Understanding Distancing Behaviors in Social Justice Activism and Organizations: An Interpretive Descriptive Study

Caera Gramore

A thesis
submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Social Work

University of Washington

2020

Committee:
Michael S. Spencer
Ryan Petros

Program Authorized to Offer Degree:

Social Work

University of Washington

Abstract

Understanding Distancing Behaviors in Social Justice Activism and Organizations: An Interpretive Descriptive Study

Caera Gramore

Chair of the Supervisory Committee:

Michael S. Spencer

School of Social Work

The United States has seen many social justice movements over time, seeking to improve conditions for various populations. While many of these movements have made significant changes and improvements over time, they have also been prone to various setbacks. While there are many factors that contribute to the difficulties faced by social justice movements and organizations, one common difficulty is the presence of distancing, division, and oppression within movements, especially when more centered members of a movement contribute to the marginalization and oppression of the more marginalized members (Crenshaw, 1991; Dzodan, 2011; Lorde, 1998; Smith, 2006). Recent studies and theoretical frameworks support the idea that marginalization and shame contribute to diminished participation in social justice

movements (Brown, 2007; Greene & Britton, 2015; Jordan, 2018; Kim, Kendall, & Chang, 2016; Stewart & Collins, 2014; Verdinelli & Kutner, 2016). This paper presents an exploratory study of adults who have experienced distancing and/or exclusion in social justice activism and/or organizations, using multiple interviews with each participant in order to gather rich qualitative data. This study seeks to improve understanding, and possibly to discover some ways to mitigate distancing behaviors within social justice movements.

Understanding Distancing Behaviors in Social Justice Activism and Organizations: An Interpretive Descriptive Study

The United States has seen many social justice movements over time, seeking to improve conditions for various populations. There have been numerous movements, and organizations sprung from those movements, working to improve conditions for indigenous peoples, Black people, women, economically poor people, people with disabilities, the elderly, immigrants, the working poor, children and youth, Hispanic/Latinx people, LGBTQ+ people, members of non-Christian religions, and others.

While many of these movements have made significant changes and improvements over time, they have also been prone to various setbacks. Recent years in the United States have seen the accomplishments of many social justice movements erased, set back, or eroded. While there are many factors that contribute to the difficulties faced by social justice movements and organizations, one common difficulty is the presence of distancing, division, and oppression within movements, especially when more centered members of a movement contribute to the marginalization and oppression of the more marginalized members (Crenshaw, 1991; Dzodan, 2011; Lorde, 1998; Smith, 2006).

Several theoretical frameworks may contribute to understanding why a continuation of oppression within a social justice movement may diminish group cohesion, engagement, and effectiveness. Critical Race Theory examines various aspects of race and oppression in relation to power structures (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). One of the basic tenets of Critical Race Theory is intersectionality, an examination of multiple identities at the same time, such as Black and woman, or poor, gay, and disabled. Dr. Kimberlé Crenshaw argues that failure to acknowledge

intersectionality within a social justice movement can lead that movement to perpetuate oppression instead of eliminate it (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 140; 1991, p. 1252). In their book Critical Race Theory (2012), Delgado & Stefancic describe a scenario in which a Black woman may have immediate concerns about workplace discrimination, limited income, and childcare, and joining but then leaving both the feminist movement and the Black civil rights movement because the dominant groups in each movement (white women and Black men) will never prioritize her concerns in their agendas (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012, pp. 58 – 60).

Although commonly focused on clinical application in counseling, Relational-Cultural Theory (RCT) has many central tenets that also apply to social connections and organizational relational concerns, including group cohesion and participation (Comstock et al., 2002; Duffey & Trepal, 2016). Central tenets of RCT include the ideas that human beings need connection, and full maturity occurs not when we achieve independence from others, but when we achieve healthy interdependence in "growth-fostering relationships" (Comstock et al., 2008, p. 279). Growth is demonstrated by "[t]he ability to participate in increasingly complex and diversified relational networks" (Comstock et al., 2008, p. 280). RCT also posits that "disconnections created by . . . marginalization contribute to the experience of immobilization and isolation . . . [They] create pain and drain energy in individuals and societies" (Jordan, 2018, p. 9).

One theme central to this paper derives from another central tenet of RCT called the "central relational paradox", which states that people need connection in order to thrive, but often behave in ways that make it more difficult and/or less desirable to connect with them (Comstock et al., 2002). These ways of behaving have been called "strategies of disconnecting or distancing behaviors" in RCT (Duffey & Trepal, 2016, p. 380). This is centrally important to understanding which behaviors contribute to distancing between people, rather than contributing

to connection. Various activist writers with intersecting marginalized identities, such as Women of Color, have written about being told by more centered group members "you're being divisive" or that they are 'distracting' from the focus of a movement, when in fact they were speaking about how more centered members of a movement were marginalizing them (Dzodan, 2011; J, 2018; Johnson, 2016). RCT is clear in its own literature that marginalization of others itself creates distance between people and can cause harm to the marginalized person (Comstock et al., 2002; Comstock et al., 2008; Duffey & Trepal, 2016; Jordan, 2008; Jordan, 2018).

Shame Resilience Theory, which was partially informed by RCT, focuses on shame as "the intensely painful feeling or experience of believing we are flawed and therefore unworthy of acceptance and belonging" (Brown, 2007, p. 5). Shame can be invoked through marginalization, and could lead a member of a group to "move away" (withdrawing, freezing, and/or feeling stuck) (Brown, 2007, p. 89). This could be detrimental to social justice movements, especially if marginalization has become a recurring pattern in a group or movement.

Since this study will also be working with various intersecting identities of each participant, there arose a need to clarify a recognized model of intersecting identities. This study worked with the ADRESSING model proposed by Hays (2008) with further commentary and clarification by Nieto, Boyer, Goodwin, Johnson, & Smith, (2010). In this model, ADRESSING is an acronym for nine major identities: Age, Disability Status, Religion, Ethnicity, Socioeconomic class, Sexual orientation, Indigenous heritage, National origin, and Gender.

Recent studies appear to confirm some of the concepts from these theoretical frameworks. For example, Greene & Britton (2015), found that both shame and internalized homophobia negatively impacted the commitment and investment of men in same-sex relationships, which is in alignment with the distancing patterns and the draining of energy from

marginalization recognized in RCT, and with the "move away" patterns identified in Shame Resilience Theory. Kim, Kendall, & Chang (2016) found that experiences of subtle racism in general American contexts negatively impacted the willingness of Asian-American students to seek professional help (in the U.S.) for mental health symptoms or concerns, which is in alignment with the isolation from marginalization recognized in RCT. Stewart & Collins (2014) and Verdinelli & Kutner (2016) both found that graduate students with disabilities often struggled with how much to let others know about their conditions. Both noted that disproportionate numbers of students with disabilities drop out from higher education and/or fail to hold jobs in their chosen field after graduation (Stewart & Collins, 2014; Verdinelli & Kutner, 2016). While direct and indirect discrimination may contribute to these factors for students with disabilities, distancing and losing energy due to marginalization, as noted in RCT, seems to also play a part.

Consistent with these theoretical frameworks and recent studies, the present study explores the experiences of adults who have encountered distancing, marginalization, and/or exclusion in social justice activism and/or organizations. This study sought to answer the following research questions: How do distancing behaviors impact participation in social justice movements? Are there identifiable categories of distancing behaviors that contribute to division and decreased participation in social justice movements and organizations?

Methods

The current study conducted a series of two interviews with each participant (N=9), in order to build rapport and trust in successive interviews and ideally to gain more rich data. Inclusion criteria for participants included being 18 years or older, having experience in social justice activism in various movements over time, and having experienced marginalization or

exclusion in movements that one had been engaged in or had been interested in.

The interview guides (included as appendices) were designed by the researcher, with guidance from academic advisors and mentors. The second interview guide incorporated questions based on data collected in the first interviews, seeking to deepen our understanding of that data. Thus, interview guides were also partially shaped by participants in the study, in alignment with empowerment models of research (Denzin, 2017; Rubin & Babbie, 2017).

The methodology in this study is also in alignment with "critical qualitative inquiry" (Denzin, 2017) in its pursuit of rich data connected to participant's experiences with power, privilege, oppression, and intersectionality, as well as in its direct inquiry into social justice movements and organizations (Denzin, 2017). Within this framework, there is a call to openly acknowledge the researcher's own social identities, beliefs, and values, and to acknowledge how these identities, beliefs, and values may impact the study, including the impact both on the interactions with study participants and on the researcher's interpretations and inquiries (Denzin, 2017; Madison, 2005).

Researcher Positionality

The researcher has experienced social privileges as a white, cisgender, adult (early 40's) born in the United States to U.S. citizen parents with English as a first language, and currently having the academic support to pursue a Masters Degree and Masters thesis. The researcher has experienced oppression as a lesbian woman with disabilities who is a member of a non-Christian religion and who has been economically poor throughout her lifetime. This combination of social identities has influenced the researcher's lived experience, values, and beliefs.

The researcher's identities, along with the researcher's connections and/or relationships with participants prior to and during the study, may also have had some impact on how the

researcher was perceived by study participants and how easily participants were willing to extend trust to the researcher. Participants were asked directly about their own experiences with these identities and relationships with the researcher in the second interview (see Discussion section). There would likely also be some influence on the current study from the researcher's own experience with marginalization within social justice movements (Kanuha, 2000). With this awareness, the researcher committed to practicing critical self reflection while seeking guidance from diverse academic advisors and mentors throughout this study (see Rigor section).

Sample

The study found nine participants through purposive, maximum variation sampling by posting to social media groups known to include social justice activists, reaching out to local groups and organizations that are engaged in social justice work, and snowball sampling asking potential participants to refer other potential participants to the study. The researcher added some stratified sampling from a pool of potential participants in order to ensure diversity among participants (by race, gender, ability, sexuality, etc.) and potentially broaden the understandings arising from data collected in this study.

Nine participants, representing a range of intersecting identities, each completed two interviews with the researcher. Each participant's data was recorded under a pseudonym to protect their identity. To further protect confidentiality, not all population identifications for any one participant will be revealed. In alignment with the empowerment model of research, the population identities listed are as self-identified by the participants, not assigned by the researcher. In some categories, there are more identities listed than the total number of participants, because some participants listed more than one identity. Numbers in parentheses following an identity show how many participants in the study listed that identity.

Table 1

Participant Identities

Category:	**Identities listed:**
Age (or generation)	Gen Z, Between Millenial & Gen Z, "26 years old and I do not identify with 'Millenial'," older Millenial, "Xillenial," Gen X (3), Boomer
Disability status (and disabilities that were voluntarily listed by participants)	Identify as having a disability(ies) (6); does not identify as having a disability(ies) (3); deaf, vision impairment, mental illness (3), autism, personality disorders, major depression (2), "terrible anxiety"
Religious identity	"Spiritual" or expressed spiritual beliefs but does not subscribe to a religion (3), Christian (2), "LDS [Latter Day Saints]," Catholic, "somewhere between atheist and agnostic," "anti-religion," "I grew up Catholic but I don't go to church now," "I just refer to myself, because I'm at a crossroad with the Jewish faith, that I'm a seventh day worshipper because I don't want that to be confused with Seven Day Adventist"
Ethnicity	African, African-American (2), Black, Chicano, "my family is from the Pima tribe in Arizona," mixed Latinx & European, white (4); Caucasian; German (2), Swedish, Dutch-American, Italian-American
Socioeconomic class	Unemployed, poor (2), low income, "working class origins," middle class (4), upper-middle class (2)
Sexual orientation	Queer (3), pansexual (2), gay, bisexual (2), skoliosexual, leatherman, poly[amorous], heterosexual (3)
Indigenous heritage (and specific heritage if volunteered)	Identify as having indigenous heritage (2); does not identify as having indigenous heritage (7); Cherokee, Creek, Pima
Nationality	Nigerian, naturalized American [citizen], Born in U.S. as citizen (8)
Gender	Transman, Trans-masculine (2), non-binary/ enby (3), genderfluid, man (2), female/ woman (4), cisgender (5)

Analysis

All interviews were recorded and transcribed. In alignment with the values of the empowerment paradigm, the researcher aimed to prioritize the voice of the participants through an inductive approach to analyzing the data, following Braun & Clarke's six steps or phases of thematic analysis (2006).

One researcher conducted all of the interviews and later coded each transcript by hand, using Microsoft Word. The codes and categories were entered into a spreadsheet, along with timestamps and quotes for when each of these codes occurred in the data. This helped clarify the frequency at which various codes occurred and allowed a quick review to show which codes and categories appeared the most frequently. For this thesis, the researcher followed recommendations from academic advisors to limit the scope of this study to codes specifically about distancing behaviors. Advisors also suggested to group the distancing behavior codes into five categories or themes, both for feasibility and to allow a deeper dive into the data.

Rigor

Creswell & Miller (2000) outlined nine possible validity procedures for qualitative studies. It is often not possible to do all nine procedures in one study, but each of the procedures may add further validity and scientific rigor to a qualitative study. The current study engaged many of these procedures. For example, "researcher reflexivity" (Creswell & Miller, 2000) has been engaged in the transparency of the researcher, both in the writing of this study and in person with the study participants, about the researcher's identities and positionality, and about the theories and paradigms that the researcher values and may be influenced by.

Originally the study design included three interviews with each participant, but limitations in time and resources shortened this to two interviews per participant. Multiple

interviews may be seen as “prolonged engagement in the field” (Creswell & Miller, 2000, pp. 127 - 128). It was hoped that “[d]uring repeated observation, the researchers build trust with participants… [and] establish rapport so that participants are comfortable disclosing information” (Creswell & Miller, 2000, p. 128). Rapport and trust were particularly important in this study since participants were being asked about negative personal experiences within social justice activism. In the second interview, each participant was asked directly about whether the connection they felt with the researcher influenced what they shared, referring both to the validity procedure of prolonged engagement and its possibility of building rapport over time, and to the validity procedure of collaboration with the participants (Creswell & Miller, 2000, p. 128), incorporating their reported experience of study methodology directly into the data. Collaboration was further engaged in forming the second interview guide from the data that participants shared in their first interviews, and beginning the second interview with an open question “Is there anything you have thought about since our first interview that you would like to talk about now?” (see appendix for interview guides). This question allowed participants to introduce and include whatever they deemed fit to include in the data for this study. A near-to-final draft of this thesis was also sent to study participants to allow them to offer feedback and check that they felt they were accurately represented before final submission.

The current study also makes use of the validity procedures “thick, rich descriptions” (Creswell & Miller, 2000, p. 128 – 129) and “peer debriefings” (p. 129). Having a second interview with each participant allowed for richer data to emerge. In writing about the results of the study, the researcher is making an effort to report findings in direct quotes and details provided by the participants, to allow participant voice to be heard directly as much as possible and to allow readers to make their own assessment of what participants shared in their own

context; this is what Creswell & Miller refer to as “thick, rich descriptions” (2000, p. 129). The researcher also engaged in critical inquiry with and sought feedback from academic peers and mentors throughout all stages of this study (design, proposal, formulation of interview guides, analysis, and writing), to check for integrity and credibility throughout the study.

Results

Categories of Distancing Behaviors

Participants spoke about a wide range of experiences with distancing behaviors within social justice movements. The researcher coded each interview transcript looking for repeating patterns. Codes for distancing behaviors were then organized into five categories, based on similarities of the different behaviors. The five categories that emerged from this research were direct attack, invalidation, different standards, isolation, and cultural enabling.

Direct Attack

Direct attack is the most direct and intentional of the five categories. It involves overt and deliberate behavior to harm or intimidate another person or group of people. This category included the following codes: name calling, ridicule, internet pile-on (when overwhelming numbers of people post negative commentary online at someone), verbal disrespect, confrontation, defamation, physical violence, intimidation, nonverbal hostility (such as making faces or gestures), and false accusation. At 50 mentions across 18 interviews, direct attacks were mentioned the least number of times in the data out of all five main categories. They were also largely referred to in contexts with significant cultural enabling. Yet they made significant impacts on participants, and on their participation or lack thereof in various groups.

One of the study participants, Makeba, who identified as an African American woman, spoke of two different groups that she refused to participate in at all because of direct attack

behaviors. First, she spoke of someone from a local organization to advocate for the rights of Black people. Makeba said she witnessed the group member "just calling [people] all kind of names," including a slur against gay people. "So I just totally disconnect, just from the minute she opens her mouth and start attacking other people. And I'm like, what, is she in this [organization]? I said, if this is the kind of folks they have then I know I won't be going to anything for this." She said this extended further to other local Black women as well: "Somebody could walk by with something about [this organization] and it was like in unison, these three ladies go, 'Oh my God.'… And they all have had a similar experience."

Makeba also spoke of herself in Seattle and her cousin in Detroit both declining to gather with community for celebrations which originated with the Black civil rights movement, because of darker skinned Black people harassing and intimidating lighter skinned Black people trying to attend gatherings. She quoted her cousin as saying "[to] those who are light-skinned, they'll come up to you and forcibly, like, 'You got your birth certificate?'"

Invalidation

Invalidation is about denying the validity of something or someone. This was the first and most obvious category to emerge naturally from the codes in the data. It includes the following codes: invalidating one's work, invalidating one's knowledge, invalidating one's experience, invalidating one's needs, invalidating one's connections, invalidating a person because of their connections, invalidating one's identity, invalidating one's culture, and invalidating how one communicates. The codes for stereotyping and for cultural misappropriation were also included in the category of invalidation, given that they are common methods of invalidation.

One participant, Blayke, said "I've been told I'm 'too passing' [for cisgender] and that I couldn't advocate for trans* rights. I've been told I'm 'not Deaf enough' or that my signing

skills weren't 'good enough' to advocate for the Deaf community… I've been told by different organizations that they couldn't get an interpreter for me." This one quote illustrates invalidation of Blayke's trans* identity ("too passing"), invalidation of their experience with impaired hearing ("not Deaf enough"), and invalidation of their needs (refusing to get an interpreter). (Refusing to get an interpreter can also be seen as an isolating behavior (leaving someone behind).) Blayke continued: "All too often I feel excluded, dismissed, or pushed out because this world was made for hearing people… So, I've stuck to just being a 'behind the scenes' help when doing sj [social justice] work now." Blayke also said of a colleague "He left just before me for similar reason… 'too passing' [for cisgender], and it affected him being involved with any [social justice] work for almost two years. It affects your confidence to be able to do the work you want to [do]." Thus, these invalidating behaviors observably led to diminished participation in more than one person.

Different Standards

Different standards was a category with fewer codes, but a moderate rate of mentions in the data (67 times in 18 interviews). It includes the codes different costs, employment discrimination, and disrupting/sabotaging one's work (due to discrimination). This category fits between the categories invalidation and isolation, but also includes aspects of both the invalidation and isolation categories. For example, in a situation where if you say or do something, it will see different results than if someone from a different population does or says the same thing, it could be invalidating what you do or say, and/or invalidating you as a person, at the same time that it isolates you from the other people who do or say those things. Two participants, Bunmi and Saniyah, offered two different poignant examples of this from their experiences as Black women.

Bunmi spoke of a research project she did at her workplace: “after I finished the research, I shared my result, my findings. I sent one to my VP, I sent one to my direct supervisor, right? After that I didn't hear anything back from her [the supervisor].” “And it ties to race for me… [It] speaks to the invisibility around your race and your hard work.” “You really have to be super-exceptional, and for People of Color in particular, you have to be maybe double of that for you to even get any kind of recognition.” About a year after Bunmi turned in her research project, a white woman presented nearly the same research at a meeting. “[W]hen she was sharing the numbers with us at the meeting, and I'm going I did this already. I did this last year, right?” Bunmi shared a broader perspective as well: “So there's the concept of meritocracy, which is if you work hard and you're good and dah, dah, dah, you'd be recognized.” “[I]t's one of the things you have to live with as, you know, and it's just that fallacy around what is merit to a racist, really is that, does that really exist, right? In the world of a Person of Color, does that really exist, right?” Bunmi commented that in her experience, if her project had been done by someone “other than a Person of Color, she [the supervisor] would have looked at it.”

Saniyah commented on multiple agencies where she came for a job interview, and was held to standards that she knows other job candidates were not held to. At one job interview “the lady [interviewing her] was like ‘Is this really your resume?’ … I thought she was gonna compliment me. And I was like, ‘Yeah.’ And she was like ‘I think we’re gonna need some copies for this and I might call all of your previous employers… Do you have your transcripts?’” This incident and similar ones happened in more than one agency where Saniyah knew white people who worked there who were not asked for transcripts and who were not questioned or challenged about the veracity of their resume, education, or work history.

Isolation

Isolation is about singling someone out, often removing and/or distancing the person from support systems and/or other resources. This category included the codes tokenization, "You don't belong here," ban/ kick out, ostracization, lack of access to resources, lack of support, loss of support, left behind, lack of representation, invisibilization, and avoidance. This was the category that came up the most frequently in the data (145 times in 18 interviews). One participant, Wyatt, illustrated the impact of isolating behaviors by saying "The constant work of feeling involved was more work than the actual [social justice] work was; it wasn't worth staying."

Another participant, DJ, talked about losing his support network of friends, who had largely been lesbian social justice activists, when he came out to them as a transgender man. "Well, and years ago I used to march at Dyke Marches and rallies and stuff, and when I was like 'I think I'm trans*' I had people pull me aside and go 'You either need to shit or get off the pot. You cannot say that you're transitioning and that you want us to call you a masculine name and use masculine pronouns and then want to go to the dyke bar with us. You can't go to women's only meetings. You can't… You have to decide what team you're batting on.' And my circle of friends basically abandoned ship."

Cultural Enabling

Cultural enabling occurs when a group's culture (including workplace culture) enables and supports inappropriate distancing behaviors, especially toward targeted populations. Initially cultural enabling stood out as a category by itself; it later picked up the code 'lack of self awareness,' as a means of enabling continued inappropriate behavior. This is somewhat of a meta-category, in that it is more about the frequency, prevalence, and systems of accountability (or lack thereof) of distancing and harmful behaviors within the group structure and general

culture. The specific behaviors that are being enabled in these group cultures are likely to be from the first four categories. For example, DJ spoke about the prevalence of recent attacks against transgender people (direct attacks) and the undoing of laws to protect transgender people's rights (invalidation and isolation), following after a period in which transgender rights had seen some progress. He said, "As we are seeing the past is repeating itself, and one person is not usually strong enough to prevent that. They need a lot of people behind them." He is clearly referring to large cultural and historical patterns here, not just to individual ways of handling these experiences.

Chelsea spoke of a group for progressive political action that demonstrated cultural enabling of distancing behaviors against various populations. For her it started when a member joined her local group who "made a point of saying a lot of nasty things about trans* people… including at least one slur that he used against trans* people." While she was speaking out against this, "[T]here were some very outspoken Women of Color who came in and started discussing racial issues as well, and found themselves similarly talked over and excluded." Here we've seen direct attacks (slurs against trans* people) and invalidation (talking over Women of Color), enabled and possibly participated in by group leadership. She talked about a meeting where some trainers from the national organization tried to educate her local group about "what it means when you gear your movement towards basically upper-middle-class, white, cis boomers, and how that's harmful." Unfortunately, the local group leaders continued to allow marginalizing behaviors, which led to the local group getting kicked out of the national organization. "Someone reported to the [national org] what had been going on in this [local] group. And [national org] were like, 'You can't call yourselves [name of org], because these are not our policies. It's not the right way to have a [name of org] group." Chelsea saw limitations

both in group participation and in the effectiveness of the local group: “I think that probably the way that they operated, they lost more people than they could gain, because it's very alienating for a lot of people, People of Color, trans* people, queer people. It was a very mainstream, civil, tone-policed approach to activism.”

In another example, Bunmi illustrates the prevalence in society of systemic racism in saying, “I have to tell my kids all the time… because you have more melanin in your skin than somebody else doesn't make you an inferior. You may look different, but that doesn't mean you're stupid or you don't know what you're doing, and don't let somebody else tell you otherwise.” While the behaviors she’s addressing here involve direct attacks (“you’re stupid”) and invalidation (“you don’t know what you’re doing”, “you [are] an inferior”), the rate at which these behaviors occur in society is frequent and prevalent enough that she feels the need to review this with her children “all the time.”

Discussion

This study sought to answer the following research questions: How do distancing behaviors impact participation in social justice movements? Are there identifiable categories of distancing behaviors that contribute to division and decreased participation in social justice movements and organizations? Examples of the impact on participation were shared in direct quotes from the participants themselves, including various examples of diminished participation after experiencing distancing behaviors and some examples of sustained participation while mitigating distancing behaviors. The categories that emerged from thematic analysis in this study were direct attack, invalidation, different standards, isolation, and cultural enabling. This study also tried to prioritize the participants’ own voices in sharing their stories, in alignment with the empowerment model of study.

The theories posted in the literature review clarified initial concepts and appear to support the findings from this study. In addition, further inquiries involving these theories could potentially aid in mitigating the impacts of the distancing behaviors found in the study. Concepts of intersectionality, power and privilege, and centralization and marginalization from Critical Race Theory contributed valuable perspective in designing and interpreting this study. Relational-Cultural Theory provided the concept of distancing behaviors that proved central to this study, as well as perspectives on marginalization and the harm it can cause. Shame Resilience Theory upholds ideas around the loss of energy resulting from shame and marginalization.

After this researcher had completed thematic analysis, an advisor compared the themes that arose from this data to various microaggression scales (Balsam et al., 2011; Conover et al., 2017; Nadal, 2011; Nadal, 2019; Sue, 2010). There is indeed some overlap between the themes identified in this study and some classifications of microaggressions. For example, the "direct attack" category in this study is largely equivalent to what Dr. Derald Wing Sue referred to as "microassaults" (2010, p. 28). The "invalidation" category in this study shares significant overlap with Sue's "microinvalidation" (2010, p. 37). It appears to be worthwhile to synthesize any new data from this study with existing literature on microaggressions.

Relationships Between Categories

Another observation from the current study was that some of the categories seem to occur together. In particular, "direct attack" behaviors seemed significantly more likely to appear in contexts that also featured "cultural enabling." Existing literature about microaggressions found a similar pattern. Sue acknowledged that microassaults, which seem equivalent to the direct attack category in this study, are generally less socially acceptable to commit, so people mostly

only do them in specific contexts: in anonymous contexts (such as graffiti on a wall), in contexts that feel "safe" for an aggressor, and when the aggressor has lost control (Sue, 2010, pp. 29 – 30). A context may feel safe for an aggressor when "in the presence of people who share their beliefs and attitudes or knowing that they can get away with their offensive words and deeds. Safety often relies on the inaction of others in the face of biased action" (Sue, 2010, p. 30).

To illustrate this, one can revisit the examples offered in this paper around direct attacks. They had focused on Makeba's experiences with a local Black civil rights group and a set of community celebrations. She offered her own perspective on the local civil rights group: "It's a revolving door with most of these places. It's very cyclical and trends. It's very transient… That's the difference from where I grew up. It wasn't as transient as what I see going on now in these organizations. People are not in these communities very long… And this is why they still had the same issues of 20 years ago." Here she is referring to both a lack of accountability within the local organizations, and a larger cultural pattern in which people move frequently, both of which fit into the category of cultural enabling. Of the community celebrations where people with darker skin tones were intimidating and demanding papers from African-American people with lighter skin tones, Makeba said she asked her cousin "'Where is this ignorance coming from?' He said, 'The 45th.'" (referring to Donald Trump as president). Again, she and her cousin are referring to broad trends across the United States, not just individual interactions.

Mitigating Distancing Behaviors Within a Movement

Perhaps the most significant question this researcher would like to pursue further is: how do we mitigate distancing behaviors (and their impact) when they occur in social justice groups and organizations? This could generate strategies to improve participation and effectiveness in social justice movements, and to achieve sustainable collaborative efforts.

While this was considered beyond the scope of the present study, mitigating factors came up in some of the stories shared by participants. Relational-Cultural Theory offers the possibility that "[d]isconnections… can often become places to work on building stronger connection…. Working toward reconnection requires a commitment to better understanding and the effort of repair" (Jordan, 2018, p. 48). While most participants in this study spoke of responding to distancing behaviors within social justice groups by leaving, "pulling back," or not joining a group in the first place, there were several who also offered examples of staying engaged and reconnecting after experiencing distancing behaviors.

Regarding the workplace where her project was overlooked and then a similar project was presented by a white woman, Bunmi still says "I really enjoy it [working there] and I still do… I have a very diverse clinic. I have therapists from Brazil, from Argentina, from El Salvador. I mean just name it. Mexico, Tibet…" In addition to diversity and inclusion, she stressed communication and support from higher leadership to resolve conflicts: "I'll tell [the Vice President] I want to meet with her, she'll make time, she comes to my clinic, we talk. So she's been trying to be the bridge [between Bunmi and her supervisor]. So we're starting to get to know each other. It's getting better."

When asked what kept her engaged after experiencing distancing behaviors in an organization that advocates for people with disabilities, Jean stressed support: ""[I]f you don't have an organization like this really speaking up and being in these meetings and being in front of lawmakers, legislators, [then] we really will be excluded. So I think what the organization does is great."

Mateo shared about staying engaged in a POC student group after he experienced an uncomfortable confrontation there: "Just because there was a disagreement or there was a

blowout, that didn't mean that it was the end. It was just part of what we had to do to get to know each other, to finesse our vision and mission… [C]haos isn't something to avoid, but it's something that we have to move through in order to achieve balance." Mateo focused on communication, accountability, support, and connection: "I think we're being more direct about what it means to be accountable to each other, and how does this commitment to each other and knowing that at some point we might unknowingly or even knowingly hurt someone else, but trying to figure out, how do we come back to doing that healing work with each other." Mateo related this connection and healing directly to the social justice work his group was doing: "and knowing that… the larger system is built to make sure that we hurt each other." He also stressed commitments within group connections (which ties back into the concept of growth-fostering relationships in RCT): "So there's this commitment to each other and it helps that we also have personal relationships [with each other]" and "there's an investment in my growth, and in each other."

Impact of Interviewer Positionality and Connections

This study asked each participant about the impacts of a) any pre-existing connections they had with the researcher before this study, and b) the interviewer's positionality and known identities. This could spark further investigations into these phenomena themselves, and/or provide information to compare to other qualitative studies using similar format and topics.

In this study, three participants said no, their pre-existing connections with the researcher did not influence what they shared. It is notable that these were the three with the least pre-existing connections to the researcher before the study (many were familiar with the researcher through shared work/activism and/or education). All three of these participants also said that they feel a need for their experiences to be heard, so they would have shared with any researcher who

asked. Three participants said that their pre-existing connections with the researcher definitely made a difference in their participation in this research. All three of these cited trust as the reason why they shared as much as they did. Another three participants seemed surprised at the question and had to think about it, sharing their thinking about what did or did not make a difference for them. These three also ended up mentioning trust between themselves and the researcher making it easier for them. Two of them also said they would have spoken to someone doing this research anyways because they feel strongly that these experiences need to be heard.

Five participants said that the interviewer's positionality/ identities did not make much impact on what they were willing to share. Three participants said the interviewer's positionality definitely did influence what they shared. All three of these cited targeted/marginalized identities that they knew they have in common with the researcher (disabled, queer, poor); two of them mentioned intersecting identities as well. One participant wasn't sure, but when asked agreed that it was probably easier to talk to someone who had some of the identities that they talked about in common with them.

Further Explorations

Contributions from a Relational-Cultural Theoretical Lens

This researcher is very interested in calling for further inquiry that explores integrating concepts from Critical Race Theory, such as power and privilege, intersectionality, marginalization, and microaggressions, with concepts from Relational-Cultural Theory, such as growth and development in relational contexts, the harmful impacts of marginalization from an RCT perspective, and the concept of distancing behaviors which was central to the current study.

This researcher first learned about Relational-Cultural Theory in a graduate school setting, where teachers verbally mentioned that RCT has a reputation for centering the voices of

privileged white women. Indeed, when this researcher went looking for literature involving RCT that focused on marginalized populations, there was a small amount of literature focused on LGBT populations, but it proved difficult to find RCT literature that centered People of Color, people with disabilities, economically poor people, or other marginalized populations. The development of this theory is largely attributed to a core group of five researchers and therapists at the Stone Center at Wellesley College who were all "privileged white women" (West, 2005, p. 98). Wellesley College is located in an area in Massachusetts with a primarily white and affluent population. This could have limited the practices of these therapists and theorists to mostly affluent white clients. These factors would have limited the possible perspectives to learn from in the early literature in RCT.

The central tenets of RCT, though, are not limited to ideas from affluent white women. Researchers from various populations have written about concepts such as development occurring within relationships (conceptually representing "growth-fostering relationships" even if not using that vocabulary), interdependence, giving everyone access to feeling centered in some way, and the importance of behavior in distancing versus connecting. These writers often present other concepts that may also be valuable to explore through an RCT lens. For example, Portman & Garrett write about development in relational contexts, from an indigenous perspective (2005), Mingus writes about the impact of experiencing intense connection and centering in contrast to the habitual experience of distancing behaviors and marginalization from the perspective of people with disabilities (2011), and Oba writes about how Afrocentric group work incorporates and enriches many of these concepts (2017).

These concepts can be integrated and presented in ways that move voices of color and other marginalized voices to the center. Research by and about people from marginalized

populations could be centered more than they currently are. Even for researchers from more centered populations, the empowerment model offers the ability to collaborate with and center the voices and perspectives of participants and not just those of the researcher. This paper is one example of another white woman writing about RCT, but it presents a plurality of voices and perspectives of people at the receiving end of what is presented in this thesis as distancing behaviors. The transparency of the writer regarding the researcher's own identities and positionality is also important, even according to RCT's own principles: "the context of relational development across the life span is inextricably linked to individuals' racial/ cultural/ social identities," calling for "examining culture-based relational disconnections" (Comstock et al., 2008, p. 280).

Writers with intersecting identities (Dzodan, 2011; J, 2018; Johnson, 2016) as well as several participants in this study have all shared about being accused of "being divisive" when they were drawing attention to distancing and marginalizing behaviors by more centered members of their social justice groups. In RCT, speaking up could be seen as the beginning of reaching out to rebuild connection after distancing behaviors had already happened. Clarifying this apparent confusion around distancing versus connecting behaviors in social justice movements appears to be centrally important to mitigating the impacts of distancing behaviors in these movements (or even identifying them).

Patterns in the Current Data

Several patterns emerged in this study that would benefit from further inquiry. For example, one pattern that the researcher noticed but was not able to fully analyze in this study was how experiencing or even witnessing patterns of distancing behaviors in larger society may drive people to get involved in social justice movements in the first place. For example, Wyatt, a

queer non-binary person with disabilities, said “I don’t typically think of what I’ve done as social justice work, just … trying to exist in a world where my existence is made political.” Makeba, who identified as heterosexual, became an outspoken advocate for respect for LGBTQ+ people “because I've seen, I've had cousins who were in the closet. I have those that were called out and got killed.” Many participants in this study seem to have joined social justice movements after experiencing or witnessing patterns of distancing behaviors, and this could be a subject of further inquiry.

This study produced quite a lot of data that did not undergo full thematic analysis due to limited time and resources. Had there been more time and resources, the researcher had hoped to explore how the distancing behaviors identified in this study impacted individual participation in social justice groups and organizations, and how these behaviors impacted group cohesion and effectiveness. Having conducted the interviews and worked in detail to code each of them for distancing behaviors, it appears that these behaviors do have a negative impact on participation and effectiveness in social justice work. However, applying full thematic analysis to these impacts could have answered some more specific questions, such as: Does any category of distancing behaviors have more or less negative impact than other categories? Does any category have more impact on individual participants, while perhaps another has more impact on the group? For example, does cultural enabling have a bigger impact on group cohesion and effectiveness, since other categories could be individual incidents and/or could be talked through with group investment? Further study in these areas could prove beneficial.

Conclusion

There is a “belief that critical qualitative inquiry inspired by the sociological imagination can make the world a better place” (Denzin, 2017, p. 12). This study intended to take initial steps

in gathering and presenting information on divisions and disengagement within social justice movements. It is hoped that this initial inquiry will inspire further dialogue and exploration of some ways in which social justice work could become more inclusive, cohesive, and effective, perhaps at least partially by identifying and mitigating distancing behaviors within such movements.

"RCT is based on the assumption that the experiences of isolation, shame, humiliation, oppression, marginalization, and microaggressions are relational violations and traumas that are at the core of human suffering and threaten the survival of humankind" (Comstock et al., 2008, p. 280). Recent protests for justice across the U.S and the world seem to amplify the urgency expressed here. Perhaps this theoretical perspective, paired with an empowerment model of research, could contribute some additional perspective to the expanding body of literature on microaggressions, marginalization, and oppression.

References

Balsam, K., Molina, Y., Beadnell, B., Simoni, J., & Walters, K. (2011). Measuring multiple minority stress: The LGBT people of color microaggressions scale. *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology, 17*(2), 163-174. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0023244

Braun, V. & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3*, 77-101.

Brown, B. (2007). *I thought it was just me (but it isn't): Making the journey from "What will people think?" to "I am enough".* Avery.

Carbado, D. W., Crenshaw, K. W., Mays, V. M., & Tomlinson, B. (2013). Intersectionality: Mapping the movements of a theory. *Du Bois Review, 10*(2), 303-312. https://doi.org/10.1017oS1742058X13000349

Comstock, D. L., Duffey, T. & St. George, H. (2002). The Relational-Cultural Model: A framework for group process. *The Journal for Specialists in Group Work, 27*(3), 254-272. https://doi.org/10.1177/0193392202027003002

Comstock, D. L., Hammer, T. R., Strentzsch, J., Cannon, K., Parsons, J., Salazar, G. (2008). Relational-Cultural Theory: A framework for bridging relational, multicultural, and social justice competencies. *Journal of Counseling and Development, 86*(3), 279 – 287.

Conover, K., Israel, T., & Nylund-Gibson, K. (2017). Development and validation of the ableist microaggressions scale. *The Counseling Psychologist, 45*(4), 570-599. https://doi.org/10.1177/0011000017715317

Crenshaw, K. (1989). Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A Black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics. *University of Chicago Legal Forum, 1*(8), 139-167.

Crenshaw, K. (1991). Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color. *Stanford Law Review*, *43*(6), 1241-1299.

Creswell, J. & Miller, D. (2000). Determining validity in qualitative inquiry. *Theory into Practice*, *39*(3), 124-130.

Delgado, R. & Stefancic, J. (2012). *Critical Race Theory*. New York University Press.

Denzin, N. K. (2017). Critical qualitative inquiry. *Qualitative Inquiry*, *23*(1), 8 – 16, https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800416681864

Duffey, T. & Trepal, H. (2016). Introduction to the Special Section on Relational-Cultural Theory. *Journal of Counseling and Development*, *94*, 379 – 382, https://doi.org/10.1002/jcad.12095

Dzodan, F. (2011, October 10). My feminism will be intersectional or it will be bullshit! *Tiger Beatdown*. http://tigerbeatdown.com/2011/10/10/my-feminism-will-be-intersectional-or-it-will-be-bullshit/

Greene, D. C. & Britton, P. J. (2015). Predicting relationship commitment in gay men: Contributions of vicarious shame and internalized homophobia to the investment model. *Psychology of Men & Masculinity*, *16*(1), 78–87. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0034988

Hays, P. A. (2008). *Addressing cultural complexities in practice: Assessment, diagnosis, and therapy*. American Psychological Association (APA).

J, C. (2018, February 13). No, straight black men are not 'the white people of black people.' *Medium*. https://medium.com/@CleoJ/no-straight-black-men-arent-the-white-people-of-black-people-af5fb4173477

Johnson, M. (2016, February 7). 6 ways well-intentioned people whitesplain racism (and why they need to stop). *Everyday Feminism*. https://everydayfeminism.com/2016/02/how-

people-whitesplain-racism/

Jordan, J. V. (2008). Recent developments in Relational-Cultural Theory. *Women & Therapy. 31*(2-4), 1-4. https://doi.org/10.1080/02703140802145540

Jordan, J. V. (2018). *Relational-Cultural Therapy* (2nd ed.). American Psychological Association (APA).

Kanuha, V. K. (2000). "Being native" versus "going native": Conducting social work research as an insider. *Social Work*, *45*(4), 439-447.

Kim, P. Y., Kendall, D., & Chang, E. (2016). Emotional self-control, interpersonal shame, and racism as predictors of help-seeking attitudes among Asian-Americans: An application of the intrapersonal-interpersonal-sociocultural framework. *Asian American Journal of Psychology*, *7*(1), 15–24. http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/aap0000032

Livingston, L. A., Shah, P., & Happé, F. (2019). Compensatory strategies below the behavioral surface in autism: A qualitative study. *Lancet Psychiatry*, *6*, 766-77.

Lorde, A. (1989). *From 'There is no hierarchy of oppressions'* [PDF]. http://uuliveoak.org/pdfs/worship_9-04-09_excerpts_no_hierarchy_of_oppressions.pdf

Madison, D. (2005). *Critical Ethnography: Method, ethics, and performance*. SAGE Publication.

Mingus, M. (2011, May 5). Access intimacy: The missing link. *Leaving Evidence* [blog]. https://leavingevidence.wordpress.com/2011/05/05/access-intimacy-the-missing-link/

Nadal, K. (2011). The racial and ethnic microaggressions scale (REMS): Construction, reliability, and validity. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, *58*(4), 470--480. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0025193

Nadal, K. (2019). Measuring LGBTQ microaggressions: The sexual orientation microaggressions scale (SOMS) and the gender identity microaggressions scale (GIMS).

Journal of Homosexuality, *66*(10), 1404--1414. https://doi.org/10.1080/00918369.2018.1542206

Nieto, L., Boyer, M. F., Goodwin, L., Johnson, G. R., & Smith, L. C. (2010). *Beyond inclusion, beyond empowerment*. Cuetzpalin Publishing.

Oba, O. (2017). Until the animals get their own story teller, the hunter remains the hero of all tales. *Social Work with Groups*, *40*(1-2), 118-123. https://doi.org/10.1080/01609513.2015.1078612

Patton, M. Q. (1990). *Qualitative evaluation and research methods* (2nd ed.). Sage Publications.

Portman, T. A. A., & Garrett, M. T. (2005). Beloved women: Nurturing the sacred fire of leadership from an American Indian perspective. *Journal of Counseling & Development*, *83*, 284-291.

Rubin, A. & Babbie, E. R. (2017). *Research methods for social work*. Cengage Learning.

Smith, A. (2006). Heteropatriarchy and the three pillars of white supremacy: Rethinking women of color organizing. In INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence (Eds.), *Color of violence: The INCITE! anthology* (pp. 66-73). Duke University Press.

Stewart, D., & Collins, K. (2014). Constructing disability: Case studies of graduate students and new professionals with disabilities in student affairs. *College Student Affairs Journal*, *32*(1), 19-33.

Sue, D. W. (2010). *Microaggressions in everyday life: Race, gender, and sexual orientation*. John Wiley & Sons, Incorporated.

Verdinelli, S., & Kutner, D. (2016). Persistence factors among online graduate students with disabilities. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*, *9*(4), 353-368. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0039791

West, C. (2005). The map of Relational-Cultural Theory. *Women & Therapy*, *28*(3-4), 93-110. https://doi.org/10.1300/J015v28n03_05

Appendix A

Interview Guide 1

The following is a list of initial interview questions:

What kinds of social justice work have you been involved in?

Have you been involved in any of the following? Describe each group that you been involved with.

- online groups (Facebook and other social media)
- email lists and listservs
- activist zines and/or other activist literature/art
- activist/community group meetings with no formal name or format
- 501c3 or other legally/socially recognized organizations
- Government lobbying groups and/or a "Day of Action"
- Other groups, organizations, or campaigns?

How long have you been involved in each group or movement?

What motivated you to join each group or movement?

Did you have any experiences in which you felt excluded, dismissed, and/or pushed out of a group or movement? Please describe some of those experiences.

Did your work with these groups change after you experienced feeling excluded or dismissed?

Have you ever dropped out or left a group or movement because of experiences of exclusion or dismissal?

Do you know if anyone else had similar experiences in this/these group(s)? Do you know how their work was affected? Did anyone else leave because of such experiences?

Do you know if the group(s) continued its work after you left? Did the group's work change between how it was before you left and how it was after you left?

Do you feel that the group(s) is effective in achieving its stated goals while demonstrating its stated values? Why or why not?

Did you find another way to continue your own work on the issue(s) that had motivated you to join the group in the first place?

Participant ADDRESSING Identities:

Age (or generation)

Disability status (living with disabilities or not)

Religious identity

Ethnicity

Socioeconomic class

Sexual orientation

Indigenous heritage (yes/no; this is specific to indigenous peoples of North America)

National origin (immigrant/ nonimmigrant, citizen/ noncitizen)

Gender (man/woman/nonbinary/other; also trans* or cisgender)

Appendix B

Interview Guide 2

Is there anything you have thought about since our first interview that you would like to talk about now?

ADRESSING identities if forgotten/skipped in first interview

In our last interview, you talked about [incident of feeling excluded in social justice work from first interview]. In that incident, can you identify a point where you first felt distancing between other group members and yourself? If so, what point in the process would you identify as the point where distancing started?

[allow for clarifying questions as needed]

Do you feel like there could have been options that would have allowed for greater reconnection?

[allow for clarifying questions as needed]

[repeat if multiple incidents given in first interview]

[If felt excluded/distanced but did not leave:] What helped you remain engaged after your experience?

You have shared some deeply personal information, and I appreciate that, thank you. Do you think that our connection from before this interview made an impact on how much you were willing to share?

[If they don't mention it themselves:] Do you think my identities (white, woman, queer, disabled, Gen X, nonChristian/pagan, poor, nonindigenous, U.S. born) impacted what you were willing to share in this conversation?