Growing From Surviving to Thriving: Negotiating Queer Sexual and Domestic Violence Survival and (Re)Empowerment Through Transformative Emergent Process in Community Gardening and Mutual Aid

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A thesis

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Education

University of Washington

2022

Committee:

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Program Authorized to Offer Degree:

Education

University of Washington

Abstract

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Queer survivors of sexual and domestic violence struggle to find safe spaces for (re)empowerment in community with others. Through the codesign and implementation of regular meetings, six white, adult queer survivors explored the role of gardening, group discussion, and mutual aid on re(empowerment). Audio was coded to unearth patterns of discourse centering empowerment and community while behaviors and commentary surrounding agency, confidence, positive self expression, and connectedness were tracked as signs of empowerment. Engagement with plants became a medium for engaging in themes accompanying empowerment (identified by participants as: agency, confidence, positive self expression, and connectedness) and community (particularly in the form of affirmation) to develop and surface. Patterns of discourse revealed that group process and norms became a central point in our work together, uplifting and expanding co-design as participants worked together to build and enact this project together. Through shared agreements, participants created a feeling of safety, allowing themselves to be fully present and vulnerable. In reaching this place of shared vulnerability, participants began answering the research question, “what does (re)empowerment look like” and identify what aspects of empowerment are important and meaningful to them, leading to discussion around how and when each participant feels empowered.

Introduction

In light of the current and historical impacts on women and trans people of widespread sexual and domestic violence (SDV) and the nonlinear, messy trajectory of survival, the politic of my design is to investigate how group discussion and gardening impact healing and (re)empowerment in queer survivors of sexual and domestic violence. This project is a vital contribution to the limited but growing body of work focused on healing centered engagement (Ginwright, 2018) and trauma-informed and community-based practices with survivors of SDV in addition to recognizing the importance of identity.

An objective of this work is to understand the role of gardening and group in (re)empowerment in queer survivors of SDV. We hope to learn if and how meeting regularly with other queer survivors to garden and discuss life's intersections with past trauma impacts one's life. The goal of our activities was to tap into participants' funds of knowledge (Vygotsky, 1978) and ideas around (re)empowerment, growth, and healing. A purpose of this project is to investigate the efficacy of gardening in transforming healing and reclaiming power. I ask the question: [How] does a combination of group and gardening impact queer survivors of sexual and domestic violence?

This community-based participatory design research project was based around a partnership with the mutual aid group @them_stems, run by Emma Kates-Shaw and Alex (pseudonym), and their Flower Feast program located in the Central District of Seattle, Washington. @them_stems is a queer run urban farm collective focused on the free distribution of produce to the local community via corner store and fresh flowers to Black and Indigenous people of color via local pickups and deliveries. This project connects a local group of queer

survivors of sexual and/or domestic violence with this mutual aid organzation to help harvest and arrange bouquets of flowers.

Researcher Positionality

The author is the principal investigator. In addition to the importance of this research on community based educational spaces and trauma informed pedagogy, as a 32 year old, white, sober (as a result of trauma), gender nonconforming new mom and multi-time rape survivor who regained my power through tending to plants, this project is personal to me. I believe that true healing and reclamation of power happened through my engagement with plants and involvement with different mutual aid and activist activities and groups (Ginwright, 2018).

Additionally, this research group consisted of participants whom I know personally and have prior relationships with, thus aligning me as even more of an insider to this group. Because the queer community is small, there were inevitably going to be connections and relationships outside of this study. I chose to lean in to this dynamic by reaching out to my network for participants that I knew were survivors of sexual or domestic violence, had received therapy, and were able to discuss their trauma without adverse side effects (triggers, sprials, etc.). This also meant that it was possible that participants may be more or less willing to be truthful and vulnerable- possibly skewing the data. There was a point in the study where a participant did not feel comfortable providing details of a story because it involved someone that other participants also knew. Ultimately, the importance of understanding the risk level of each participant and their involvement in this study outweighed any possible adverse impacts. By having prior relationships with each participant I knew that each person was able and willing to dive into discussions around trauma and had a desire to do so in a group of other queer survivors. Lastly,

by working within my own community, I can continue to see the impacts of this study for years to come and work with participants in developing future studies.

Literature Review:

Domestic Violence/Sexual Assault

For education to be a means for liberation, equity must be at the forefront of our practice (hooks, 1994). As outdoor and experiential educators become more invested in incorporating trauma informed practices into their lessons, there is much we do not yet understand about trauma and what is most impactful and helpful. This project sets out to shed some light on one way that trauma informed and healing centered educators can support the (re)empowerment of survivors (Ginwright, 2018).

The history of sexual violence predates written history. According to the Code of Hammurabi from 1780 BC, the earliest written law that we know of, rape was considered a property crime against the woman's father (Bishop, 2019). "It wasn't until the 11th and 12th centuries that rape began to be considered more as a violent, sexual crime against the victim" (Bishop, 2019). Although rape began to be seen as less of a property crime and more of a form of violence against the person who was violated, SDV continued to be seen as an individual issue of sexual temptation rather than one of control and dominance.

Rape has long been a tool of white supremacy and colonization, used for centuries to control and dominate women enslaved on plantations and continuing today as an epidemic of missing and murdered Indigenous women. "The history of rape in the United States is a history

of racism and sexism intertwined. Rape was an important tool in white colonists' violent efforts to repress Native nations" (Author Unknown, 2017). The civil rights era of the 1960s and 1970s brought about the beginning of awareness and change regarding the legal status of rape. It wasn't until the this time that rape began to be viewed as a violent weapon used as a way to control others, primarily women and people of color. On so-called "US" soil, this has impacted Black and Indigenous communities particularly harshly with 19% of black women, 24% of mixed race women, and 34% of American Indian and Alaskan Native women experiencing rape (Author Unknown, 2017). Changing the public's understanding and awareness of sexual violence took hard, persistant, thankless work and bravery and is still very much in progress with said work often falling onto the most impacted.

The first recorded public speak-out regarding sexual violence was in New York City in 1971 by a grassroots group of feminists attempting to draw the connection between sexual violence and control. The National Organization of Women brought legislation to the United States government in the 1970s to revise rape laws. According to the Washington State Coalition for Sexual Assault Programs, when the Institute of Mental Health opened the Center for the Prevention and Control of Rape in 1975, a tidal wave of research was set in motion. Grassroots, radical feminist, rape crisis centers (RCC) began popping up nationwide, working with local hospitals and legislators to change laws and create protections for women and children (trans issues were not often brought up and many of the RCCs were explicitly 'female run,' which is generally synonymous with 'cis women only'). Almost none of the work done within these organizations was paid or recognized outside of the communities in which they served. Their work was vital to get us to where we are now and continues to propel us forward.

We are in the early stages of understanding the complex and violent issue of sexual and domestic violence. Rape within marriage and raping children was legal as late the 1990s- within my lifetime. While much progress has been made, we still live in a society that very much views the accusation of rape as more impactful than rape itself. In 2015, when Brock Turner made headlines for being caught in the act of raping an unconscous woman behind a dumpster, his father famously published a letter upset with any prison time at all, stating “His life will never be the one that he dreamed about and worked so hard to achieve...That is a steep price to pay for 20 minutes of action out of his 20 plus years of life” (Wootson, 2019). In 2018 the United States Senate confirmed Brett Kavanaugh to the Supreme Court notwithstanding the powerful accusation of rape by Christine Blasey Ford (and Deborah Ramirez, Julie Swetnick, and an anonymous woman) (Kantor & Twohey, 2020). The 45th president was elected after a recording of him stating “grab ‘em by the pussy. You can do anything,” was released. The current president, Joe Biden, has had several accusations of sexual harassment against him. In each of these cases, it was the rapist's life and future opportunities that were discussed as being impacted, not the survivor’s. Our research hopes to address that unspoken impact *that survivors take on* by examining the efficacy of gardening and group discussion in transforming healing and reclaiming power.

With a 2021 United Kingdom study finding that 97% of women will be sexually assaulted or harassed in their lifetime, it is imperative that educators begin to understand and address gender based violence head on. We still live in a society that very much views the accusation of rape as more impactful than rape itself. This participatory action community-based design research work (re)centers survivors and looks to them as experts “as part of the solution” (Garcia et al, 2014). This project addresses the gap in research and literature surrounding the

impact of gardening on queer survivors of sexual and domestic violence. This project will help education and mental health professionals understand if and how incorporating a group garden or horticulture activity can grow healing and (re)empowerment.

Queer women and trans people

While gender based violence effects all women, according to the Center for Disease Control's 2010 National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey, queer women are substantially more likely to be victims than heterosexual women. Queer survivors are presented with a unique set of barriers to recovery and healing. The Human Rights Campaign reports that, "for LGBTQ survivors of sexual assault, their identities – and the discrimination they face surrounding those identities – often make them hesitant to seek help from police, hospitals, shelters or rape crisis centers, the very resources that are supposed to help them." In fact, according to a National Coalition of Anti-Violence Projects survey, 85% of victims advocates have reported working with a survivor who was denied support and services due to their queer identity (2022). These additional barriers to healing and support for members of the LGBTQ+ community are just a few reasons we specifically focus on this subgroup for our research.

Garden as Healing

While studies and projects examining the positive impacts of gardening or horticulture on individuals with various mental health challenges exist, the intersection of sexual trauma and gardening is understudied. We know that gardening can be a pathway toward healing. University

of Kentucky researchers Renzetti and Follingstad, teamed up with the directors of a “battered” women's shelter to evaluate the benefits of gardening as a therapeutic means of healing trauma and pain experienced by survivors of domestic violence (2015). They found that the benefits of gardening were “physical exercise, mental health benefits (e.g., reduction in anxiety and depression), money and work experience, social connections, and a sense of accomplishment” (Renzetti & Follingstad, 2015; Rose, 2017). Audrey June Putz speaks more to this in *Healing Garden for Survivors of Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault*, “as a group of survivors, we developed a garden group which enabled us to navigate through the dialectics of trauma and recovery, as well as group and garden. Throughout our time together we developed a narrative, an empowering activity meant to overcome the shame and silence and the dread of disclosure” (2014).

Putz explains that, while there is evidence that garden based healing for traumatic experiences from combat is successful, there is little known about the impacts for survivors of sexual and domestic violence. Putz also challenges us to continue her work by asking important questions such as “In what ways would having a garden space separate from a community garden affect the impacts of a garden research project? What would be the benefits of becoming involved and therefore more integrated and visible within the community in which the healing garden is embedded?” My research worked to answer some of these questions while making space for emergent solutions and challenges.

Theoretical Framework

I draw upon a combination of queer, feminist, intersectional, and empowerment theories to guide this research. These theories center the examination of power and oppression through lenses of intersectional identities and experiences. Intersectional and feminist theories help us understand and unpack the impact of our identities on our lived experiences. By examining what is beneath and beyond the stories and experiences of oppression and power, queer theory centers activist and emergent praxis while exploring the intersections of identity and hegemony (Aleksa, Sacay, Williams, & O'Neil, 2015, Wozolek, 2019). Queer theory encourages us to investigate the spaces between the binary. It allows us to ask the question, "why?" and then "why" again.

Queer theory, paired with feminist and intersectional theories, which not only center gendered power and oppression but how those powers interact with one another while examining *all* aspects of one's personhood and identity, seeks to unearth the hidden and disrupt hegemony (Crenshaw, 1994, Wozolek, 2019). Wozolek states, "In sum, queer theory functions within the lines of qualitative research as a means to disrupt normalized ideals through an attention both to the event and the underlying understandings that are central to that event as it occurs, and to the analysis of what has happened" (2019.) Guided by the understanding that 'my normal may not be your normal,' and that each person brings with them their own set of unique experiences and expertise we opened ourselves up to the collective power and funds of knowledge amongst ourselves. It is within this vulnerability that there is space for (re)empowerment.

These theories allow us to wonder about the impact of centuries worth of unpaid labor done by and for survivors. They allow us to consider the ways monogamy and nonmonogamy play a role in abuse, power, and control. Discussing SDV amongst queer people forces us to

move away from the cis and binary man/woman abuse scenario. These theoretical frameworks enable us to confront the patriarchal, hegemonic, white supremecist society that allows for such egregious crimes to happen at such alarming rates.

After surviving sexual or domestic violence, feeling any sense of control within oneself can seem an impossible feat. Regaining a sense of power, both within oneself and within the world around them, is a central piece of (re)empowerment. For survivors, the process of (re)empowerment is just as important as the outcome (Miley & DuBois in Shera & Wells, 1999, Swift & Levin, 1987). By participating and engaging in the garden group, participants are working toward their own (re)empowerment (Freire, 1986). Using the (re)empowerment questionnaire, we can assess (re)empowerment through self-efficacy and motivation (Bandura, 1986) in addition to encouraging reflective practices. Empowerment theory helps understand and analyze the impact of time spent discussing experiences and gardening together.

(Re)mpowerment involves finding control within one's own life (Bandura, 1986). In a late stage capitalistic society this must also include economic control. Who can pay for therapy and access high quality healing spaces is a systemic inequality. Because of economic inequalities and compounding experiences of trauma for individuals in the queer community, the need for free and low-cost healing spaces outweighs the supply. While there are centers that offer free or low cost therapy to queer and trans individuals, these places often have long wait lists, high turnover, and are few and far between. Additionally, nonprofits such as Seattle's Northwest Network, who are structured as "by and for" organizations are often situated within already small communities. This creates issues when both people in a couple need services; one is inevitably not welcome or safe in the sole healing space available.

The intimate and complex dynamic of trauma within queer relationships paired with limited support services, can lead to queer and trans survivors of domestic violence being ousted from these organizations by their abuser/intimate partner who has already used those services. Because of this, large groups of survivors have no resources for healing. This can lead to feelings of hiding within a community that is already hiding from society-this grows shame. For people who are from historically oppressed communities, access to care and safe space to be vulnerable can be complex. Self-regulation can be a mountain not a hill for members from non-dominant or historically oppressed communities. Empowerment theory assists us in understanding the dynamic context within which we sit (Bandura, 1986).

Methods (participatory action research, radical flexibility)

In line with community based design research, this project is based around a partnership with the mutual aid group @them_stems and their Flower Feast program located in the Central District of Seattle, Washington. This is a queer run urban farm collective focused on free distribution of produce to the local community via corner store and fresh flowers to Black and Indigenous people of color via local pickups and deliveries. The mission statement of @them_stems is “we believe in flowers in the home as a source of joy and self care, flowers as a reminder that as time passes and we continue to sustain our movements, ourselves and each other, the world around us continues to bloom and die, to remake itself again and again. Flowers for BIPOC folks as a given, a gift, a way to bring care and love to the forefront of the new world we wish to build together. Plus, some mutual aid thrown into the mix, because why not.”

As we work toward collective liberation, radical flexibility and freedom dreaming must be employed (Love, 2019). This project combines aspects of culturally sustaining pedagogy, feminist participatory action research, radical flexibility, and queerness to build together an experience rich with risk taking, freedom dreaming, reflection, and collective liberation (see appendix A). Radical flexibility (Veletsianos and Houlden, 2020) is more than offering a flexible schedule and multiple ways to participate- it's about recognizing the relationality and humanity of every person and understanding that each individual has their unique set of needs and contributions (see appendix B). Radical flexibility "begins with the recognition that …[we] are relational beings and must be honored and collaborated with as such" (Veletsianos and Houlden, 2020). When working with survivors of sexual and domestic violence, particularly during a time of national unrest in the midst of a pandemic, we must put the humanity and relationality of our participants above all other priorities. This means codesign, redesign, and other forms of relinquishing power and building trust. In this project, participants are welcomed to discuss daily life's intersections with prior trauma through semi-monthly meetings. While I facilitated most focus group sessions, I engaged participants as co-designers and co-researchers. Drawing from reciprocal vulnerability, "where the researcher shares personal experiences with oppression to establish collective and mutual trust. This method is most effective when the researcher can engage interviews as dialogues that involve openness and vulnerability from both sides" (Kohli, 2014), I shared my experiences and did not ask anyone to share something that I myself was not comfortable sharing. As I came across new information or findings, I shared these with the group.

Due to the highly personal and sensitive nature of the topic of sexual or domestic violence, it was imperative that I use great care in every step of the way when conducting

research. As participant observers, the researchers and participants both had a part in the design of the project and are contributors in the generation of new knowledge and data (Kawulich, 2005). One of the impacts of SDV is a loss of control or power in an individual's life. The fact that survivors of SDV, as participants in this project, are (re)empowered to control the data that comes out of this study is central to the design. While somewhat radical, due to patriarchal systems that we exist within, survivors of SDV have often had to work together to build grassroots systems to create their own forms of safety, data/truth, accountability, and solutions. This project stays in line with that history in that everyone involved in the project is a survivor of SDV. This is the first partnership that @them_stems has made outside of their initial partnership to acquire space from Seattle Girls School and donate produce to Yesler Grocery and will hopefully help them obtain future funding or opportunities.

In addition to the importance of this research on community based educational spaces (Baldridge, 2020), trauma informed pedagogy and healing centered engagement, this project is extremely personal, as I am a gender nonconforming new mom and multi-time rape survivor who regained my power through tending to plants and engaging in mutual aid. Additionally, the person who runs @them_stems is a friend of the lead researcher and it is imperative that we maintain a relationship that feels healthy, rejuvenating, and safe. In our initial discussion, Alex, the founder of @them_stems, a professional urban farmer, a participant in this project and a good friend of mine, and I brainstormed where power could show up and who all would be involved at different levels. For example, since we only have one key to the garden, Alex feared she would be in a gatekeeper role for access to the garden space. Alex expressed initial hesitancy in the fact that she would be "telling everyone what to do" because she is the master gardener. We were able to reflect on this in discussing how each person will bring a specific expertise and hers is

gardening. Part of the Points of Unity activity helped to understand how each person brings power into the group (see appendix C).

The activities that have been implemented within the project work to reflect knowledge of history and power that is relevant to the people in the community by actively and intentionally (re)empowering participants to take part in codesign of nearly every aspect. In recognizing the fact that SDV works to disempower and take control away from survivors, I have chosen codesign to be central to each aspect of this project from designing our points of unity together to rotating discussion topic responsibility. Furthermore, as queer survivors of SDV, we recognize that the official systems set up by the state do not generally provide the types of support that are needed and that we often end up supporting one another from within the community. In honoring this truth, mutual aid is a central aspect of this project and the activities that we will do together in partnership with @them_stems and their Flower Feast program. One of the activities that we will do together is arrange bouquets and self care packages for Black and Indigenous people of color in the Seattle area (see appendix D). This is also one way that this project serves as participatory action research- activism as both a process and an outcome.

Activity Design:

Each meeting of our community was planned to be approximately two hours - one hour for activities and discussions and one hour for gardening - and was initially planned to take place in the garden space at Seattle Girls School. Due to logistical issues, the use of the Seattle Girls School garden was no longer a viable option and, as a group, participants decided to have

rotating hosts for our meetings. Each participant was excited for the opportunity to have the group to their own home garden.

As an insider in this community, I hoped to engage on a peer to peer level with our participants, sometimes assuming facilitation roles when necessary, but mostly participating as co-collaborators and participant observers intent on practicing a pedagogy of listening (Kawulich, 2005 & Rinaldi, 2004). I adhered to the emergent strategies of both trusting the people in our community and moving at the pace of trust as we build relationships with our community members (brown, 2017). This also meant that the timing of the activities and meetings had to be flexible depending on the wants and needs of our community members and sometimes spanned additional meetings when necessary. For example, we didn't start the Community Agreement and Points of Unity activity until the second meeting and we rescheduled when there was bad weather. The following four activities were conducted throughout this research (see appendix E).

Create a Community Agreement and Points of Unity

With the understanding that all queer people and all survivors of abuse struggle to find safe spaces in a nation founded on patriarchy, white supremacy and colonialism, we began our time together by creating a community agreement together. The goal of this activity is to find points of unity among all members, set intentions and expectations for our time together, and share what strengths we can bring to the community. This also served as an opportunity for the group to discuss consent and how to voice asks or content warnings when sharing about potentially triggering topics. As one of the first activities that we do together, this set the stage

for how the group would come to see our time together. Participants spent some solo time writing down their contributions followed by sharing out what we wrote and providing context and explanation. Participants also shared what their experiences are when triggered and what their needs are when that happens. Needs ranged from wanting a hug and going for a walk together to wanting to be left alone and ignored. As something that we return to, this activity incorporates principles of community based design research by being a living document and therefore allowing for change over time and by focusing on "cultivating and building increased capacity to continue the ongoing work of social change" (Bang & Marin, 2015).

Brainstorm, Create, and Take an (Re)mpowerment Questionnaire

This activity empowers participants to choose what they want the data to be and how they want it collected. After familiarizing ourselves with the group and space, participants and researcher(s) were asked to co-design a (re)mpowerment questionnaire together to help create a foundation of data for the project. Participants helped brainstorm question topics, decide on frequency of application, and give questionnaire feedback throughout our time together to contribute to the collective data (see appendix F). This activity exemplifies qualities of community based design research in that all participants have a voice in the design, and that the long term trajectory of the garden project allows for yearly iterations of questionnaire re-creation and data collection. I, the lead researcher, ended up creating the questionnaire after receiving input and support from the group.

Bouquet Arrangement for BIPOC Community Members

This experience was two hours and included two parts. In collaboration with Alex from @them_stems, it started with the harvesting of flowers from the Seattle Girls School garden space then moved to the arrangement of flowers from our shared garden space. Because of logistical issues with the Seattle Girls' School location, only 3 participants were able to harvest the flowers. Since I, the lead researcher, was not with them, their conversations were not recorded however the participants who engaged in this part of the activity reported that they wished they had recorded the conversation because it was thick with relevant content. They spoke about non-manogomy, platonic love and relationships, monogamy, and sexual and domestic violence in past relationships.

Bouquets and self-care packages were delivered and sold out of Broadcast Coffee to raise money to give 100% as gifts to Black and Indiginous community members. This is in line with the mission of our garden partner, @them_stems, with the flowers and care packages as a source of joy, care and mutual aid to help sustain our community members on their journeys towards healing. In the commitment to justice and work towards "an overall, structural transformation of society and culture" (Galletta & Torre, 2019), this activity parallels participatory action research framework.

Sample

6 self identifying white queer nonbinary people and women living in the Pacific Northwest. All are known personally by the principal investigator and were asked to be involved in the study based on their prior therapeutic- and self-work and therefore reduced risk of harm due to triggers. All participants have chosen pseudonyms for this project. During the planning

and implementation of our project, we expected both challenges and opportunities to arise. The most evident risk of working with survivors of SDV is the potential for causing unintended harm while in conversation around trauma. We acknowledge that we as researchers are not mental health professionals, and therefore are not equipped to treat any potential conditions which may have arisen/arise from our participants' past experiences or conversations within our community. It has therefore been important to consider concurrently consulting with mental health professionals as we navigate our work. Additionally, we hope our community can be a safe space to talk about and work through trauma, and with that comes the challenge of safeguarding the stories of our individuals both within and outside of our community space. To mitigate some risk, I have received training and certification in mental health first aid and each participant has received prior personal therapy.

Additional considerations when implementing our project were the different trajectories of healing between individual community members. Anticipating these differences, we aimed to make clear the ideas that "my normal is not your normal" and "what works for me doesn't always work for you" during our meetings. With these ideas in mind, we had the opportunity to build a strong community and gain different perspectives from survivors about what has mediated their individual healing.

At the start of the project, there was one participant of Color. After reflection upon the first meeting, they reached out stating that they did not feel it would be conducive to their healing to be the sole person of Color and that they would not be continuing. They also stated that they hoped this would be useful information for the study. My behavior and inaction was a clear example of white supremacy and white feminism. It was in my privilege that I did not take seriously the importance of 1) actively recruiting more participants of Color, 2) not giving this

participant a heads up that they would be the only non-white participant, and 3) including a non-white facilitator/researcher. By ignoring the unique needs of queer and trans people of color, I continued a pattern of white, middle-class research that not only upholds white supremacy and reproduces societal inequalities but that "neglects the strengths, struggles, and aspirations of students from non-dominant groups and communities" (Philip et al., 2018). Moving forward with the project, extra attention was put on intersectionality and recognizing and honoring the different and unique needs and experiences of different identities.

Data Collection

Group meetings happened roughly 2x per month during the warmer season and/or as participants' schedules allow. All group and some individual conversations were audio recorded. The researcher and participants also took notes, drawings, and photographs. There is a group text message thread where participants shared thoughts, ideas, scheduling, and other relevant information. Additionally, participants completed a self reflection worksheet on empowerment. I used these artifacts to analyze the data to understand the efficacy of growing (re)empowerment through group and gardening.

Data Analysis

All group meetings have been recorded and transcribed. These transcriptions were read and re-read both accompanying and non-accompanying the audio to pick up on tones and subtleties.

Using grounded theory, I have uncovered and choosen themes of focus centering a queer, feminist, empowerment theory.

Questions that guide my research include:

- What are the patterns of discourse?
- What does (re)empowerment look like?
- How have levels and experience of (re)empowerment changed?
- How did the combination of group discussion, gardening, and mutual aid work together?

Audio was coded to unearth patterns of discourse centering empowerment and community. Behaviors and commentary surrounding agency, confidence, positive self expression, and connectedness were tracked as signs of empowerment. Each participant's contributions were also coded and tracked to help understand the scope of co-design, in that if the principal investigator is doing the majority of speaking, then the opportunity for co-design was small. Because the group consisted of trans and cis people, I also wanted to see what patterns or data surfaced when I tracked participants' gender identities as they contributed. We looked for trends and patterns in the data, creating tentative hypotheses along the way. As we continued the analysis, we checked to see if the data supported or contradicted these emerging hypotheses.

Findings

Participants not only engaged in the activities and discussions, they took an active role in creating and maintaining a collaborative, safe, vulnerable space- all noted aspects of (re)empowerment and distinctive patterns of discourse. At one early meeting, Ada paraphrased to Tom (who had to leave to put a child to bed during part of the conversation),

> "...we were just talking about um, how people kind of, what people kind of, what everyone needs when they're feeling triggered and just like, keeping in mind that not everyone likes to be touched, um, and for the most part we'll need to, like, express what we need because everyone needs such different things you know, if someone's having a hard time. But it's, also a lot of us are criers so if people are crying they're okay…we were talking about um the idea of like consent around sharing and like, if we're talking about something, and it's feeling challenging for people, were thinking, we'll just do kind of like a, like someone can just do a pause sign if they need a pause. And so we kind of take like a safety pause until everyone's ready to talk and, like, start talking again."

Here, Ada expressed confidence in her ability to fill Tom in, agency in the ability for each person to state their own needs, and a positive self expression about being a group of criers.

When filling out a questionnaire on empowerment, Tom shared their initial discomfort and resistance to the activity followed by the fact that once they worked through those feelings, they had a lot to say. "I like started having feelings and then I was like, ugh, I can't do this today like I feel too exhausted. and then I just like worked through it. started writing and then I was just like brrrrbrbrbrbrrrrr." Max on the other hand said, "I think it helped for me that there was not like a ton of space to answer. And it made me be like okay, what's like the most important

thing that takes up… I couldn't get too into it." Once they finished the questionnaire, Max looked ahead in their packet to "My bill of rights" (Martens, Viegas, & Mimoso, 2008) and began writing. When I asked them what they were doing they said, "Yeah. So um I got done, I think like a little, maybe like second or third or something. So I went to the next page and I read all of the, the the statements and then I thought of times when I didn't think I had the right to these things and initialed next to it…" This spurred a conversation around what rights participants saw on the list that they didn't realize were rights. "Mine is like I have the right to privacy," Max shared with the group while Ada and I shared feelings about alone time and the right to "develop my individual talents and abilities" (Martens, Viegas, & Mimoso, 2008).

When I asked, "do y'all—well how do you all feel, like with this, specifically with this bill of rights and like empowerment..... and like abuse or violence. Do you feel like, um, I don't know. I'm just wondering if it's like an all or nothing, you know? Like if in order to be empowered or have a sense of empowerment, you have to feel like that kind of all the time or in most aspects of life or if it can, like, vary or oscillate?" Max responded, "I think they can coexist but like, I don't know how to do that yet." Even though I am the principal investigator, I shared an emergent understanding of my own experience with empowerment: "I was surprised that my feelings of empowerment, I don't know. I just learned from filling up, answering those questions that I really need to, like, be more physical and do stuff with my body. For me empowerment a lot comes from like, I dunno, I think just like being such a small person and like being treated like a small person my whole life… I think that I just like get a really big sense of power from doing hard things in my body, whether it's skateboarding or gardening or building and I didn't realize that I haven't done that like in a long time… it's when I pushed myself, not that somebody else pushes me, when I push myself slightly past something that I didn't know I could do. And

then I did it. And then I feel empowered and I feel powerful. And I'm like, hell yeah. I didn't even realize I could do that. I can, it makes me feel like I can do something else too. (Fire crackling) How do you feel empowerment and power or control are connected?"

"Gardening," Ada chimed in. "My experience actually making a garden. Growing vegetables and having them actually grow and then eat them was like one of my points I was talking about…I just like I didn't know I could do this and I just, did it…For me when I started trying to like break down my definition of empowerment it had a lot to do with like agencies, personal agency, and just the ability to make my own choices and also to like articulate what I want. And ask for what I want and need and not be afraid to communicate that…Yeah and I guess like being in control of my own reality… but it's the power over myself. my own self and not really anyone else."

We went on to question the impact of another person on our own empowerment when Tom said, "I think it can. It depends on the type of response I think. typically. A thing, a thing that keeps coming up in my head is my relationship previous to you. And there were so many times where I felt empowered by this person and then there were also times where I felt like the most disempowered and.... um... And I think... feeling that disempowerment did come from some of their reactions to me sharing things. or mistakes I made in my relationship, and... ultimately I got to a place where I didn't feel like I could be honest. to like, I was so afraid of their reaction that I couldn't be honest in order to leave the situation." Agreeing, Ada shared that, "I think the reaction really does matter, and like, yeah. I feel very similarly to my last relationship." Max also said that " I think it's, it's like, the act of bringing it up is one thing that helps me feel empowered. But then like, when the reaction is good, it feels like even better. like so, the base thing is that like if I feel good enough to, or like or if I feel like- not even just like if

I like I can do something, but if I do it, whether I feel like I can or not, that feels good. And then if it's positively received then it feels even better to me…But if it isn't positively received, I just like have to accept that the person doesn't understand either isn't understanding what I'm saying Or like just has such a different view of it that does not work out."

What unfolded during our time together was mediated by both codesign and our engagement in garden activities. It was during the bouquet assembling activity that a participant problematized the use of the word "partner" in queer communities and how that intersects with personal identity and agency. As our hands worked with vibrant flowers grown by a participant, someone shared their expansive view of relationships, community, and connection by stating, "I'm not single just because I am not in a romantic relationship with someone." At another point when the group was potting propagated plants from a participant's home collection, someone asked the group how to handle a friend breakup. With hands in the dirt, huddled around a planting table, participants vulnerably shared their experiences and thoughts on boundaries, codependency, manipulation, and healing.

Limitations

The historical, sociopolitical and oppressive issues of sexual, domestic violence and gender-based violence, homo/transphobia, and lack of accessible and inclusive healing spaces are too large to cover in a single study. Although there were only six participants, this study did not retain any participants of color, which is a continuation of a pattern of gatekeeping and barriers to queer and trans people of color in accessing healing spaces. Because of this, I may argue that this project widens the access gap for queer and trans Black people, Indigenous people, and other people of color.

Other limitations include not having any funding or stable location. While the loss of a usable location just before the start of our research was a hurdle, it did allow for incredible opportunities in codesign. Participants were able to volunteer their own garden spaces, bringing with them a sense of pride that they could contribute to the group. Additionally, once the garden space did become available, the group was able to process together whether the constraints (a cis man would be present and no bathrooms would be available) were too hefty to agree to. In the end, participants decided that they preferred being in their own home garden spaces and it would not be worth it to have to share the space with a cis man.

Lastly, with the queer community being so small, there were times where it did not feel appropriate to discuss certain situations with one another due to multiple relationship dynamics. One evening, while discussing boundaries and community, we had to stop recording and assess whether we could continue the conversation because, as one participant put it, “I don't even know if we should talk about it's too connected.” In this situation, the participant was talking about her feelings around a person in our community dating her friend. The person of topic is the ex of one participant and friends with other participants and therefore she didn't feel like it was appropriate to continue the conversation. This exemplifies the need for more queer healing spaces as the possibility for overlap is large.

Discussion

In this study, we set out to understand if and how a combination of gardening and community impacts queer survivors of sexual and domestic violence drawing upon queer, feminist, and empowerment theory (amongst the influences of many others such as intersectionality, healing centered engagement, transformative justice, and grounded theories).

As we met, engagement with plants became a medium for engaging in themes accompanying empowerment (identified by participants as: agency, confidence, positive self expression, and connectedness) and community (particularly in the form of affirmation) to develop and surface. These themes of empowerment were used to explore the patterns of discourse throughout the study. The patterns of discourse revealed that group process, norms, and affirmations became a central point in our work together, uplifting and expanding co-design as participants worked together to build and enact the majority of this project together. Through developing shared agreements, participants were able to create a feeling of safety, allowing themselves to be fully present and vulnerable. In reaching this place of shared vulnerability, participants were able to begin answering the research question of "what does (re)empowerment look like" and identify what aspects of empowerment are important and meaningful to them, leading to a full conversation around how and when each participant feels empowered. Participants named confidence, "a source of strength that comes from inside me," autonomy, ability to articulate needs, and being in charge of their own actions as key points of empowerment. Because these conversations happened in our designed space, it touches on the research question, "How did the combination of group discussion, gardening, and mutual aid work together," but it does not fully answer the question.

Queer people and survivors of sexual trauma are long adapted to taking care of one another. By utilizing co-design, we tapped into participants' funds of knowledge, not only instilling a sense of confidence and agency (named aspects of empowerment), but also sharing the brilliance of lived experience with this project. By examining the patterns of discourse we saw this exemplified when participants discussed ways to mitigate PTSD symptoms, such as triggers, while in this space together. Because they were provided the space for agency (a clear

and stated indicator of empowerment by participants) in the process, participants expressed a mutual responsibility for others' wellbeing while brainstorming how to share explicit details of our experiences with trauma and abuse. This would not have been possible without both codesign and radical flexibility, central tenets of mutual aid. By honoring the reality that queer people often create their own safe spaces and inviting participants to join in this process here, participants experienced agency and (re)empowerment, thus impacting their levels and experiences of (re)empowerment. By focusing on the combination of group discussion, gardening, and mutual aid work, we begin to understand the connection between codesign and agency as a vital piece to designing safe(r) learning spaces for the queer community. We discovered that the act of gardening and/or participating in mutual aid activities allowed for more freedom of group discussion and connection amongst participants. More research is needed to understand the direct relationships between mutual aid work and gardening on (re)empowerment

This project built upon and contributes to current understandings of gardens as healings spaces for survivors of sexual and domestic violence (Putz, 2014; Renzetti & Follingstad, 2015; Rose, 2017), but more importantly, makes visible the empowerment potential within codesign and group process. The results of our (re)empowerment questionnaire have given us an understanding of our participants' experience with empowerment and serve as a starting point for further research. Due to challenging schedules, pandemic safety concerns, and the need to end this iteration of the study, we were not able to assess how levels and experiences of empowernet changed. Through data analysis of transcriptions and worksheets, we know that participants developed and built upon their understandings of empowerment, however we do not have the ability to measure the change at this time. I hope that our group as a place of healing will be continually reimagined and attempted across contexts over time. In line with community based

design research, I hope that our work can be iterative, and therefore this research can help inform future iterations of this design. The next iteration of this design based participatory action research project is currently being designed and, in designing for more flexibility of participation (virtual/in-person), hopes to address some of the gaps we see here.

As these queer survivors of sexual and domestic violence came together with the shared purpose of engaging in garden centered mutual aid as a medium for healing from and disussing our past traumas, we experienced magic.

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Appendix A


Growing From Surviving to Thriving
format:
Most of the things that we do over the course of our time together will be co-designed, meaning we will work together to decide what/how we want to do or discuss. We will create space to discuss daily life's intersections with prior trauma through weekly meetings. While the exact format will be co-designed together, the basis will be rotating topic discussions paired with physical work in the garden and arrangement of bouquets. Growing, harvesting, and distribution of the produce and flowers will be central to the experience while creating intentional space for individuals to show up as our full, queer, surviving selves. We will collectively create a community agreement at the start of the project and revisit it throughout the project to ensure the safety and consent of everyone involved. When working with survivors of sexual and domestic violence, particularly during a time of national unrest in the midst of a pandemic, we must put the humanity and relationality of our participants above all other priorities. This means codesign, redesign, and other forms of relinquishing power and building trust.
research plan:
My plan is to audio record our time together so that I can go back in and look for patterns and understandings of empowerment. I will be using this data to build an understanding of how gardening and/or group impact empowerment. My hope is that this data can be used to help encourage others to look at gardening and/or informal group settings as opportunities for growth, empowerment, and healing for survivors of sexual and domestic violence. I will not be sharing the audio with anyone outside of this project and everyone involved will have the opportunity to choose a pseudonym to attach to any data that is published in this report. No personal identifying data will be shared or published and each person will have the opportunity to read the report before it is submitted anywhere and to redact any information they would like. Consent will be checked for at the start, end, and throughout the entire process of this project. Everyone is free to show up as they are and share only what they feel comfortable sharing.
follow-up:
As we spend time together, there may be things we want to discuss further. There may be opportunities for people to come to the garden on their own or go for a walk together. Everyone is welcome to share as much or as little as they feel comfortable and called to share. If anyone ever shares something that they would not like to be included as data, they can tell me and I will delete it.

Appendix B

Growing From Surviving to Thriving

Negotiating Sexual and Domestic Violence Survivance and Empowerment Through Transformative Emergent Process in Community Gardening and Mutual Aid

How does a combination of group and gardening impact empowerment in queer survivors of sexual and domestic violence?

Community Based Design Research

Codesign, redesign, and other forms of relinquishing power and building trust.

How does a combination of group and gardening impact empowerment in queer survivors of sexual and domestic violence?

Empowerment and Consent

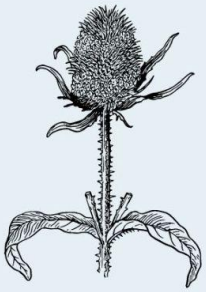
The group will collectively create a community agreement at the start of the project and revisit it throughout the project to ensure the safety and consent of everyone involved. Invitation to discuss daily life's intersections with prior trauma

Procedure

Rotating topic discussions paired with physical work in the garden and arrangement of bouquets. Involvement in the growing, harvesting, and distribution of the produce and flowers will be central to the experience while creating intentional space for individuals to show up as their full, queer, surviving selves.

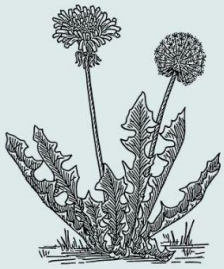
Existing Literature

Putz, A. (2014)
Millican, J., Perkins, C., Adam-Bradford, A. (2019)
Johnson, L. R. (2017)
brown, a. m. (2017)
Garcia, A. P., Minkler, M., Cardenas, Z., Grills, C., & Porter, C. (2014)



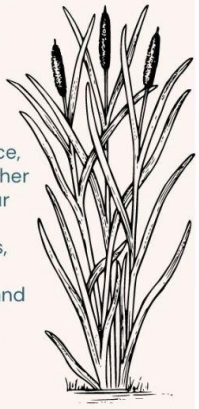
Participatory Action Research

Partnership with a queer run urban farm collective focused on free distribution of produce to the local community via corner store and fresh flowers to Black and Indigenous people of color via local pickups and deliveries.



Activities

- Create group Points of Unity/Community Agreement
- Create art with found objects in the garden
- Create art with materials that we bring into the garden space
- Create an empowerment check-in questionnaire (something we can fill out at the start, middle, and end of our time together)
- Bring something to share with the group
- Arrange bouquets and self care packages for BIPOC community members
- Read an article, zine, poem, art piece, etc. and discuss or debrief it together
- Individual or group reflection on our past's impact on our present
- Check-ins about our week, families, work, etc.
- Writing activities (both individual and group)
- Information sessions on gardening techniques, practices, and skills
- Information sessions on self care techniques, skills, and practices
- Expert Lessons



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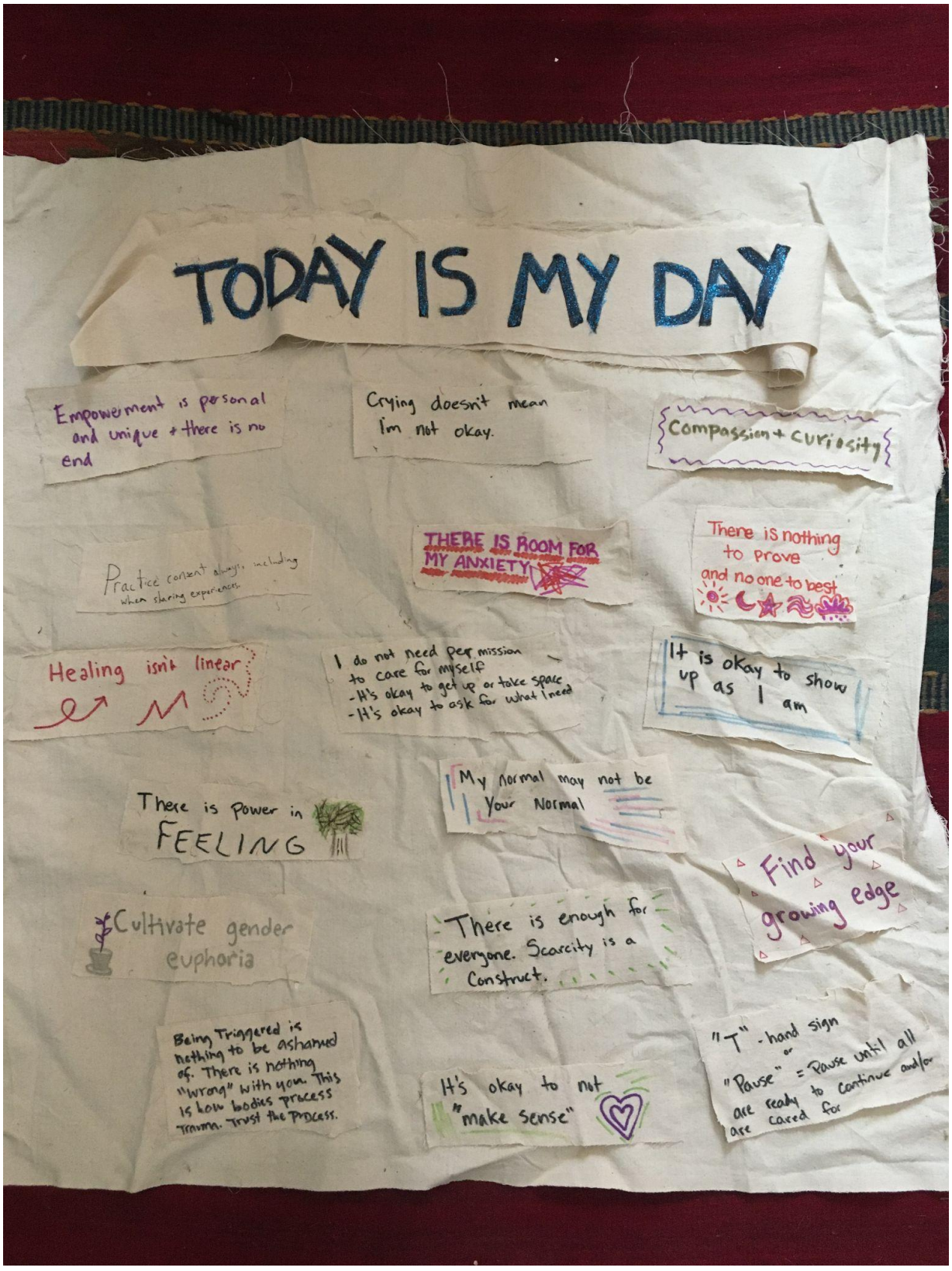
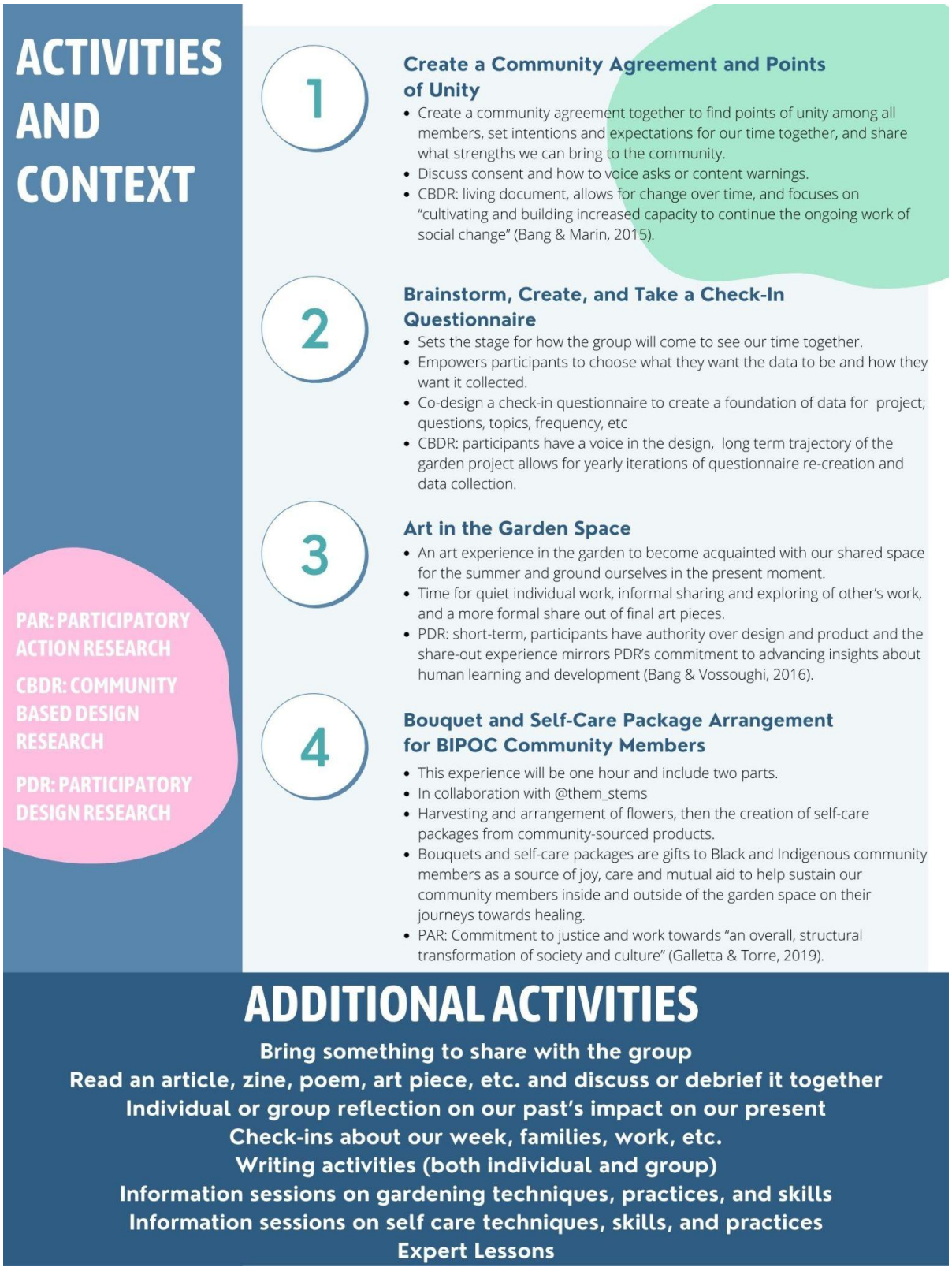
Appendix C

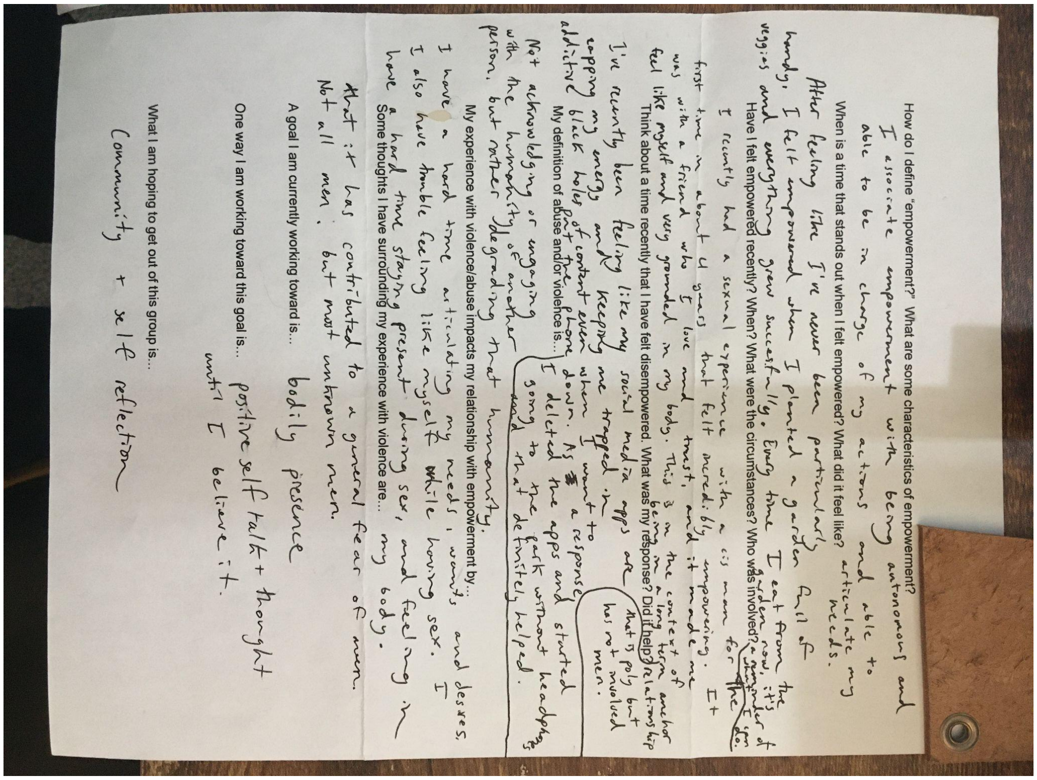

TODAY IS MY DAY
Empowerment is personal and unique + there is no end
Crying doesn't mean I'm not okay.
Compassion + Curiosity
Practice consent always, including when sharing experiences.
THERE IS ROOM FOR MY ANXIETY
There is nothing to prove and no one to best
Healing isn't linear
I do not need permission to care for myself
- It's okay to get up or take space
- It's okay to ask for what I need
It is okay to show up as I am
My normal may not be Your Normal
There is power in FEELING
Find your growing edge
Cultivate gender euphoria
There is enough for everyone. Scarcity is a Construct.
Being Triggered is nothing to be ashamed of. There is nothing "wrong" with you. This is how bodies process trauma. Trust the process.
"T" - hand sign or "Pause" = Pause until all are ready to continue and/or are cared for
It's okay to not "make sense"

Appendix D

Appendix E


ACTIVITIES AND CONTEXT
1
Create a Community Agreement and Points of Unity
• Create a community agreement together to find points of unity among all members, set intentions and expectations for our time together, and share what strengths we can bring to the community.
• Discuss consent and how to voice asks or content warnings.
• CBDR: living document, allows for change over time, and focuses on "cultivating and building increased capacity to continue the ongoing work of social change" (Bang & Marin, 2015).
2
Brainstorm, Create, and Take a Check-In Questionnaire
• Sets the stage for how the group will come to see our time together.
• Empowers participants to choose what they want the data to be and how they want it collected.
• Co-design a check-in questionnaire to create a foundation of data for project; questions, topics, frequency, etc
• CBDR: participants have a voice in the design, long term trajectory of the garden project allows for yearly iterations of questionnaire re-creation and data collection.
3
Art in the Garden Space
• An art experience in the garden to become acquainted with our shared space for the summer and ground ourselves in the present moment.
• Time for quiet individual work, informal sharing and exploring of other's work, and a more formal share out of final art pieces.
• PDR: short-term, participants have authority over design and product and the share-out experience mirrors PDR's commitment to advancing insights about human learning and development (Bang & Vossoughi, 2016).
4
Bouquet and Self-Care Package Arrangement for BIPOC Community Members
• This experience will be one hour and include two parts.
• In collaboration with @them_stems
• Harvesting and arrangement of flowers, then the creation of self-care packages from community-sourced products.
• Bouquets and self-care packages are gifts to Black and Indigenous community members as a source of joy, care and mutual aid to help sustain our community members inside and outside of the garden space on their journeys towards healing.
• PAR: Commitment to justice and work towards "an overall, structural transformation of society and culture" (Galletta & Torre, 2019).
PAR: PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH
CBDR: COMMUNITY BASED DESIGN RESEARCH
PDR: PARTICIPATORY DESIGN RESEARCH
ADDITIONAL ACTIVITIES
Bring something to share with the group
Read an article, zine, poem, art piece, etc. and discuss or debrief it together
Individual or group reflection on our past's impact on our present
Check-ins about our week, families, work, etc.
Writing activities (both individual and group)
Information sessions on gardening techniques, practices, and skills
Information sessions on self care techniques, skills, and practices
Expert Lessons

Appendix F



How do I define "empowerment?" What are some characteristics of empowerment?
I associate empowerment with being autonomous and able to be in charge of my actions and able to articulate my needs.

When is a time that stands out when I felt empowered? What did it feel like?
After feeling like I've never been particularly handy, I felt empowered when I planted a garden full of veggies and everything grew successfully. Every time I eat from the garden now, it's a reminder of what I can do.

Have I felt empowered recently? When? What were the circumstances? Who was involved?
I recently had a sexual experience with a cis man for the first time in about 4 years that felt incredibly empowering. It was with a friend who I love and trust, and it made me feel like myself and very grounded in my body. This is in the context of being in a long term anchor relationship that is poly but has not involved men.

Think about a time recently that I have felt disempowered. What was my response? Did it help?
I've recently been feeling like my social media apps are sapping my energy and keeping me trapped in addictive black holes of content even when I want to put the phone down. As a response I deleted the apps and started going to the park without headphones and that definitely helped.

My definition of abuse and/or violence is...
Not acknowledging or engaging with the humanity of another person, but rather degrading that humanity.

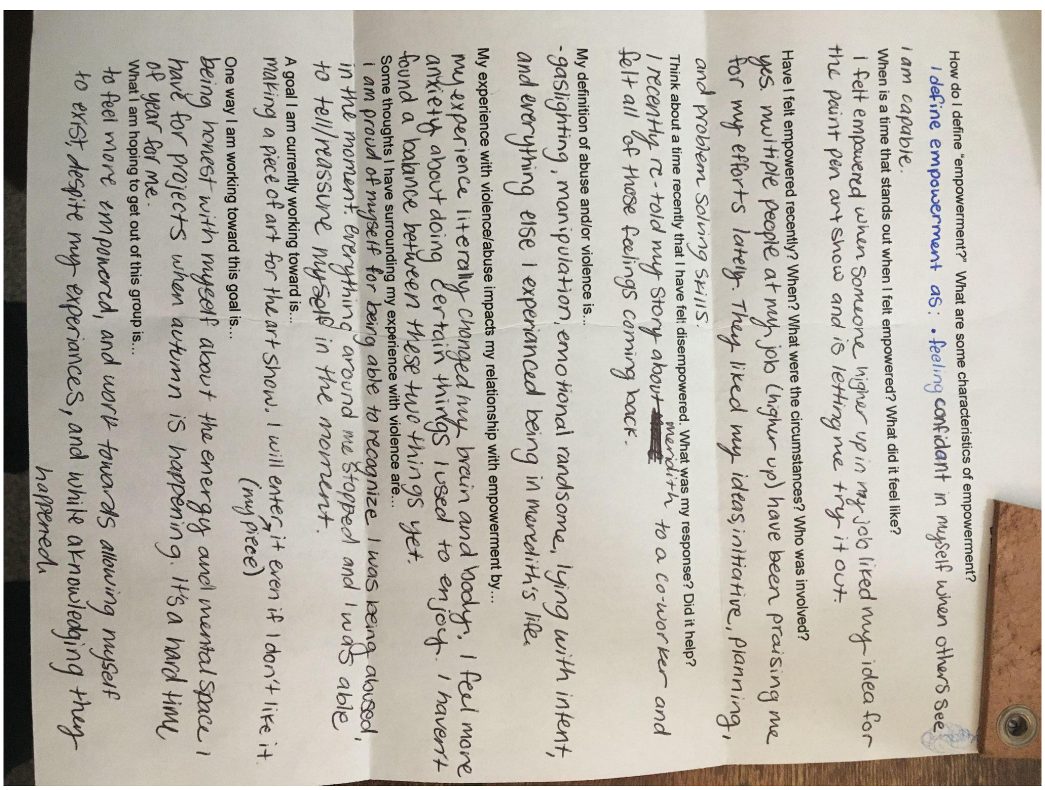
My experience with violence/abuse impacts my relationship with empowerment by...
I have a hard time articulating my needs, wants, and desires. I also have trouble feeling like myself while having sex. I have a hard time staying present during sex, and feeling in my body.

Some thoughts I have surrounding my experience with violence are...
that it has contributed to a general fear of men. Not all men; but most unknown men.

A goal I am currently working toward is... bodily presence

One way I am working toward this goal is... positive self talk + thought until I believe it.

What I am hoping to get out of this group is...
Community + self reflection



How do I define "empowerment?" What are some characteristics of empowerment?
I define empowerment as: • feeling confidant in myself when others see I am capable.

When is a time that stands out when I felt empowered? What did it feel like?
I felt empowered when someone higher up in my job liked my idea for the paint pen art show and is letting me try it out.

Have I felt empowered recently? When? What were the circumstances? Who was involved?
yes. multiple people at my job (higher up) have been praising me for my efforts lately. They liked my ideas, initiative, planning, and problem solving skills.

Think about a time recently that I have felt disempowered. What was my response? Did it help?
I recently re-told my story about meridith to a co-worker and felt all of those feelings coming back.

My definition of abuse and/or violence is...
- gaslighting, manipulation, emotional randsome, lying with intent, and everything else I experianced being in meredith's life.

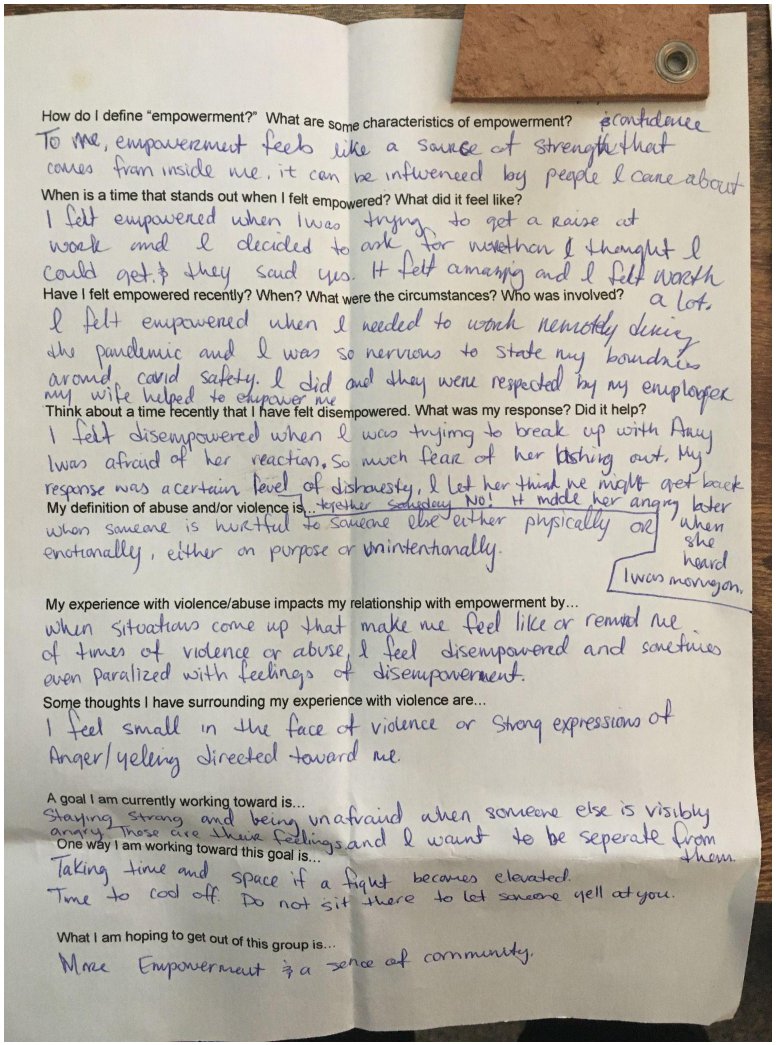
My experience with violence/abuse impacts my relationship with empowerment by...
my experience literally changed my brain and body. I feel more anxiety about doing certain things I used to enjoy. I haven't found a balance between these two things yet.

Some thoughts I have surrounding my experience with violence are...
I am proud of myself for being able to recognize I was being abused, in the moment. Everything around me stopped and I was able to tell/reassure myself in the moment.

A goal I am currently working toward is...
making a piece of art for the art show. I will enter it even if I don't like it (my piece)

One way I am working toward this goal is...
being honest with myself about the energy and mental space I have for projects when autumn is happening. It's a hard time of year for me.

What I am hoping to get out of this group is...
to feel more empowered, and work towards allowing myself to exist, despite my experiances, and while aknowledging they happened.



How do I define "empowerment?" What are some characteristics of empowerment? confidence
To me, empowerment feels like a source of strength that comes from inside me. it can be influenced by people I care about

When is a time that stands out when I felt empowered? What did it feel like?
I felt empowered when I was trying to get a raise at work and I decided to ask for more than I thought I could get. & they said yes. It felt amazing and I felt worth a lot.

Have I felt empowered recently? When? What were the circumstances? Who was involved?
I felt empowered when I needed to work remotely during the pandemic and I was so nervious to state my boundries around covid safety. I did and they were respected by my employer my wife helped to empower me

Think about a time recently that I have felt disempowered. What was my response? Did it help?
I felt disempowered when I was trying to break up with Amy I was afraid of her reaction. So much fear of her lashing out. My response was a certain level of dishonesty, I let her think we might get back together someday No! It made her angry later when she heard I was marrying.

My definition of abuse and/or violence is...
when someone is hurtful to someone else either physically or emotionally, either on purpose or unintentionally.

My experience with violence/abuse impacts my relationship with empowerment by...
when situations come up that make me feel like or remind me of times of violence or abuse, I feel disempowered and sometimes even paralized with feelings of disempowerment.

Some thoughts I have surrounding my experience with violence are...
I feel small in the face of violence or strong expressions of Anger/yelling directed toward me.

A goal I am currently working toward is...
Staying strong and being unafraid when someone else is visibly angry. Those are their feelings and I want to be seperate from them.

One way I am working toward this goal is...
Taking time and space if a fight becomes elevated. Time to cool off. Do not sit there to let someone yell at you.

What I am hoping to get out of this group is...
More Empowerment & a sence of community.