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Abstract The counterspaces framework articulated by Case and Hunter (2012), follows from community psychology’s long-standing interest in the potential for settings to promote well-being and liberatory responses to oppression. This framework proposes that certain settings (i.e., “counterspaces”) facilitate a specific set of processes that promote the well-being of marginalized groups. We argue that an intersectional analysis is crucial to understand whether and how counterspaces achieve these goals. We draw from literature on safe spaces and present a case study of the Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival (Michfest) to illustrate the value of an intersectional analysis and explore how these processes operate. Based on 20 in-person interviews, 23 responses to an online survey, and ethnographic field notes, we show how Michfest was characterized by a particular intersection of identities at the setting level, and intersectional diversity complicated experiences at the individual level. Moreover, intersectional identities provided opportunities for dialogue and change at the setting level, including the creation of counterspaces within counterspaces. Overall, we demonstrate the need to attend to intersectionality in counterspaces, and more broadly in how we conceptualize settings in community psychology.

Keywords Counterspaces · Safe spaces · Settings · Oppression · Intersectionality

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Community psychology has a long-standing interest in the potential for settings to promote well-being, empowerment, and a liberatory response to oppression (e.g., Maton, 2008; Rappaport, 1987; Sarason, 1972; Seidman, 1988; Tseng & Seidman, 2007). The counterspaces framework articulated by Case and Hunter (2012) provided an advance to this aim by articulating the specific processes within settings that may lead to adaptive responses to oppression. This framework proposes that certain settings, called “counterspaces,” challenge deficit notions of marginalized individuals via at least three processes: (a) narrative identity work, (b) acts of resistance, and (c) direct relational transactions. These challenging processes facilitate adaptive responses to oppression, which promote well-being for people from marginalized groups. The purpose of the current paper is to further affirm and extend the counterspaces framework by: (a) exploring how these challenging processes operate, and (b) incorporating intersectionality theory to reveal how oppression, privilege, and power operate within counterspace settings, even for individuals with marginalized identities. Intersectionality refers to the understanding that people are comprised of multiple identities that intersect in unique configurations and are interdependent rather than additive (Bowleg, 2008; Warner, 2008). In this study, we integrate and apply the counterspaces framework and intersectionality theory through a case study of the Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival.

In order to achieve these aims, we first review the major tenants of the framework proposed by Case and Hunter (2012). Next, we discuss intersectionality theory and the larger context of privilege, power, and oppression to assert that multiple dimensions of identity are important in how and for whom a setting may serve as a counter-space. We draw from the safe spaces literature, a parent
literature of the counterspaces framework, to elucidate similar tensions around intersectionality in settings that enhance adaptive responses to oppression. We then develop this expanded intersectional counterspaces theory through a case study based on 20 in-person interviews, 23 responses to an online survey, and field notes from ethnographic participation at the Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival. Overall, we elucidate the need to incorporate intersectionality into community psychology’s larger goals of promoting diversity and social justice and understanding power, culture, and the ecology of social settings.

Counterspaces

Oppression involves systemic inequalities in access to resources that have myriad negative impacts on members of marginalized groups (Fondacaro & Weinberg, 2002; Prilleltensky, 2008; Prilleltensky, 2012). Counterspaces (Case & Hunter, 2012) are conceptualized as settings that promote adaptive responding to oppression (i.e., “the capacity to circumvent, resist, counteract, and/or mitigate the psychological consequences of oppression” [Case & Hunter, 2012; p. 259]) among members of marginalized groups. Historically, counterspaces has its origin in critical race theory (Solórzano, Ceja & Yosso, 2000), which has led it to focus largely on racial marginalization. Counterspaces have been studied in relation to racial minority students in hostile or unwelcoming educational settings and have been defined as “sites where deficit notions of people of color can be challenged and where a positive collegiate racial climate can be established and maintained” (Solórzano et al., 2000: p. 70). Examples include formal (e.g., student organizations, centers) and informal (e.g., peer groups, physical locations) spaces for African American students in predominantly White educational settings (Carter, 2007; Grier-Reed, 2010; Solórzano et al., 2000), academic programs for Latino students and other students of color (Muñoz, Espino & Antrop-González, 2014; Nuñez, 2011; Schwartz, 2014), and even digital spaces such as Twitter (Hernández, 2015).

Recently, Case and Hunter (2012) extended the counterspaces framework to other marginalized groups, thus invoking a different usage of the term. In this redefinition, they noted the resemblance between counterspaces and constructs from other disciplines, such as safe spaces, free spaces (Fine, Weis, Weseen & Wong, 2000), sites of resistance (hooks, 1990), and empowering community settings (Maton, 2008; Maton & Salem, 1995). However, Case and Hunter pointed out that this work had not led to the identification of specific functional mechanisms responsible for adaptive responding to oppression and proposed the counterspaces framework to address this lack. We agree that a more fully developed understanding of these mechanisms is crucial for advancing theory and research on these settings and see this as one of the defining features of the counterspaces framework. Thus, although these kinds of settings have been discussed under other theoretical frameworks (e.g., safe spaces), the counterspaces framework provides a much more developed language for understanding setting processes.

Counterspaces promote adaptive responding through both self-protection (i.e., protection of self-concept during an experience of oppression) and self-enhancement (i.e., ongoing enhancement of self-concept). They include three challenging processes comprised of specific mechanisms with particular effects. The first challenging process, narrative identity work, is a process of meaning making about individual and group experiences through the creation and maintenance of four types of narratives. Oppression narratives articulate participants’ shared experiences of oppression, which affirms these experiences. Resistance narratives articulate participants’ ability to overcome oppression, which fosters a sense of agency and hope for a liberatory future. Reimagined personal narratives challenge negative beliefs about individual identities that have been internalized from dominant cultural narratives. More recently, Case and Hunter (2014) identified reimagined collective narratives, or enhanced shared beliefs about participants’ marginalized group identities, as a fourth form of narrative identity work. These four types of narratives comprise a range of specific mechanisms that constitute narrative identity work. The second process, acts of resistance, refers to behaviors which are marginalized or discouraged in dominant society or which explicitly critique oppressive conditions. Specific mechanisms include collective critique (e.g., protest or critical discussion) and non-normative behaviors (e.g., gender-variant dress). The third process, direct relational transactions, refers to the relationships, interactions, and communication between participants in a counterspace. Specific mechanisms include social support, experiences of empathy and security, sense of community, and sharing adaptive strategies for responding to oppression. For an in-depth review of these processes and mechanisms, as well as their effects, see Case and Hunter (2012).

Although these three challenging processes are defined distinctly, Case and Hunter (2012) note they are also interrelated, often co-occur, and that their framework “is meant to provide general domains for beginning to think critically about the types of person-environment transactions” that take place within these spaces (p. 266). Work in community psychology and systems theory supports the importance of understanding the dynamic ways in which setting characteristics are in transaction in order to better understand setting outcomes (Tseng & Seidman, 2007). Relationships within settings may be particularly
important, as social processes are foundational to settings and underlie many setting outcomes (Christens, 2012; Maton, 2008; Neal & Christens, 2014; Neal & Neal, 2011, 2013; Tseng & Seidman, 2007). This was reflected in Case and Hunter’s (2014) examination of offender-labeled African American youth participating in an after school program. The authors found that relationships played a central role in supporting both resistance narratives and reimagined collective narratives, highlighting the interactions between narrative identity work and direct relational transactions. Part of our goal in extending and applying the counterspaces framework is to better understand how these challenging processes, particularly direct relational transactions, dynamically interact and co-occur to shape setting outcomes. Also, we assert that intersectionality is an important lens for understanding these interactions, as myriad aspects of individuals’ identities are relevant to understanding their lived experiences of marginalization and liberation within counterspaces.

Intersectionality, Privilege, Oppression, and Power

In recent decades, scholars have increasingly acknowledged the importance of attending to the intersections of multiple identities to understand systems of privilege and oppression. Black feminist scholars, such as the Combahee River Collective (1982), Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991), Patricia Hill Collins (1990), Angela Davis (1990), bell hooks (1984), and Audre Lorde (1984), developed intersectionality theory to articulate Black women’s experiences of racism and sexism. Intersectionality acknowledges that social identities are not simply additive, but are mutually constructed and interdependent (Bowleg, 2008; Warner, 2008). Although articulated with regard to race and gender, intersectionality theory has since been applied to other identities including sexual orientation (Parent, DeBlaeire, & Moradi, 2013), class (Jackson & Williams, 2006), disability (Warner & Brown, 2011), religion (Todd, McConnell & Saffrin, 2014), age (Seaton, Caldwell, Sellers & Jackson, 2010), and citizenship (Mahalingam, Balan & Haritatos, 2008).

Fundamental to intersectionality theory is that identities are situated within structures of power; people experience advantages through privileged identities as well as disadvantages through oppressed identities (Collins, 1990; Warner, 2008). However, experiences of marginalization are unique to particular configurations of identity and are not simply equivalent to the sum of an individual’s relative privileged and oppressed identities. For example, Black women’s experiences of sexism are shaped by racism, and are thus not analogous to the sexism experienced by women of other races; similarly, their experiences of racism are shaped by sexism, and are thus distinct from the racism experienced by Black men (Crenshaw, 1991).

Psychologists have called for increased attention to intersectionality within the social sciences in order to better understand the role that aspects of identity play in phenomena under study (Cole, 2009). Failure to adequately attend to intersectionality can result in “intersectional invisibility” for people with multiple marginalized identities, whose experiences do not fit the prototype for any of their single marginalized identities (Purdie-Vaughns & Eibach, 2008). More generally, research that does not attend to intersectionality is likely to be less valid due to its reductionist approach to understanding aspects of identity through a single-axis lens (Bowleg, 2008). However, there are a number of conceptual and methodological challenges to conducting intersectional research, which have likely been a significant barrier for psychologists (Bowleg, 2008; Cole, 2009; Warner, 2008). Due to the complexity of intersectional research questions, qualitative methods have been identified as a particularly useful approach (Bowleg, 2008).

Although community psychology has long recognized the relationships between identity, power, social inequality, and well-being (e.g., Prilleltensky, 2008; Watts & Serrano-García, 2003), the field is just beginning to focus greater attention on systems of privilege and explicitly incorporate intersectionality as a theoretical and methodological lens. In an early contribution, Gutiérrez (1990) noted the relationships between identity, power, and empowerment in the lives of women of color; however, this analysis was framed through an additive “double jeopardy” approach to understanding racism and sexism. In another example, a 1997 special issue of the American Journal of Community Psychology (AJCP) focused on the experiences of women of color and alluded to the importance of “recognition of the intersections of race, gender, and class as central to our work” (Bond, 1997: p. 733). As these examples illustrate, an understanding of intersectionality has been present in community psychology for some time. However, there has not been as much attention to theorizing or conducting research through an explicit frame of intersectionality. This is unfortunate, as intersectionality theory offers a rich lens for understanding issues of privilege, oppression, and power and has strong potential to contribute to not only an understanding of individuals, but as we argue also enriches an understanding of settings. We now draw from the literature on safe spaces, a parent literature of counterspaces, to illustrate the rich potential of considering the role of intersectionality within settings.

Intersectionality within Settings: Literature on Safe Spaces

Like counterspaces, safe spaces are conceptualized as spaces where members of marginalized groups can come
together to heal from oppression. Overall, the two concepts are strikingly similar. Notable differences include that the language of safe spaces has been used more widely in the humanities, while the counterspaces framework has been used in education and critical studies prior to its use in community psychology. The focus on functional mechanisms is unique to literature on counterspaces in community psychology. The literature on safe spaces predates the counterspaces literature and develops an analysis of intersectionality within settings, which has strong potential to enrich our understanding of counterspaces.

A prominent example of a safe space is the LGBT Safe Space campaign organized by the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN). In this example, school classrooms and offices are marked by the presence of a sticker as open and affirming spaces for LGBT students (Fox, 2007; GLSEN, 2013). Safe spaces have been conceptualized as either exclusive to people who share a marginalized identity, as in separatist spaces, or as including people from diverse backgrounds, as in inclusive safe spaces (Boostrom, 1998; Fox, 2007; Roestone Collective, 2014; Weems, 2013). For nearly as long as safe spaces have been studied, scholars and educators have drawn attention to paradoxes and tensions within the safe space metaphor (Boostrom, 1998; Fox, 2007). Many of these tensions stem from the intersectional identities of participants in safe spaces and their different relationships to power. We now discuss safe spaces in more detail as similar tensions exist when considering intersectionality within counterspaces.

Separatist Safe Spaces

Separatist safe spaces construct membership around a specific shared marginalized identity shared by all participants (e.g., an African American sorority) or an identity that participants may or may not share but which provides the focus of the space (e.g., an interracial reading group about racism). In both cases, safety is primarily constructed relative to a single aspect of identity. For example, in GLSEN’s safe space campaign, stickers mark certain settings as safe based solely on the presence or absence of presumed LGBT allyship, and thus rely on a binary understanding of both people (as LGBT-allied or not) and settings (as safe or unsafe). An intersectional approach would acknowledge that students’ experiences of their LGBT identities are informed by myriad other identities, including race (Fox, 2007; Pritchard, 2013), which shape their experiences of safety in all spaces. As this example illustrates, separatist safe spaces run the risk of focusing narrowly on a single identity, which can render members’ intersectional privileged and marginalized identities invisible and thus perpetuate other systems of oppression. Case and Hunter’ (2012) description of counterspaces most closely aligns with this separatist type of space, and thus embodies similar tensions.

Inclusive Safe Spaces

Next, consider safe spaces in which diverse participants come together for dialogue without a focus on a particular shared identity, such as inclusive classrooms and courses focused on diversity more broadly. Within these spaces, safety is constructed through an environment in which diverse students, including those from marginalized groups, feel open to participating (Boostrom, 1998; Du Preez, 2012; Kerr, 1996; Stengel & Weems, 2010). This conceptualization acknowledges that participants hold diverse intersecting identities; however, this does presuppose a concurrent awareness of the ways in which these identities are associated with relationships to power, which in turn shape safety, engagement, and discourse within these settings. Without this awareness, these settings are likely to conflate safety with comfort and replicate norms of civility that make them feel safe for members of dominant groups while inhibiting the positive potential of discomfort to disrupt entrenched modes of relating shaped by structures of social dominance and oppression (Goodman, 2011; Mayo, 2002, 2010; Stengel, 2010). This is a central critique in the literature on safe spaces: they have been oversimplified as classrooms absent of stress, when scholars and educators sought to underscore the positive potential of vulnerability, discomfort, and disequilibrium as part of critical pedagogy in the service of social justice (Boostrom, 1998; Greene, 1995; Kerr, 1996). The positive potential of discomfort, particularly around privilege, has led some scholars to question whether completely safe spaces for dialogue around oppression are possible or even desirable (e.g., Du Preez, 2012; Hackford-Peer, 2010; Leonardo & Porter, 2010; Mayo, 2010; Stengel & Weems, 2010; Weems, 2010, 2013). Some have employed different terminology, such as “safe(r) spaces” (Fox, 2007; Stoudt, 2007) or “brave spaces” (Fox & Fleischer, 2004) to problematize comfort, and others have argued for a more fundamental incorporation of intersectionality to challenge unidimensional constructions of safety (Revilla, 2010). This work on inclusive safe spaces highlights the potentially intersectional nature of counterspaces and illustrates how discomfort may be an important aspect of participants’ experiences of challenging processes, particularly around their privileged identities.

Tensions between Separatist and Inclusive Spaces

An intersectionality perspective highlights the tensions between these two formulations of safe space. Separatist spaces implicitly prioritize the identities members share,
which has been criticized as reductionist and can result in the replication of systems of oppression along other aspects of identity (Roestone Collective, 2014). For example, lesbian separatist movements were organized around gender and sexual orientation, but were dominated by White lesbians who reinforced racism by de-emphasizing race and by centralizing the concerns of White women (Kendall, 2013). Although some scholars have called for intersectionally inclusive safe spaces due to these limitations, others note the potential utility of separatist spaces for supporting participants’ well-being (Roestone Collective, 2014; Stengel, 2010). Still others have acknowledged the tension between inclusive and separatist spaces, but underscored the potential utility of both (Weems, 2013). Scholars in feminist geography argued that safe spaces are best understood as “paradoxical spaces” contextualized relative to the relational work required to produce them, and advocated both intersectional inclusivity and experimentation with separatism (Roestone Collective, 2014). The tension between and value of separatist and inclusive spaces is present in Crenshaw’s early writing on intersectionality: “With identity thus re-conceptualized, it may be easier to understand the need for, and to summon the courage to challenge, groups that are after all, in one sense, ‘home’ to us, in the name of the parts of us that are not made at home” (1991: p. 1299).

Connection to Counterspaces

This literature interrogates the relationships between identity, privilege, oppression, power, safety, comfort, and liberation, illustrating the theoretical contribution of integrating intersectionality into work on settings within community psychology, particularly counterspaces. Literature on counterspaces has historically focused on participants’ shared experiences of racial marginalization and thus bears closer resemblance to separatist than inclusive safe spaces. We argue that this analysis lacks adequate attention to participants’ diverse intersectional identities and the ways in which other forms of privilege and marginalization are experienced and expressed within counterspaces. Case and Hunter (2012) reference both inclusive and separatist counterspaces, including “intersected” counterspaces that focus on multiple shared marginalized identities. Although Case and Hunter do not incorporate intersectionality in their formulation of the counterspaces framework, they identify a need for future research to better understand how the presence of “perceived oppressors” within a counterspace impacts the challenging processes, which implies an intersectional analysis. They note this has “implications for understanding the ways in which counterspaces, in addition to serving as spaces that facilitate adaptive responding, can also be sites of transformative dialogue and social justice across multiple oppressed and non-oppressed groups” (p. 267). We agree that such an understanding is crucial, and seek to develop an intersectional formulation of the counterspaces framework through a case study example. We now integrate and apply theory and research on counterspaces, intersectionality, and safe spaces to examine the Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival as a case study and to illustrate this rich theoretical potential.

Present Research: A Case Study of the Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival

In this study, we examine the Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival (Michfest) in order to understand: (a) how challenging processes, particularly direct relational transactions, may be in dynamic transaction with each other to shape setting outcomes; and (b) how intersectionality shaped participants’ experiences of the setting. Michfest was a week-long women’s music festival held in August from 1976 to 2015 and attended annually by 3000–5000 women. Participants camped “on the land” and attended concerts, workshops, workshifts, and meals. Although Michfest was a women’s festival, it has been characterized as a form of lesbian separatism because the space was not open to men, many of the women identified as lesbian, and the festival had a historical relationship with lesbian separatism (Kendall, 2013; Morris, 1999). Michfest was the subject of widespread controversy regarding its lack of inclusion of transgender women (Kendall, 2013; McConnell, Odahl-Ruan, Kozlowski, Shattell & Todd, 2016), as festival organizers maintained that it was intended for “womyn-born, womyn-identified” (WBW; i.e., cisgender) women (Kendall, 2013). This conflict traced back to the early 1990s and sparked a great deal of trans activism around the festival, including Camp Trans and the Trans Women Belong Here campaign (Kendall, 2013). In recent years, a series of petitions and performer boycotts heightened attention to the festival’s lack of transgender inclusion, which many believe ultimately led to the festival’s end in 2015 (McConnell et al., 2016). Although it has now ended, Michfest may be understood as a separatist counterspace and thus provides a useful case study for this research.

Method

Research Design

We approached this study from a critical theory perspective, with a focus on the relationships between identity and power and the value of research in promoting social
change (Creswell, 2013). We used an ethnophenomenological design (Creswell, 2013) to understand how Michfest may have served as a counterspace for festival attendees. We examined patterns of values, beliefs, and language of festival attendees to understand how, if at all, they experienced Michfest as a counterspace. This was part of a broader study on feminism, empowerment, and transgender inclusion at the festival. Our team of four researchers (including the first and third authors) attended the festival from August 7 to 11, 2013 and used participant observation and field-notes to document our experiences. We conducted 20 interviews with festival attendees on-site and another 23 women completed an online survey in the month following the festival.

Recruitment and Participants

Prior to conducting the study, we obtained IRB approval through DePaul University. We recruited participants by approaching festival attendees, posting fliers around the festival, and snowballing through interviewees. Fliers included information about the online survey, and we offered the survey option to people who declined an interview. This resulted in 20 interviewees, whose average age was 45.20 (SD = 11.51; Range 28–68), and average number of years of festival attendance was 12.15 (SD = 8.16; Range 1–26). Most (n = 14) identified their sexual orientation as “lesbian” or “dyke,” three identified as queer, one identified as bisexual, one identified as “celibate lesbian,” and one identified as “ex-lesbian queer.” Thirteen identified as White, three as African American, three as Biracial/Multiracial, and one as Hispanic/Latina. The average age of the 23 survey participants was 40.74 years (SD = 11.12, Range 25–61), and average number of years of festival attendance was 7.96 (SD = 8.75, Range 1–30). Twenty-one women identified as White and two identified as Biracial/Multiracial.

Researcher Positionalities

The first author identifies as a feminist, queer, White cisgender female who researches the relationships between identity, systems of inequality, and well-being, with a focus on racial privilege and sexual and gender minorities. She was a graduate student during this study and had attended Michfest once before. The second author identifies as a profeminist, gay, White man who conducts qualitative and quantitative research on religion, racial privilege, and intersectionality. He was an assistant professor during this study and did not attend the festival. The third author identifies as a feminist, straight, White, cisgender female who researches the impact of gender role ideology, religious beliefs, economic disparities, and sexism on women’s identity and empowerment. She was a graduate student during this study and attended Michfest once, during the study. The last author was a professor during this study and has attended Michfest twice. She identifies as a gay, feminist, cisgender White woman who uses predominately qualitative methods to explore aspects of human experience that are difficult to access or are little known to the general public, which usually try to right social injustices. Individually and as a team, we were self-reflective about how our identities and experiences shaped our interpretations of the data. Reflexive processes included journaling and discussing our experiences with and perspectives on topics under study (e.g., feminism, transgender inclusion, intersectionality), particularly as they related to our interpretations of the data.

Procedures

Before each interview, informed consent to participate and audio record was obtained. Researchers asked about participants’ experiences of Michfest, womanhood, feminism and empowerment, relationships with feminists of other ages, perspectives on trans inclusion, and experiences transitioning home after the festival. Interviews ranged from 19 min to 2 h 19 min, with an average length of 54 min (SD = 27.78). The online surveys included a few demographic questions and two to four open-ended questions about each topic noted above.

Analytic Strategy

Data were analyzed using content analysis (Burnard, 1991). We initially used theoretically structured coding, in which we created a coding structure with the challenging processes identified by Case and Hunter (2012) and used open coding to identify new mechanisms. As we coded, we realized that direct relational transactions and acts of resistance often co-occurred and that narrative defined the broader context of the festival. Also, we began to realize the importance of participants’ multiple identities, and the intersectional identities that characterized the setting, in understanding how the festival may operate as a counterspace.

Guided by these realizations, we restarted the coding process using open coding with greater attention to intersectionality. To form a coding structure, the first and third authors coded one transcript for major themes related to intersectionality and the challenging processes. After consensus was reached, a code structure was developed. We then selected and organized codes to understand the ways in which intersectionality was important to participants' experiences of the setting and to better understand the challenging processes proposed by counterspaces theory.
The coding structure and developing themes were reviewed and discussed to obtain consensus during weekly research team meetings, which included the first, third, and fourth authors. In the event of coding discrepancies or disagreements, we discussed the rationale behind coding decisions, reflexively considered and discussed the influence of our positionalities on our interpretations of the data, and considered solutions. The fourth author (who did not participate in coding) provided feedback during this process, and consensus was achieved when all members of the research team were in agreement about coding and analysis decisions. Overall, we use Michfest as a case-study example of how integrating intersectionality helps to further extend the counterspaces framework.

Findings

We first examine how Michfest operated as a counterspace using Case and Hunter (2012) language of challenging processes and adaptive responding. Second, we elucidate how we observed the challenging processes to interrelate and work in tandem. Finally, we explore how intersectionality shaped participants’ experiences at both the individual and setting levels, with implications for the need to integrate an intersectional analysis when considering how counterspaces may promote adaptive responding to oppression. Please note that “… ” indicates text was omitted for clarity and we refer to “acts of resistance” as “actions” for parsimony.

Michfest as a Counterspace

We first describe the ways in which Michfest operated as a counterspace for attendees, who were primarily lesbian feminist women, to promote adaptive responding to their experiences of sexism and heterosexism in society. Participants experienced the festival very differently than other settings, particularly in regard to safety, empowerment, self-expression, and community. The festival’s positive impacts transferred to participants’ outside lives, illustrating how counterspaces may promote adaptive responding during and after participation in the space.

Michfest as Different from Dominant Culture

Participants described the festival very differently than other settings in their lives. They voiced oppression narratives outlining experiences of marginalization, victimization, inhibition, and isolation in the outside world. These oppression narratives were juxtaposed with resistance narratives about participants’ experiences of safety, empowerment, self-expression, and community at Michfest, consistent with its function as a counterspace. One participant wrote, “The safety that I feel on the Land is something that is hard to describe to people in my life… I’ve seen women burst into tears when they first feel that… I have learned to always be wary, be careful, you are female, you are in danger, you are fragile, somebody will DO SOMETHING to you… I can walk naked (if I want to) in the dark (no moon) at 3:00 in the morning on that Land, and feel NO fear, NO sense of anything but safety.

In addition to safety, participants noted the importance of having a space to express, celebrate, and affirm their marginalized identities as women, which reflects the importance of self-enhancement processes in counterspaces. One participant said, “I think even without realizing it, many of us constricst ourselves as we walk through the world… and I never have that feeling here.” Another underscored the importance of reimagined collective narratives, not just resistance narratives: “Instead of being a community identified by resistance to a patriarchal whatever, it’s [like] ‘let’s celebrate who we are’ and what does that look like.” As these examples illustrate, participants juxtaposed their experiences at Michfest and the dominant culture, which underscored how Michfest operates as a counterspace.

Promotion of Adaptive Responding

Participants described positive impacts of Michfest that transferred to their lives outside of the festival. One participant said, “I carry this message through my life. I carry this love, this energy.” Many participants described developing a sense of strength or empowerment and identified that this changed how they handled situations in their outside lives. One participant said, “I think I’m a lot more outspoken about feminism, and my mouth doesn’t stay shut as often as before.” Participants described Michfest as a rejuvenating space that promoted healing from the impacts of oppression and helped them to deal with challenges in the outside world. One participant said, “This is home and it’s my reset button every year, no matter what happens during the year… this is my chance to reset and I feel like I come out a new woman each time I leave the festival.” As these examples illustrate, Michfest promoted adaptive responding for attendees that impacted their outside lives.

Interdependence and Dynamic Interaction of Challenging Processes

Participants described ways in which challenging processes were interrelated. First, acts of resistance
frequently occurred through relational transactions. Second, participants described narrative identity work as the broader context of the festival rather than as a specific observable event. We believe this reflects how narratives operate more implicitly and pervasively than other processes, and conceptualize narrative identity work as the context within which acts of resistance and direct relational transactions take place.

**Relational Actions**

Participants described relationships as intertwined with actions. For some participants, the relationships that emerged through participation in the counterspace were more transformational than specific activities, for example, “The most important part is not the music. The music is wonderful. The workshops are wonderful. It’s the women.” Participants also provided examples of specific acts of resistance that were very relational in nature, such as discussions with other women, working together to accomplish difficult physical tasks (e.g., building the physical infrastructure of the festival), and observing other women’s acts of resistance (e.g., diverse gender expression). Several participants highlighted collective song as a highly relational act of resistance that allowed them to experience vulnerability, solidarity, and connection with other women, for example: “Yesterday at the day stage they were performing ‘We Shall Overcome’ and there was a huge circle of women holding hands in solidarity around the stage and it was very moving and beautiful.” Others talked about observing women at the festival exhibit public nudity and comfort with their bodies as transformative. One participant highlighted the sense of relational connection she feels observing women displaying this comfort: “Sunday morning they start at zero-dark-thirty for the Lois Lane Run... And you will see a woman running without a shirt on, and she’ll have had a mastectomy... It’s those moments of I don’t know those women, but I know those women you know?” Overall, relationships and sense of community played an important role in participants’ experiences of acts of resistance.

Participants also identified that relationships played an important role in the festival’s impact on their outside lives, whether because they felt a sense of community during the festival or because they developed relationships that extended beyond the festival through get-togethers or social media. Participants from larger urban areas often described affiliation with an active community of “festies.” One participant said, “If there’s enough of us and we go to somebody’s house it really becomes like... the spirit of Michfest in somebody’s apartment.” These experiences illustrate the importance of relationships in facilitating the transference of adaptive responding to other aspects of participants’ lives.

**Narrative as Context**

Participants described narrative identity work as an important aspect of Michfest as a setting, but did not describe it as a specific observable event in the same way they did acts of resistance and direct relational transactions. Thus, we conceptualize narrative identity work as part of the broader context within which actions and relationships occur. Several participants described feminism as a resistance narrative that was an important part of the overall climate of Michfest, for example:

At Fest, I get to experience feminism in a very integrated way - the whole environment that I get to spend time in is actually working on feminist principles. It is a time when I can embody some feminist ideals, such as feeling an absence of rape culture, a presence of body acceptance and body positivity. For that reason, Fest is a very empowering place.

Participants described how different types of narrative identity work interacted within the climate at Michfest, which facilitated validating and naming oppression narratives (e.g., experiences of sexism and heterosexism) and fostering resistance narratives (e.g., women’s empowerment and feminism), which lead to reimagined personal narratives (e.g., a greater sense of personal empowerment and strength). One participant spoke about the powerful impact of these co-occurring mechanisms within the culture of the festival: “When I first started coming it was remarkable to me how unaware I even was of how much I felt like I needed to apologize for my existence out in the world. Here not only is there no apology for being who and what you are, but it’s celebrated.” This participant’s experience of a resistance narrative (i.e., being celebrated) led to her challenge an oppression narrative (i.e., apologizing for her existence), which in turn led to a reimagined personal narrative (i.e., greater self-awareness and empowerment).

The example of body positivity also illustrates how different types of narrative identity work co-occurred to form a powerful and transformational festival culture. Observing women embrace their bodies functioned as a resistance narrative that challenged participants’ oppression narratives of devaluing aspects of their appearance; this resulted in reimagined personal and collective narratives of celebration of women’s diverse bodies. One participant said, “If a woman can be 300 pounds and walk around in all of her glorious nudity and feel amazingly beautiful
who the hell am I to be worried about this cellulite on my thighs?” Another said,

I think it’s the first time I fully embraced my body as being awesome. Before it’s like you have this mama belly with the stretch marks and you’re kind of ashamed about it… Here, it’s like it’s beautiful. It’s like these [pointing to her breasts] represent my sons and the gifts that I was given. And seeing everybody else… nowhere else can you find that.

These experiences reflect how narrative identity work forms the broader context within which acts of resistance (e.g., public nudity) and direct relational transactions (e.g., observing and appreciating other women’s bodies) occur, illustrating the dynamic relationships between challenging processes that promote adaptive responding.

Intersectionality at Michfest

Intersectionality fundamentally defined participants’ experiences of Michfest as a counterspace at the setting-level, the individual-level, and the interaction between the two. At the setting level, participants identified the dominant culture at Michfest was not just a separatist safe space for women, but was characterized by a particular intersection of identities: “womyn-born” (i.e., cisgender), lesbian, feminist, White women. Although this intersection formed the dominant culture within the festival, participants introduced other diverse identities. Political (e.g., opinions around trans inclusion) and racial diversity were two aspects, although numerous other examples emerged (e.g., disability, sexual practices). This intersectional diversity shaped individual participants’ experiences and also shaped the setting, such as through the creation of smaller separatist spaces within the festival, or “counterspaces within a counterspace.”

Dominant Intersectional Identities

Although Michfest was organized as a separatist women’s space, participants identified a particular intersection of identities that constituted the dominant culture at Michfest. First, Michfest was structured for “womyn-born,” or cisgender, women. One participant connected her experience of the safety described by many women at the festival to her “position of privilege as a White cis woman,” but also said, “to be honest I don’t feel always that safe, particularly with being an out supporter of trans inclusion here.” Thus, not only was the dominant culture characterized by the intersectional identity of cisgender women, but also by a political position of supporting the “womyn-born, womyn-identified” intention, which for this participant jeopardized her sense of safety in the setting. Second, participants characterized Michfest as a lesbian cultural space. One participant wrote, “I imagine the completely straight women, be they cis or trans*, who attend the festival, even if there are no official rules or signs barring or critiquing their attendance, also feel marginalized, silenced, and excluded, as the default assumptions, in both personal interactions and mass programming, are that the ‘target audience’ is queer-female-identified above all else.” This quote illustrates how a dominant identity (i.e., heterosexuality) can become non-dominant within a counterspace, which may deconstruct and complicate established relationships to power.

Moreover, participants described feminism as the “baseline” at the festival. One participant wrote, “The feminists were not lesbians in our town and the lesbians were not feminists. I belonged to both groups but felt like I was the only political lesbian in our town. Then in 1978 we attended the festival and I found an entire community of women who celebrated both lesbians and feminists.” For this participant, the setting’s culture at the intersection of women, lesbian, and feminist identities provided a powerful sense of home. Finally, both White participants and participants of color identified that Michfest was primarily attended by White women and that its leadership in particular was very White-dominated, illustrating how oppressive power relations along other aspects of identity can be replicated within a counterspace. We discuss the importance of race in greater detail below. Thus, although Michfest was generally a counterspace for women, participants said that it was dominated by cisgender, lesbian, feminist, White women. Participants who shared this intersection of identities tended to find Michfest welcoming and affirming of their identities. However, this also made Michfest seem less welcoming to those who did not share these identities, such as this participant who stated: “I feared that I would be rejected by other lesbians because I’m no longer a lesbian and I discovered that there is a grain of truth to that stereotype.” Thus, intersectionality operated at the individual and setting levels to shape how participants experienced safety and belonging within the festival. Participants who shared the dominant intersectional identities of the festival were more likely to experience self-enhancement, while those who differed along at least one axis of identity were more likely to report needing to engage in self-protection around identities that were not dominant within the festival culture.

Although Michfest was characterized by a particular intersection of identities, participants underscored the diversity of attendees’ racial backgrounds, class, region, religion, dis/ability, and parenting status. Thus, intersectionality also complicated the dominant culture of Michfest through the introduction of other forms of diversity.
One participant who coordinated social justice education at the festival spoke about how attendees came from different geographic regions and had different experiences with diversity, which impacted dialogue: “I have conversations with [people here] and I’m like, you really haven’t been exposed much to people who are different from you. So they come here and they’re being exposed to people who are different from them and it brings up a lot.” Thus, in addition to constituting a potential site of marginalization and self-protection for participants with non-dominant identities, this intersectional diversity provided opportunities for education and dialogue. Two of the most commonly discussed forms in this respect were political views about trans inclusion and race.

**Attitudes about Trans Inclusion**

We developed themes around trans inclusion more fully in a separate paper (McConnell et al., 2016), but provide select findings here that are relevant to understanding counterspaces. Participants endorsed a range of attitudes about trans inclusion at the festival. Some fully supported the inclusion of transwomen and attended the festival specifically to promote activism and dialogue around this issue. A supporter of trans inclusion wrote, “Trans womyn belong. No bones about it...We are not whole without our trans sisters.” Other participants expressed vehement opposition to trans inclusion and preferred that the festival end rather than include trans women. A participant who opposed trans inclusion expressed her belief that transgender people were “stealing” the culture of the festival, which “was always built with the intention of being for womyn-born womyn to breathe and celebrate themselves.” Several participants observed a generational division, where younger women were more likely to support trans inclusion and older women were more likely to support the WBW intention. Other participants problematized this generational metaphor, such as younger supporters of trans inclusion who underscored the dangers of ageism or expressed surprise about older women who were vocal supporters of trans inclusion within the festival. This observation again illustrates the importance of intersectionality at both the setting and individual levels, as participants noticed how age and perspective on trans inclusion were related in complex ways, and this intersection shaped dialogue about trans inclusion within the festival.

Participants also described a range of positive and negative experiences with dialogue around trans inclusion at the festival. Negative experiences included feeling “attacked,” “not worth paying attention to,” and unsafe. Positive experiences included open dialogues, drawing parallels between trans inclusion and other conflicts within the festival, and a sense of “hope.” Some participants expressed changing their views; for example, “I would rather the space be WBW, but I’m resigned to the fact it needs to change.” Thus, diversity of political perspectives on trans inclusion constituted a site of conflict within the festival that provided an opportunity for dialogue, which is reminiscent of the literature on intersectionality in inclusive safe spaces.

**Race and White Privilege**

Participants identified several forms of privilege that shaped festival dynamics; however, White privilege was the most commonly discussed. Participants noted the festival’s racial dynamics had changed over time and were subject to dialogue and activism within the festival. The overall trend described was that very few women of color attended the festival or participated in its leadership early on, and that activism by women of color and White allies within the festival raised awareness of how racial power inequalities were replicated within the festival’s culture. One White participant said,

> It seems to me the festival power structure, which is mostly White women, certainly started out as all White women, has made strides in being welcoming and inclusive to women of color...I’m not a woman of color so I don’t know, but it seems like a genuine effort, not just doing it for show. And I hope that’s true because it feels like it to me.

An African-American participant said, “I think that they have gotten much more articulate about race issues.” As this participant highlights, the growing awareness about White privilege within the festival constituted an important site for dialogue and change. One of the ways this was addressed within the festival was through the establishment of the Women of Color (WOC) Tent, a space within the festival which was open only to women of color. In this respect, the Women of Color Tent constituted a separatist counterspace within a White-dominated counterspace.

**Creation of Counterspaces within a Counterspace**

In order to address conflict around intersectional diversity at the festival, several separatist counterspaces, including the Women of Color Tent, were created. A White participant described the WOC Tent’s history of activism:

> There were very few women of color coming at first, and then more came and they were wanting to meet each other, so they wanted a space to do that. They
petitioned the festival. The festival said, ‘Well, we’ll have a political tent; you can have half of that.’ And then it just grew. But it did take many years of building and advocating for that space, and for White women to advocate for that space for the women of color.

The creation of the WOC Tent was an important step to provide structural support for women of color at the festival. An African-American participant expressed the space’s importance to her: “When I first came here I saw people who were like me when I had never seen that. I had Black women who were my sages, they were the women at whose feet I sat and I valued that.”

However, the WOC Tent’s creation did not come without conflict or resistance. One participant described how White women responded defensively, such as demanding to be admitted into the space, which eventually led to the establishment of a patio to engage and educate White women. An African-American participant described how this resistance declined over the years, such as when the space expanded to include a fire pit:

I was there when it was still new and still threatened and now it’s huge and we have a patio for well-intentioned White folk and people who want their White girlfriend to be able to be in the Women of Color space and we have the fire pit and, you know when we took the fire pit space... that wasn’t a big harassment thing so that was a major change.

The history of the WOC Tent and the defensive and hostile responses from White festival attendees illustrate how intersectional diversity within separatist safe spaces can constitute a site of marginalization and necessitate self-protection. At the same time, this diversity generated activism and dialogue that changed the festival’s racial dynamics and led to the establishment of the WOC Tent. Intersectional diversity can both constitute a site of marginalization and necessitate transformative change and dialogue, particularly around privilege, within counterspaces.

Participants also described other smaller counterspaces that formed within the festival along other marginalized aspects of identity. Examples included DART (a camping area and service provision network for attendees with disabilities), childcare and “family friendly” festival areas, and the Twilight Zone (a camping area that affirmed BDSM and other non-dominant sexual practices). Although the Twilight Zone was formed on the basis of sexual practices and attitudes, it tended to also be frequented by younger festival attendees: another example of intersectional identities as a setting-level characteristic, as one participant described:

It’s so funny because a lot of women particularly in my age group or older, they’ll kind of whisper, ‘The Twilight Zone.’ And then every once in a while one will venture out just to check it out, to see what’s really going on. And they come back and they go, oh you know, they’re just sitting around the campfire drinking beer. No big deal.

As this example illustrates, intersectionality operated on both the individual and setting levels to shape how people participated in Michfest as a counterspace. It led to the creation of separatist counterspaces within the festival, providing opportunities for people at particular intersections of identities to seek out additional support and affirmation. These counterspaces reflect the diverse needs associated with participants’ intersectional identities, including accessibility, childcare, freedom from judgement, political organizing, and the formation of relationships. These smaller counterspaces often operated as separate physical spaces and subcultures with which other festival attendees may never come into contact, perhaps decreasing the potential for relational connections across diverse identities within the festival. Thus, consistent with system approaches to understanding settings, intersectionality functioned on the setting level to both facilitate and constrain patterns of relationships between attendees.

Discussion

Findings illustrate how Michfest functioned as a counterspace for many attendees. Participants experienced the space differently than other environments in their lives and found it promoted adaptive responding, including safety, empowerment, self-expression, and sense of community with other women. Participants negotiated marginalization in their outside lives through self-protection, and found the self-enhancement and celebration of shared identities at Michfest especially powerful. Adaptive responding transferred back to participants’ home lives, illustrating the radiating impact of participation in the setting (Tseng & Seidman, 2007).

Findings support the challenging processes identified by Case and Hunter (2012) and illustrate how these mechanisms overlap and interact in complex ways. Relationships were a foundational aspect of attendees’ experience: they were highly valued, promoted transference of adaptive responding, and characterized experiences of acts of resistance. This supports the importance of relationships and social processes within settings (Christens, 2012; Maton, 2008; Neal & Christens, 2014; Neal & Neal, 2011, 2013; Tseng & Seidman, 2007). Narrative identity work characterized the setting as a whole and provided
the broader context within which acts of resistance and relationships occurred. Participants’ emphasis on self-enhancement and celebration of shared identities points to the importance of reimagined collective narratives, a significant recent contribution of Case and Hunter’s (2014) work on challenging processes. Findings are consistent with work in community psychology on the multilevel nature of narrative and the ways in which individual and setting narratives interact and can be powerful tools for transformation and social change (Rappaport, 1995, 2000). Overall, findings support a systems understanding of social settings, which highlights how setting characteristics are in dynamic transaction with each other to produce outcomes (Tseng & Seidman, 2007).

This case study highlights the multilevel nature of intersectionality. Intersectionality characterized Michfest as a counterspace at both the setting and individual levels as well as the interaction between the two. At the setting level, although Michfest was organized as a separatist women’s space, it was characterized more specifically by a dominant culture of cisgender, lesbian, feminist, White women. This is consistent with Crenshaw’s (1991) observation that what is often perceived as “the group” in fact centers on “the intersectional identities of a few” (p. 1299). Festival attendees who did not share this intersection of identities reported marginalization and exclusion within the festival. Thus, although Michfest was a site of safety and self-enhancement for many attendees around their identities as feminist, lesbian women, it also necessitated self-protection in response to oppressive experiences for groups marginalized within the festival, such as women of color and those who supported trans inclusion. This complicates the idea that counterspaces primarily support adaptive responding, as participants may experience further marginalization within spaces that are not attentive to intersectionality and therefore replicate oppressive social relations.

The creation of counterspaces within counterspaces also illustrates how individual and setting level intersectionality interact in complex ways. Consistent with our finding on the importance of direct relational transactions, intersectionality operated through relationships on multiple levels. Many participants expressed a sense of connection around dominant identities at the festival (e.g., lesbian, feminist, women), while non-dominant identities generated conflict and resulted in acts of resistance to establish smaller separatist settings within the festival defined by more specific intersections of identity. These spaces provided opportunities for attendees marginalized within the festival to gather with others “like them” to form different collective narratives. These spaces shaped participants’ relational affiliations by facilitating social connections among attendees with particular intersectional identities and potentially constraining connections across other aspects of difference. Participants found great value in these spaces, underscoring the value of support for participants who are marginalized within a counterspace.

Michfest’s large size (in the thousands of attendees) is an important setting characteristic to consider in contextualizing this case study application of the counterspaces framework and intersectionality theory. The large number of participants likely increased intersectional diversity and may have made it more likely that counterspaces would emerge within the setting around other aspects of identity, as it is common for smaller settings and subgroups to form within such a large gathering of people. We believe this is an interesting aspect of this case study, as it provides an example of how setting boundaries can be complex and multifaceted. On one hand, Michfest is an intact setting; on the other, it is comprised of numerous physical and social spaces created and navigated by participants in part due to their experiences of intersectional diversity within the setting. A recent model proposed by Neal and Neal (2013) reformulates existing understandings of ecological systems of settings as nested places (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, 1979) by defining settings as sets of people engaged in interpersonal relationships that overlap and are directly or indirectly connected through social interactions. This model may further enrich our understanding of counterspaces; for example, we may think about counterspaces within the festival as overlapping relational networks often associated with physical spaces rather than as distinct, nested subcultures. Social network methods hold great promise for understanding how intersectional identities are associated with relational affiliations, and consequently shape experiences of the setting as well as the structure of the setting itself.

Future research should examine how intersectionality may produce similar or different dynamics within smaller counterspaces. For example, Case and Hunter’s (2014) exploration of a program for offender-labeled African American youth provides an example of a much smaller counterspace. The narratives discussed in their study relate to youths’ shared identities as offender-labeled and African American; an intersectional approach might complicate this by examining how other identities (e.g., class, gender, sexual orientation) were experienced and negotiated within the setting. Although the same level of intersectional diversity found in larger settings may not be present in smaller counterspaces, attention still is warranted to how intersectional identities work in dynamic tension with the dominant intersectional identities of the setting in shaping if and how the setting functions as a counterspace. Marginalized participants in smaller counterspaces may not have the critical mass to form smaller separatist counterspaces, and may feel isolated and be less
likely to vocalize their experiences with the dominant culture of the setting. Thus, it may be more important for all participants in smaller counterspaces to have a heightened awareness of intersectionality and privilege in order to recognize and address these dynamics across different relationships to power.

In addition to informing literature on counterspaces and settings theory in community psychology, this study has implications for literature on safe spaces. Findings problematize the division between separatist and inclusive safe spaces and illustrate the ways in which separatist spaces are also essentially inclusive spaces. Although separatist spaces may explicitly focus on a single identity (e.g., women), they are likely to also carry assumptions about a more specific target audience (e.g., cisgender, lesbian, feminist, White women) manifested in the dominant culture of the space. Participants who do not share this dominant intersection of identities or introduce other forms of diversity are likely to be aware of the ways in which they differ and may experience marginalization or conflict around these differences, which is more consistent with conceptualizations of inclusive spaces than separatist spaces (Fox, 2007; Revilla, 2010; Stengel & Weems, 2010). Thus, even separatist spaces organized around a particular intersection of identities function as inclusive spaces along other axes of identity. Without intersectional theorizing and analysis, these spaces are likely to promote adaptive responding for some members while perpetuating the marginalization of others. Perhaps one useful heuristic for understanding the relationship between inclusive and separatist safe spaces may be situating them at opposite ends of a continuum, where inclusive spaces focus on and affirm multiple marginalized identities and separatist spaces focus on affirming a single core marginalized identity. Most safe spaces likely fall somewhere on the continuum between these two poles.

Although the relationship between separatist and inclusive spaces is complex, findings support the potential utility of separatist spaces to address particular identities or intersections of identity. It is striking that smaller counterspaces formed within the broader counterspace of Michfest around identities that were non-dominant within the festival, such as the Women of Color Tent, DART, and the Twilight Zone. This was driven by activism and dialogue within the festival, which was in turn generated by the presence of festival attendees who represented various forms of intersectional diversity. The importance attendees placed on these spaces reflects the value they found in gathering with others “like them,” whether this was around a single identity or a particular intersection of identities. Participants also found inclusive festival spaces valuable as sites of dialogue, growth, and transformation. Neither type of space is likely to exclusively serve either function, and safe spaces may be primarily separatist, inclusive, or both, depending on the intersectional specificity of the identities around which the space is organized. Overall, findings support theorists who argue for the utility of both separatist and inclusive safe spaces (Roestone Collective, 2014; Weems, 2013), an observation that we believe also extends to counterspaces.

Limitations and Future Directions

This project has several important limitations. First, we focused on incorporating literature about safe spaces, which is by no means a comprehensive review of writing about these types of spaces. For example, work on free spaces in political science (e.g., Evans & Boyte, 1992) examines environments that encourage engagement in democratic processes and social movements. Related literature in the fields of history, sociology, ethnic studies, women’s and gender studies, and comparative American studies could add additional richness and complexity to our understanding of counterspaces. Second, findings from this case study may not generalize to other types of counterspaces. This reflects an underlying tension in ethnographic research, which may examine more universal questions but is contextualized in specific groups and settings (Case, Todd & Kral, 2014). Our goal in this study was to illustrate the theoretical contribution of integrating intersectionality theory into the counterspaces framework through a case study application. Future research should examine counterspaces organized around different aspects of identity and age groups, of different sizes, and in different contexts. Third, we only interviewed people who attended Michfest, and thus are missing the perspectives of people who chose not to attend or were excluded from festival attendance, including transwomen and others on the trans spectrum. Future research should consider not only participants, but also those who may be excluded from or not participate in counterspaces for various reasons.

Lastly, an important area for further theoretical development involves the relationship between intersectionality within counterspaces and intersectional political organizing. In her seminal paper on how intersectionality shapes experiences of identity, Crenshaw (1991) also notes the importance of political intersectionality, or the ways in which forms of identity politics narrowly focused on the interests of particular groups often continue to marginalize members of these groups with non-dominant intersectional identities. As an example, Crenshaw (1991) illustrates how both feminist and antiracist movements function together to marginalize the issue of violence against women of color. She does not advocate for marginalized groups to abandon organizing together around issues that affect them, but reconceptualizes this work as a coalition-based project due to the
intersectional diversity present around any single aspect of identity. The relationship between intersectional diversity within counterspaces and intersectional, coalition-based political organizing is an exciting area for future community psychology research and action.

Conclusion

The current paper makes two primary contributions to advancing the counterspaces framework. First, we illustrate how integrating intersectionality theory into the counterspaces framework offers rich perspective on participants’ experiences of identity and community within settings that strive to promote well-being for members of marginalized groups and liberatory responses to oppression. Participants reported engaging in both self-enhancement and self-protection depending on their relationships to power, and their experiences of challenging processes show how these processes are intertwined and work in tandem. Thus, although counterspaces have strong potential to support adaptive responding for members of marginalized groups, they also have the potential to perpetuate oppressive social relations without adequate attention to intersectionality. Second, relationships and social processes were a meaningful aspect of the setting for participants, who expressed value in being able to gather together in smaller separatist counterspaces around other aspects of identity. Intersectionality played a central role in the creation of these spaces, as participants who were marginalized within counterspaces were most likely to identify a need for and work to carve out these smaller separatist counterspaces. Paradoxically, we may become most aware of our differences in settings organized around some aspect of sameness; our challenge then becomes how to collectively harness the strengths of each in the service of justice.

Conflict of Interest

The authors report no financial or other conflict of interest relevant to the subject of this article.

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