Empowering Women through Alternative Settings: Michigan Womyn's Music Festival

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Abstract

Sexism is a form of oppression impacting women in multiple spheres of their lives. The current study examines the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival as an alternative setting in which attendees create a unique culture apart from dominant patriarchal systems. An ethnophenomenological approach was used to examine experiences of empowerment and healing among festival attendees. Twenty women were interviewed at the festival and this data was analyzed using content analysis. The women-only, feminist space offered attendees both physical and emotional safety, which yielded healing. Participants defied gender-prescribed roles through work duties, gender non-conforming dress, and festival events/ceremonies. The development of a "festival family" and close relationships within the festival, quiet times of introspection, and designated spaces of healing were empowering. Results from this study add to the understanding of empowering settings and may inform efforts to create safe spaces for other oppressed groups.

Introduction

All women face subtle and overt acts of sexism, but some groups of women who violate prescribed gender roles (e.g., lesbians, feminists, career women) experience additional discrimination due to what is called "backlash effect," a negative evaluation and treatment of non-conforming women (Rudman, 1998; Rudman & Glick, 2001). Alternative settings to where oppressed groups can withdraw, even temporarily, from the oppressive dominant culture can offer a time of healing, empowerment, and critical consciousness raising that combats the internalization of dominant oppressive cultural norms. This study will examine one such alternative setting, the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival (Michfest), to determine which factors of the setting serve as empowering agents.

History of the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival

Michfest began in 1976 and takes place in the woods of Michigan each summer, filled with music, camping, workshops, and ceremonies.

The festival was the U.S.'s first women's music festival and one of the first large showcases for openly lesbian artists, who were mostly operating outside of the mainstream music industry. The majority of attendees identify as lesbian, but the festival is open to all women-born (cisgender) women.

Michfest typically draws 3,000 to 5,000 women each year and reached a high of 8,000 attendees in the early 1980s. Most attendees camp in tents but some come in RVs and motorized campers. Each year women who volunteer to work "crew" arrive a week to a month in advance to build the physical structures and prepare the land for the festival. At the end of the festival, the physical infrastructure is torn down so that the land is returned to its natural state. All festival attendees are asked to volunteer for several "work shifts" (e.g., childcare, trash, and security).

Sexism in the Dominant Culture

The women who attend the festival frequently reject the gender roles prescribed by traditional gender role ideology, and, because of this, they face intensified sexist-fueled acts of oppression and aggression (Rudman, 1998; Rudman & Glick, 2001). Described as "the systematic inequitable treatment of girls and women by men and by the society as a whole" (Bearman, Korobov, & Thorne, 2009, p. 11), sexism ranges from egregiously hostile acts of violence against women, such as rape and domestic violence, to subtle daily instances of intimidation or condescension (Benokraitis & Feagin, 1995; Swim, Hyers, Cohen, & Ferguson, 2001). Sexism is a form of oppression, which is psychological and political, internal and external (Prilleltensky, 2008) and entails a state of asymmetric power relations where the dominating persons or groups exercise their power by the process of restricting access to material resources and by imparting to the subordinated persons or groups self-deprecating views about themselves.

Brazilian humanitarian P. Freire (1973), one of the early proponents of empowerment theory, advocated for liberating oppressed people through education and critical awareness (Hur, 2006). Settings such as Michfest offer a space for education and consciousness raising. Theorists argue that it is only when an oppressed group attains a certain degree of conscientization that resistance can begin (Prilleltensky, 2008). Liberation from oppression entails both *freedom from* oppressive external forces, such as gender discrimination, and *freedom to* pursue goals (Fromm, 1965; Prilleltensky, 2008) and ultimately involves dismantling oppressive structures through collective action (Moane, 2003). Empowerment, at its core, is about overcoming oppression. Community psychologist J. Rappaport (1981) describes empowerment as the possibility for people to control their own lives.

Empowerment is viewed as both an individual, or psychological, process (Zimmerman, 2000; Zimmerman & Rappaport, 1988) and a group experience (Chavis & Wandersman, 1990). It is exercised at different levels of change, including that of individual, family or kinship group, organization, neighborhood, city or town, or the broader society.

Individual Empowerment

Psychological empowerment is a combination of self-acceptance and confidence, social and political understanding, and the ability to be assertive in obtaining and controlling resources and making decisions (Zimmerman & Rappaport, 1988). Personality and cognitive factors relate to psychological empowerment such as locus of control (Rotter, 1966), self-confidence (Larson, Walker, & Pearce, 2005), and self-efficacy (Bandura, 1989). Self-determination is often reported in the literature as the most crucial individual component to empowerment (Hur, 2006; Sprague & Hayes, 2000). Self-determination can be viewed in four dimensions: 1) constancy and perseverance, 2) the courage to take risks, 3) being proactive, and 4) voicing one's opinion (Boehm & Staples, 2004). It is also one's sense of autonomy and control over how one does her own work (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Settings such as Michfest can be psychologically empowering by building the self-efficacy of attendees and encouraging them to voice their opinions.

The goal of individual empowerment is to achieve a state of liberation where one has the power to impact life, community, and society (Hur, 2006). The dual characteristics of power and empowerment come from a combination of both internal and external factors; individuals internalize external values and beliefs about their place in society and their abilities (Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2005). Additionally, power is the combination

of ability and opportunity to make changes and exert control (Prilleltensky, 2008). Living in unjust and oppressive circumstances can lead to psychological processes, such as feelings of helplessness, upward comparisons, and self-blame, that negatively impact personal wellness (Prilleltensky, 2012). In the case of sexism, this can result in an internalization of sexism, where women begin to believe sexist messages about themselves and others.

Oppression can be internalized and the oppressed group feels inferior and helpless to alter their circumstances, assuming personal blame rather than seeing structural oppressive factors (Moane, 2003). The development of critical consciousness (Freire, 1973; Kieffer, 1984) refers to individuals developing critical awareness about the causes of undesirable social conditions, the possibilities of change, and the importance of acting to transform the world. This is particularly important for an individual if they are to be able to present issues, lead groups, analyze problems, make decisions, and implement empowerment tactics (Fawcett et al., 1994; Serrano-Garcia, 1984).

Group empowerment

Community empowerment refers to collective action by a community to improve the quality of life of the community. Maton (2008) describes empowerment as a groups-based, participatory, and developmental process through which oppressed groups gain greater control over their lives and resources, acquire basic rights, achieve important life goals, and reduce societal marginalization. Furthermore, Maton (2008) describes empowering settings as having a belief system that inspires change, is strengths based, and focuses members beyond themselves. These settings have core activities that accomplish the mission of the setting and a relational environment that fosters social support, caring relationships, and a sense of community. Foster-Fishman,

Salem, Chibnall, Legler, & Yapchai (1998) state that empowering community settings consist of group and strength-based goals; promotion of peer social support systems; and leaders who articulate vision, stand as role models, and socialize new leaders within the group. Settings such as Michfest have a unique culture, social support system, and sense of community that can foster empowerment at both the individual and group level.

Alternate Settings as a Means of Empowerment

Sarason (1972) asserted the idea in his seminal book *The Creation of Settings and the Future Societies* that alternative settings can be an effective means to create social change. As a community psychologist, he became frustrated with efforts to change existing organizations and proposed taking a prevention attitude towards social change. Therefore, rather than attempting to intervene to fix existing broken institutions, he suggested it was effective to just create new institutions. These alternative settings can meet needs not currently met in society, provide greater diversity of options, and be empowering for the people who are involved in them (Sarason, 1972). Additionally, alternative settings demonstrate a new social form that people can choose outside the established options (Reinharz, 1984). Michfest serves an example of an alternative setting and by examining the factors within that setting that empower its attendees, researchers can learn more about alternative settings and their impact.

Method

The current study examines Michfest as a type of alternative setting, where women have opted to temporarily remove themselves from the dominant culture to create a setting with a unique culture, set of gender expectations, norms, and values. The

purpose of this examination is to use qualitative methodology to describe the empowerment and healing experiences of attendees at the festival to learn which factors are most impactful in such a setting. Though this physical setting is temporary, it has the potential to serve as a space for education, consciousness raising, relationship building, and empowerment for attendees.

Design

An ethnophenomenological design was used to examine experiences of empowerment and healing among attendees at the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival. Ethnography focuses on members of a culture-sharing group (e.g., Michfest) in order to identify and explore the meaning of these shared patterns (Creswell, 2013). This study was part of a broader study that focused on feminism, multigenerational relationships, safe spaces, empowerment, and transgender inclusion at the festival. A team of four researchers immersed themselves in the culture of Michfest by attending the festival in August 2013 and by using participant observation to document their experiences and observations. These experiences included attending workshops, concerts, work shifts, and informal conversations with other festival attendees. Among the researchers, one had never attended Michfest before, one had attended once, one had attended three times, and one had attended eight times. In addition to participant observation, data was collected by audio recorded interviews of festival attendees. Members of the research team interviewed twenty women on-site at the festival.

Recruitment and Participants

Participants were recruited through posting fliers around the festival, approaching festival attendees to ask if they would like information about the study, and through referrals by interviewees. The total number of women interviewed was 20. Each participant was individually interviewed by one of the researchers. The mean age of participants was 45.2 (age range 28-68). The mean number of years of festival attendance was 12.15 (range 1 - 16 years). Most (n=14) of the women identified their sexual orientation as "lesbian" or "dyke," three identified as queer, one identified as bisexual, one identified as a "celibate lesbian," and one identified as an "ex-lesbian queer." Three of the women identified as African American, 13 identified as White, three identified as Bi-racial or Multiracial, and one identified as Hispanic/Latina. Of the 18 that reported being religious or spiritual, seven identified as purely "spiritual," two identified as "eclectic" and named multiple traditions (e.g., Wiccan and Buddhist), four identified as "Neo-Pagan/Wiccan," one identified as "Unitarian," two identified as "Buddhist," one identified as "African Methodist Episcopalian," and one as attending a "liberal church." Ten self-reported their political beliefs as being "very liberal," one reported being "moderate liberal," three reported being "liberal," three reported other categories (e.g., radical, anarchist, or outside the spectrum), and three did not report or were unsure.

Procedures

Semi-structured interviews were scheduled at times and locations selected by participants. All interviews were conducted on-site at the festival, and sites included participants' camping areas, community areas around the festival, and fields or lawn areas away from major festival activities. Interview duration had a mean length of 54 minutes (range 19 minutes - 139 minutes). Before starting each interview, the researcher completed the informed consent process with the participant, including consent for audio recording. After consent, interviews began with an introduction of the seven major topical areas on the interview guide. First,

researchers asked demographic questions. Second, participants were asked about their experience and history with Michfest, including how long they had attended, if they had friendships or relationships with other festival attendees, how they describe the culture of Michfest, and any memories or experiences at Michfest that were meaningful to them. Third, participants were asked about their experience of womanhood, including how they experienced womanhood at Michfest and at home, how the community at Michfest has shaped their view of womanhood, and how their experience as a woman was shaped by other aspects of their identity. Fourth, participants were asked about their experiences of feminism and empowerment, including aspects of life inside and outside of the festival they found empowering and disempowering, how they defined feminism, and how they experienced feminism inside and outside of the festival. Fifth, participants were asked about relationships with feminists of other ages, including if they felt connected intergenerationally, any changes they saw in the views of feminists of different ages, and how these relationships have shaped their view of feminism. Sixth, participants were asked about their perspective on the inclusion of transwomen at Michfest, including how they arrived at this perspective, what they thought the general opinion of women who attend Michfest was, what conversations around trans inclusion had been like for them, and what they thought should happen around the issue of trans inclusion in the future. Finally, participants were asked about how they experienced Michfest as a temporary setting, including whether they experienced it differently than similar settings that are not so time limited and intensive, their experience of camping at the festival, how they deal with the transition home, and if they transfer aspects of their festival experience to their lives at home.

Results

Analytic Strategy

Data collected from in-person interviews was analyzed using content analysis (Burnard, 1991). To begin to form a coding structure, and in order to reach consensus, the first two authors coded one transcript for major themes of empowerment. After consensus was reached on that transcript, a code structure was developed for the authors to use with the remaining transcripts. The transcripts and coding structure were uploaded into Dedoose, an online qualitative analysis software system, and then coded using the finalized code structure. The authors coded the transcripts and discussed any new codes. The authors placed these codes into initial thematic categories and then developed preliminary themes. These preliminary themes were discussed by the research team and then revised to form the final themes of the empowerment at Michfest.

The final themes of empowerment, as experienced by Michfest attendees, include women-only safe space (physical safety), "dropping my armor" (emotional safety), defying gender-prescribed roles and duties, "festival family" and powerful relationships, unplugging from the world (lack of technology), and dedicated spaces for healing and ritual.

Women-Only Safe Space

Participants felt safe at the festival in a way that they did not in their home communities because the festival was a women-only space. Participants felt safe to explore their identities and express themselves more openly in public. This sense of safety extended to the children, with mothers allowing children to explore the grounds and to spend extended time with other families and children. This yielded greater independence and physical freedom for the children, particularly for girls whose

movements are often restricted for fear of predators. For festival-goers who were also survivors of sexual assault, the women-only space was healing because they could lay aside the vigilance they had developed as a result of the trauma. They felt safe from triggering events, which gave them freedom to be vulnerable and engage in a deeper level of introspection and healing. Women expressed a freedom to explore their physical surroundings, without fear of violence:

> I think this is the only place that you can find just women and you're just around women and you, it's so safe and as a child abuse survivor and a rape survivor it's safe. You don't have to worry about any of your triggers being set off and you can just let yourself be open to healing, which I think is not available anywhere else.

To participants, this safety was unique to their time at Michfest and they used their yearly time at the festival as a healing time that carried them throughout the rest of the year.

This women-only environment also allowed both adults and children to roam around the grounds in various states of undress. Nudity is common at the festival and many women felt a sense of freedom and acceptance from seeing women of all ages and shapes walking about free from the body shaming that women in the dominant culture are often subjected to, particularly if they do not fit society's idealized standards of beauty. Young women in particular felt a sense of body empowerment and healing from seeing older women who acted accepting of their own bodies.

Dropping My Armor

Michfest offers a general culture of acceptance, feminism, and affirmation among women who attend. This culture gave emotional safety for attendees, who often had to regularly defend their sexual orientation,

feminist beliefs, or gender presentation in their regular lives. For women who do not conform to the patriarchal ideals of beauty (e.g., feminine dress, shaving body or face, being submissive or demure in appearance or attitude), both overt and subtle attack can be commonplace occurrences in their daily lives. This leads to a sense of needing to be on guard and to assume defensive postures. Freedom from these attacks provided a space for them to explore their identities, beliefs, and wounds from past trauma or discrimination. The phrase "drop my armor" was used to describe the internal reaction to this sense of emotional safety:

> I come back...to breathe...each year I say I'm going to be open to the experience of this year and I can't predict what that experience will be, but I know that I can have, you know six days where I can not be living in my head, not be living constantly with my armor on. That's why I always come back. I can experience life differently.

Participants also noted the need to "put back on the armor" when they left the festival to protect themselves from vulnerability in the outside world.

Defying Gender-Prescribed Roles and Duties

Festival attendees are asked to engage in "work shifts," and some attendees are involved in more long-term "crew" positions, where they are responsible for security, transportation, construction, sound and lighting, or other needed tasks. These duties often defy gender-prescribed duties, which allow women to explore roles and perform duties typically reserved for men:

> I got here and someone said, "hey, go build those steps." And I didn't know how to build the steps but someone trusted me to do it...I think that's empowering just knowing that so many things we as women were taught we can't do. Or are not an

option, we actually do, above and beyond. I find [the labels] disempowering. I feel like it's like breaking down.

Participants felt empowered by their involvement in a setting that was completely women-created and run:

> This is the place where I feel most powerful, most like I can do anything...There's definitely something really exciting and empowering about the fact that everything here is created by women. Built by the hands of women. All this stuff that we brought - that we broke our backs for. We didn't need any help with it. We did it ourselves with sweat and the muscle. That's definitely part of what I love about being here is just that feeling of all this awesomeness I'm experiencing. Yeah, this was created by women. Only women.

These gender-defying roles and duties gave them a sense of power and efficacy, causing them to question gender-prescribed limitations on roles and tasks they performed in their daily lives.

"Festival Family" and Powerful Relationships

Many of those interviewed were long-time attendees and had developed close relationships with other women at the festival, which served as social support and accountability in their lives, even outside the parameters of the festival. The term "festival family" was used to describe these relationships, and indeed, for several older participants who had been rejected by their biological families after revealing their sexual orientation, this "festival family" had served the role that their families had previously occupied in their lives and gave them emotional support and affirmation:

> Yeah, these women I will put my life on the line for. And I know they would for me too, we're that type. But that comes, for me that comes from a

background of losing my own family and haven't seen my family in over 20 years. Because of who I am. So, total rejection. And so I have all this love inside and many of us have experienced things like that.

Younger women were less likely to be completely rejected by their biological families for their sexual identities; however, they still noted that they felt a sense of family at the festival and considered the older women to be mothers and aunts to them and their children, and they relied on them for emotional support.

Unplugging From the World

The camping environment gave the women opportunities for quiet reflection. Most women could not get cellular reception within the festival grounds (though there were spaces in the parking lot where calls could be made). The positive aspect of this digital disconnection was that it allowed the attendees to "unplug" from technology and to engage in introspection, walks through nature, journaling, and quiet contemplation. Women who came to the festival with partners noted that being away from technology was beneficial to their relationships:

> So the quality time and just the peace we can get here and just be away from ringing phones and texting and e-mails and work, definitely makes it so that we can just focus on each other.

Dedicated Spaces for Healing and Ritual

The festival offers spaces devoted to healing, such as workshops on sexual assault healing, sweat lodges, and rituals devoted to celebrating womanhood and sisterhood among women. The communal nature of healing spaces and normalization of seeking healing experiences for trauma and wounds had an empowering impact on the women by creating a collective safe space to process

trauma and wounds. There is a culture of ceremony around the idea of Amazon women and the strength of women, including music, performances, and rituals:

> One particular opening ceremony where they were singing the song, Calling All Angels and I believe it was a couple of years ago...and they had women of every shape, size, color, age coming out wearing white and running through and at that moment, now I'm tearing up again just thinking about it like, I just, you know I couldn't help but to cry because it was just such a cleansing and amazing experience because it was just, I mean that's what I feel about fest, you know it's calling all angels, calling all women, calling all, you know that's what this is….That's what this festival is about, that's what this space is about.

These events and ceremonies were places of healing from emotional wounds and were spaces of empowerment, where all women were celebrated as diverse, beautiful, and powerful.

Discussion and Implications

Sexism pervades dominant culture, impacting women across multiple domains of their lives. Women who do not adhere to traditional gender roles often face intensified acts of oppression and aggression as a result of non-compliance to gender norms (Rudman, 1998; Rudman & Glick, 2001). Michfest is an empowering alternative setting where these women choose to withdraw from the dominant culture for a week every year and to create a women-only setting formed on feminist beliefs with its own culture, traditions, rituals, and norms. The festival gives them a setting that is emotionally and physically safe. It offers both psychological empowerment by building a sense of efficacy and self-confidence (Zimmerman & Rappaport, 1988) and group empowerment

by building relationships with like-minded women seeking to dismantle oppressive structures in the dominant culture (Foster-Fishman, et. al., 1998).

The festival meets Maton's criteria for an empowering setting (2008) with its own strengths-based belief system that acts to inspire change in members. Much of Michfest culture was based around Dianic and Amazon ceremonies that celebrate matriarchal cultures and reject dominant patriarchal gender norms. Women took on roles and duties that were contrary to dominant cultural gender norms and encouraged women to question gender-based social prescriptions and explore new roles and their identity outside options offered by patriarchal culture (Reinharz, 1984, p. 329). This power to define their own gender roles and gain autonomy and control over their work and roles was psychologically empowering to the women (Deci & Ryan, 1985).

The attendees also created a setting with unique norms of beauty and they celebrated women of all ages and sizes as beautiful, which counteracted that of the dominant cultural of idealized beauty. This led to a sense of psychological empowerment for attendees who gained a new sense of self-acceptance and confidence (Zimmerman & Rappaport, 1988). This also led them to question dominant standards of beauty in the patriarchal culture and led to emotional healing of wounds inflicted on them for not conforming to idealized beauty standards for women.

As Freire (1973) noted, empowerment is achieved through education and critical awareness, which were integral parts of the culture of the festival. Consistent with what Freire (1973) envisioned, by "dropping the armor" for one week each year and living within a unique alternative setting with its own counter-culture, Michfest attendees

were raising critical consciousness about sexism and questioning the dominant culture in a way that gave them strength to resist internalizing oppressive messages throughout the rest of the year (Prilleltensky, 2008).

Limitations and Implications for Future Research

Michfest was often described by participants as being utterly unique. This uniqueness, while powerful to attendees, may limit the generalizability of our findings. However, due to the qualitative nature of the study, findings are meant to describe a particular alternative setting; they are not meant to serve as a definitive description of all alternative settings or factors that must be present in an alternative setting in order for it to be empowering. The very nature of alternative setting makes it more likely that each will be unique in some way. Future research could examine additional settings and look for common features among them.

Addtionally, Michfest lasts for only one week per year and includes a complete withdrawal from the dominant culture. It is possible that some of the empowering aspects of the festival (defying gender roles and duties, building strong social connections, and women-only spaces) could be replicated in other settings, such as weekly group meetings. However, without the intense immersive experience of a weeklong retreat, it is unclear whether these factors would have the same impact on participants. This study offers a snapshot view of participants' experiences, but a longitudinal study of festival-goers would yield insights to patterns of attendance, the impact of repeat attendance, and whether participants recruit others to become involved in the festival. Future research examining different types of alternative settings may clarify the impact of duration and intensity of the alternative setting on empowerment and healing.

This study offers community psychologists insight into the setting characteristics that make this alternative setting empowering. These insights add to our understanding of empowerment and can inform our efforts in the field to construct and foster safe spaces for groups that are marginalized by the dominant culture. As existing literature on empowerment has been critiqued for its basis on traditionally masculine ideas of power and control (Riger, 1993), this study's focus on an explicitly feminist alternative community setting that focuses on empowerment for women is an important contribution. Community psychologists working in practice with feminist groups may note whether similar themes arise in these settings.

Conclusions

Attending a women-only space devoted to feminist ideals was healing and empowering for attendees, andthe temporary nature of the festival did not seem to diminish its effect. They carried the empowerment, critical awareness of oppressive sexist culture, and emotional healing with them throughout the year, changing the way they processed daily acts of sexism and combatting the pressure to internalize oppression. All but one attendee stated that Michfest was an utterly unique space for them. By examining this unique alternative setting, community psychologists, feminists, and those devoted to dismantling oppressive cultural systems learn more about factors that exist within alternative settings that make them empowering for their members.

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