techniques were used to ensure that quieter members were given priority to share before those who were more vocal. The combined experience of the team was over 50 years, including one member with 24 years of experience doing participatory program evaluation, CBPAR and collective-led inquiry (authors).

The research team met monthly and felt strongly that being in community and storytelling were essential to organizing and should be mirrored in the research process. Therefore, we designed focus groups that would allow all

voices to be heard and that would allow individuals to share stories while remaining in community with other youth and adult staff organizers. Question prompts were derived from the experience of the youth researchers on the team, as well as the experience of the adult-staffers and what we learned from the literature. The university partners trained youth and adult staff mentors to design and facilitate focus groups at each of the three organizations. The organization partners likewise trained the university partners through reciprocal knowledge sharing and redesigning research activities to make them relevant to the youth organizers we aimed to engage.

Data Collection

Youth focus groups. Data collection included four focus groups with youth of Color organizers. Focus groups with youth organizers were held at each organization to address the questions co-created by youth and adult research team members. These focus groups were facilitated by youth members of the research collective or by youth in partnership with an adult staff member. Using a semi-structured focus group protocol, questions included several prompts, such as:

1. What drew you to work with others to make things better?
2. When you say the words *leader or organizer*, what images or thoughts come to mind?
3. Has anything ever gotten in the way of you organizing or taking leadership? If yes, in what ways?
4. How do you feel when you are organizing?

Focus group sizes varied in number of participants: The Red Hook Initiative ($n=8$), Girls for Gender Equity ($n=20$), and The Center for Anti-Violence Education ($n=15$). All organizations served primarily youth of Color. Two of the three organizations served exclusively girls and gender expansive youth. Focus groups were representative of these demographics.

Adult staff focus groups. Ten people participated in three focus groups primarily for adult staffers at each organization directly involved in designing and implementing youth organizing training programs. Of the ten adults, six identified as African American, four as white, and four identified as queer. Three identified as youth participants who had become paid staff of the organization. The adult staff focus groups were held at each organization to review findings from the youth organizer focus groups, and included question prompts such as:

1. What do you think about what the youth organizers shared?
2. Did anything surprise you?
3. How will we grow our organizing work with youth based on the wisdom our youth organizers expressed?

Research team members were counted in the sample size because we facilitated the focus group and also were engaged as participants and stakeholders responsible to the changes that were identified, as occurs in community-based participatory action research (Bradbury, 2015). In these adult-staff focus groups, participants including the research team debriefed the findings from the youth focus groups, which generated data about the organizational responses and readiness to act upon the implications.

Data Analysis

All focus groups were audio recorded or hand transcribed to produce verbatim transcripts that were reviewed for accuracy. As an adult-youth research team with different levels of experience with coding, we built in training that tapped into everyone's lived experience with discerning themes. For example, we designed a collective coding training opportunity with the snacks we ate. Each person described the dimensions of what they experienced while eating (e.g., taste, texture, smell, memories that were sparked). We then applied this procedure to coding our data. We individually listed categories and compared the codes we developed with quotes from our notes associated with the codes. We practiced making overarching super codes with supporting quotes for evidence. Codes achieved saturation when we found repetition of the themes across and within datasets. All initial codes and concomitant data were reviewed by the research team, and consensus was reached. These codes were grouped and regrouped to develop themes using axial coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Our analyses were strengthened by the theoretical sensitivity arising from the authors' multiple subject positions at participating organizations, as well as university researchers (McCracken, 1988). Member checking and reflexive memoing were also used throughout data collection and analysis process. The researchers, having been embedded in the contexts under study, were also resources in verifying the trustworthiness of the data (Erlandson et al., 1993; Ryan & Bernard, 2003).

Discussion

Overview

In synthesizing our analysis, four key themes emerged for adults training youth organizers: Adults can (1) provide an emotional homespace to process

the rub between worlds, (2) actively shape the long view on systems change with youth, (3) support youth with increasing self-care skills and emotional preparation for organizing, and (4) promote healing by building leader(full) communities with youth organizers.

Create Emotional Homespace to Process the Rub Between Worlds

Youth and adult stakeholders spoke repeatedly about the importance of having a sense of family and feeling at home in the spaces created at their lead organizations. A youth organizer at Girls for Gender Equity described the organization as a safe space:

> In my years at, I felt like I belonged, and I felt my differences were still accepted. And, I felt like for once in my life, I was in a safe space, I was able to identify a safe space. No matter what happens between us, there was always what I had to look forward to at the end of the day.

Our findings were consistent with the concept of *homespace* as coined in Ward's (2000) work on Black girls' identity development. Ward describes a homespace as a specialized location where girls learn to deal with everyday racism and stereotypes they encounter both directly and indirectly (Ward, 2000). Consistent with this theorization, the youth organizations were successful if they became homespaces and an additional site of resistance in which adult mentors and other youth passed on the wisdom needed to resist internalizing intersectional negative images, undo shame, and create healing. A youth organizer at Girls for Gender Equity shared the feelings she experienced from being in a homespace:

> "When I'm at Girls for Gender Equity, I feel . . . alert, very enthusiastic, excited, thrilled, spontaneous, original, unique, informative and divine, one of a kind, lovely, accepted, creative. That's how I feel."

Youth organizers' original homespaces, within their families, occasionally became a source of tension as youth civic engagement and activism flourished. One youth organizer at The Center for Anti-Violence Education offered an illustrative story:

> Ever since I was young me and my brother would like stay with my grandmother for the summer time. She owned a restaurant, and it was extremely hot in the summertime. And my brother would go to the park and she would say you can't go to the park cause you're a girl. Like my grandmother would always say that to me. And I would try to like sneak out and go to the park. I would get in

> trouble, and I always thought like, "This is super unfair." Like that really scarred me. Like someone who I lived with for my whole life like my brother like has all these opportunities – even if they're small like going to the park and playing with random kids. It just seemed unfair that I couldn't go because I was a female.

Participants described their experiences with confronting ageism and painful stereotypical norms within their families. An organizer spoke of the extra work she took on of having to explain her intersectional understanding of social justice to her family. She said, "If I'm watching the news with my family, 'cause they only know the basic ones like racism, but they don't really know deeper, like colorism and ageism and stuff like that, so I talk to them about it." She said that this dynamic could be difficult to navigate at times. Others felt the sting of ageism or disregard at home. One participant said, "Parents automatically feel like you don't know anything about the world and also they think that you're ignorant to what's happening around you, but you're not." Youth activists in this study were persistently engaging in social change work at home, school, and afterschool programs, and whenever there were urgent calls to action about social injustice.

Staff organizers across organizations thought intentionally about how to make young people feel supported, accepted, unique, informed, creative, and loved. The three organizations gave much attention to the physical and emotional setting of the organization. In the debrief process, one adult staff member of the Center of Anti-Violence Education shared the importance of a sacred space:

> At the Center for Anti-Violence Education in the main meeting space, shoes were always removed upon entering and nothing was ever on the walls. Just a mirror covered one wall. Youth loved to lay on the ground, listen to music and relax in this space. Because it was left blank, I believe the youth owned the space as their respite and their relaxation zone. It was kept clean and sacred for them and others at all times. They would get upset if we changed the rules on special occasions and let people wear their shoes in for a meeting. . .The space in the rest of the organization showed photos of the many ancestors who had come through the space and also all current and past youth members.

Youth of Color pick up messages from the physical settings they spend time in about the kind of mentoring they can expect, positive or negative assumptions being made about them, levels of identity safety they can expect, and whether they could anticipate an opportunity to learn from those with identities different from their own (Purdie-Vaughns et al., 2008). One youth organizer described the messages that are sent to young people about expectations, stating, "Trusting me to be responsible enough to have opportunities

where I could take leadership roles, like, showed somebody else believed in me that I could do something so I was like, ok I can do it."

Consistent with Purdie-Vaughns et al. (2008) research, our results suggest that identity safety is a key component for positive identity development and psychological health among diverse youth organizers. Identity safety and home-space cues were experienced and displayed uniquely in each organization with several commonalities emerging, including being held to high expectations; being trusted; being given unconditional positive regard; seeing posters, photos, and live role models who reflected an intersectional and inclusive community with clear expectations; and co-creating brave space agreements that were posted throughout each space. For example, one youth organizer at the Center for Anti-Violence Education described how the women she saw inspired her:

> I really felt like seeing other women that were standing in their own power kind of allowed me to take up space as well. So, like, I remember being really apologetic in middle school and like coming to the Center for Anti-Violence Education and seeing women like fully empowered and standing in their full selves and not apologizing kind of inspired me to hopefully do the same thing.

Through feeling a sense of mutual engagement with the space and staff members, the youth members discussed how they were able to develop a sense of appreciation of difference and their own identities.

Actively Shape the "Long View" on Systems Change

Organizations are uniquely poised to offer space to name and work through the fear some youth organizers might have of never seeing change in one's lifetime. One staff member said that we can "nurture Black radical imagination – imagining what could be if the system was really fundamentally changed." Imagination, a strength of young organizers, can be cultivated for fuel when friends, family or school staff express views that oppose their organizing work and even reinforce the status quo. The way imagination was described is consistent with conceptualizations of healing that promote it as a fundamental resource for collective action (Brown, 2017; Ginwright, 2010).

Another strategy a staff member presented is to "remember and name the ancestors who have come before them – personal and famous, and how the world has changed based on their ancestors' contribution," because "even if we don't see change now, maybe we can become the ancestors who others will channel." In this example, imagination was again defined as an important medium to access resources from the legacies of one's cultural heritage to persist when encountering obstacles.

These experiences of systemic change taking a long time is common across transformative organizing efforts, but the feelings can be more profound among newer organizers who may lack the personal experience of witnessing change over the long haul. This finding supports transformative and healing justice models that suggest that it is critical to acknowledge and validate this stress (Greene, 2020; Page, 2010). Further, participants shared, it is important to draw upon not only the power that comes from our movements, but also the power, hope, and healing that comes from within our cultural, spiritual and historical community practices. Finally, staff recommended the importance of truly celebrating small wins, even when "we technically lose" short term so youth can see the long-term impact of the work they are doing. These findings contribute to principles found in healing justice and transformative organizing models (Page, 2010; Zimmerman et al., 2010).

Increase Self-Care Skills and Emotional Preparation for Organizing

Staff members reflected deeply upon the pain of isolation and burnout youth felt when they became increasingly aware of oppression within their families, friends, schools, and communities. The youth who participated in this study referred to how isolating it could be as new organizers in the "real world" as they grew politically. One adult staff member at The Red Hook Initiative shared an idea for addressing this isolation:

> We should provide opportunities for young organizers to engage their peers and family members in the learning that occurs at the Red Hook Initiative. Perhaps we can look into culture change models that organizations like the Dream Defenders are embarking on.

Self-care suggestions for youth organizing training included making time for activities other than organizing with each other or even telling the history of organizers who burned-out or suffered psychological stress when encountering violence. A staff member at the Red Hook Initiative suggested that we prepare youth emotionally at the beginning of their training to better expect what could come up on this journey. The staff member further suggested including themes about community organizing and mental health into the purpose of organizing programs in an introductory session. A Girls for Gender Equity adult staff member similarly suggested that organizations reconsider how they invest in and center the joy of youth organizers, because "while joy is definitely organic and youth will create magic, is joy/

celebration/fun intentional, funded or even mentioned as essential to carrying out the mission of our organizing work?"

These insights provide critical examples for how programs designed to train youth organizers can be more intentional in incorporating a healing justice approach into training. The process of naming stress and pain and attending to self-care as a central part of the organizing model is part of the collective healing process, which is in alignment with healing-centered engagement, a growing focus in youth development (Ginwright & James, 2002; Harden, 2014; Travis & Leech, 2014).

Promote Healing Through Building a Leader(full) Community

Building a strong bond was described as healing in our study. Youth organizers described finding "like minded-people" within their community organizing spaces as supportive. Adult staff across all three organizations, when reviewing the results, identified ways that relationship building can be intentionally promoted during the training process. A Center for Anti-Violence Education adult staff member suggested having role models, "like a Big Bros/Big Sis for activists and organizers," as a strategy to make youth organizing spaces more resilient. The staff member continued by stating, "It is important considering how much members rely on each other as they are growing in consciousness." In this view, healing and leadership occurred within the relationship, which aligns with scholarship on macro-therapeutic interventions (Ferguson et al., 2018) and sociopolitical development (Anyiwo et al., 2018). One Center for Anti-Violence Education adult staff member said that it will prepare youth "to be held radically accountable and also radically supported when there is conflict. Everyone is challenged and supported to navigate conflict without acting out their traumas. Never giving up on each other." Radical support and accountability required a type of leadership among trainers to simultaneously provide emotional care and maintain boundaries, which are nuanced skillsets with at times competing demands (Brown, 2017).

An Red Hook Initiativen adult staff member suggested working with trainers that are allies to young organizers, who share similar stories. For example, one staff member said she could "connect them to people who can relate directly to their life experiences of oppression and organizing against it, because it supports with reframing one's story." Another Red Hook Initiative adult staff member noted the importance of "integrating continuous spaces for reflection to connect storytelling to the issues they organize around and developing a process beyond standard debriefs at the end of a training session." The staffer generated strategies such as using photography and zine making as potentially "more helpful to process a group experience."

A Red Hook Initiative adult staff member said highlighting the value of youth organizers working together even when they are not "getting along" is an important lesson of community building. The staff member suggested, "Youth and mentors can learn together that offending someone is not irreparable and a group culture can be created that includes mediation." Transparency about strain and conflict was valued as an asset for youth organizing training. Staff members said that establishing a transparent process for addressing conflict is an important part of training. They further described a transparent process for addressing conflict as one in which youth and mentors were supported with articulating emotions. For example, an adult staff member at the Red Hook Initiative said, "A youth organizing group could use feeling cards to practice talking about emotions coming up around the injustice encountered while organizing, which could be helpful when the words are hard to find." The strategies proposed aligned with literature connecting sociopolitical development to emotional healing (Ginwright, 2018).

Implications

Although the study took place in the northeast of the United States, its insights are potentially important nationally for youth organizers and their adult organizational partners and mentors. This study both extends the literature and our understanding of how healing justice and macrotherapeutic action can be put into practice to improve the personal and community well-being of youth organizers of Color (Ferguson et al., 2018; Kulick et al., 2017; Ortega-Williams, 2020; Ortega-Williams et al., 2020; Rodriguez, 2020; Wernick et al., 2014).

Future research could explore various techniques and methods to assess readiness of youth organizations for confronting adultism and practicing power-sharing in their physical space, practices, and relationships with youth organizers (Kivel, 2011). Additionally, future research could support staff and youth organizers with examining their intersecting identities (e.g., transgender, Black, Indigenous, Asian, Latinx, and mixed-race identities; sexual orientation; familial support levels) who have complex experiences of oppression to better understand the dynamic process of navigating healing while organizing to confront oppressive practices. For example, is there a difference between how people of Color and white anti-racist adult allies need to prepare themselves to support youth healing while organizing?

Lastly, our findings showed that youth prefer to assume leadership roles, not as individuals, but collectively. It was important to them to have peer support and mutual learning take place. This has implications for how organizations design their training programs for youth organizing and implies that organizations could consider training youth within small groups or cohorts,

toward developing leadership skills to promote mutual aid to mitigate strain. Additionally, youth did prefer to have adult partners in leadership or to have the presence of active mentors with experience in the field. To support adult-youth partnerships, organizations can recruit adult staff and volunteers who have a youth organizing history and reflect the family backgrounds, cultural, racial, gender, and class experiences of youth organizers.

Strengths and Limitations

The present study involves a number of methodological strengths. Community-based participatory action research methods ensured that the study was meaningful to the organizations collecting the data. Research team members were integral members of their organizations; therefore, when it was time to review the results of the study, there was a level of accessibility to program managers and participants necessary to examine the trustworthiness of the findings and interpretations. Staff members from each organization were invested in responding to the findings and were interested in integrating them within the organization. Additionally, the leadership of staff and participants throughout the research process enabled key definitions of lived experiences to surface about mental health, psychological strain and well-being that otherwise could have been inaccessible.

Several limitations were present in this study as well. The researchers' deep relationships with the organizations under study were beneficial at times, but also may have created bias about effective organizational practices. Additionally, the adult staff carried the power of being paid staff and adults, which could have impacted the process. We used constant reflexivity and dialogue, not to rid ourselves of these biases, but to make them known and implement strategies to mitigate them. Demographic data on participants was not collected as a methodological choice at the time; however, we realize this information could have been useful in adding depth to the knowledge that was built. Lastly, future research could benefit from including a wider range of organizing training styles beyond the selected three organizations which would have expanded our understanding of the topic.

Conclusion

One definition of healing justice is the cultivation of survival practices that center the collective safety and well-being of communities as an integral part of the fight for social justice (Page, 2010). Our findings highlight the strains experienced by youth organizers, as well as recommendations for adult mentors and trainers to help young people navigate the strain of

organizing. Our study contributes to the healing justice and social justice youth development frameworks by documenting the myriad ways adult organizers and activists prepare and care for the strain that can be experienced by organizing, sociopolitical development, and centering healing. The voices of adult staff and youth in the study provide a unique and emergent perspective on how adult organizers and researchers might better partner with youth to balance youth healing and wellness within the work of deep social change.

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