

## Special Thematic Section on "Rethinking Prefigurative Politics"

# Learning From Critical Collective Spaces: Reflections on the Community-Diversity Dialectic in Safe Spaces

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### Abstract

Safe spaces have the potential to become prefigurative groups that aim to create social change. The idea of a safe space as a place separate and sheltered from dominant culture to mobilize for social change has gained traction in a number of academic and practical areas. However, safe spaces have the ability to be both progressive and regressive. To guide our discussion we utilize the concept of community-diversity dialectic to address the tension between these forces within two settings. First we discuss research in an upper level college course rooted in feminist praxis. Then we discuss a faith community's use of adaptive liturgy with parishioners with intellectual disabilities. Following this discussion, we offer a new term, "critical collective spaces", to better capture the work done in these spaces. We offer this alternative label to move popular and academic discourse away from debating about how "safe" these spaces are (or are not) and toward a more nuanced discussion of the community-diversity dialectic and other tensions within these spaces. Our overall intention is to generate dialogue on the regressive and progressive aspects of these locations and to inform the activism and community building process within prefigurative politics more broadly.

*Keywords:* safe spaces, prefigurative politics, community-diversity dialectic, community, diversity

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"Safe spaces"<sup>1</sup> are literal and figurative areas and processes that are sometimes removed from the control of a dominant group to facilitate the development of networks and skill building among individuals to create social change. Like prefigurative groups, individuals in safe spaces engage in consciousness raising, community building, and political mobilization (Collins, 1999; Polletta, 1999). While prefigurative groups are involved in the creation of spaces and processes to develop alternative ways of imagining and enacting a model of a new and better society (Armstrong, 2002), they may initially develop through safe spaces. Safe spaces may develop into a prefigurative group with shared values and goals, and later as prefigurative groups that engage in social action. We contend that safe spaces are a critical yet underexplored facet of prefigurative politics.

Prefigurative groups, particularly early in their development, may limit membership to create safe spaces (Polletta, 1999). Small intimate groups may allow for free expression when compared to larger and/or more diverse group configurations (Polletta, 1999). For example, women's only groups may be limited to women and disability groups may be limited to people with disabilities; these configurations allow for more intimacy and can offer enhanced possibilities for free expression (Collins, 1999; Polletta, 2002).

Prefigurative groups outline their processes for realizing a better society (Maeckelbergh, 2011), which requires building a community. Working to develop community may necessitate that group members build close relationships involving personal sharing. The process of building connections among members may reveal differences in life experiences, perceptions, or goals. Thus, a primary tension in prefigurative groups may exist between building community and the need for a sense of individual autonomy (Hardt, 2013); the focus on building community to achieve the group's goals may overshadow diversity among group members. Alternatively, overly focusing on diversity may hinder the development of sense of community.

The limitations of focusing on community are evident in the safe space tactics developed in feminist consciousness raising groups in the second wave of the women's movement (Ferree & Hess, 2000) and the gay liberation movement (Armstrong, 2002). Both movements have been criticized for focusing on the needs of upper and middle class whites (Armstrong, 2002; Ferree & Hess, 2000). Similarly, during the civil rights movement Black Southern churches functioned as safe spaces, which were removed from the control of white Americans and provided a physical space for African Americans to develop a network and strategize (Polletta, 1999).

A safe space intends to move out of the control of the dominant group and allow physical and/or figurative room for identity development, social support, emotional connection, and sense of community, and facilitate development of critical consciousness (Collins, 1999; Tatum, 2003). While originally conceptualized as existing within social movements, the idea of safe spaces has been taken up by those outside of social movements. The application of safe spaces within fields such as education has increased the visibility of safe spaces but it has also been met with critique and backlash (see Agness, 2015; Noonan, 2015). We argue that safe spaces share many processes and tensions with prefigurative groups. Further, we see safe spaces as one aspect of prefigurative politics. Safe spaces may transform into a prefigurative group that shifts into the view of mainstream society to create social change (Polletta, 1999). Thus, safe spaces can be used to create a foundation for a movement through recruitment and development of its members (Gamson, 1991). We believe that by explicitly linking the ideas of safe spaces and prefigurative politics we can expand the understanding of both, including the benefits and challenges of each.

Although underexplored in the social sciences literature, safe spaces are a key tactic for social movements both in the past and present day. Consequently, the formations and processes involved in safe spaces vary widely within practice. We seek to honor the historical and present use of safe spaces by prefigurative and other social movements while also bringing a critical lens to their use to better understand their potential benefits and challenges. We have learned from our time in community safe spaces, both those presented here and others in which we have engaged as activists. Our goal is to offer reflections on the use of safe spaces, their connection to broader prefigurative politics, and ideas for addressing some of the challenges we have identified in working within safe spaces. However, we acknowledge our definitions of safe spaces and prefigurative politics do not capture the full breadth of their practice and that our suggestions may have limited utility outside of this manuscript. Our intention is to open a dialogue on these issues that extends beyond this special thematic section and stimulates further

exploration. Herein, we present research on the community-diversity dialectic and share our experiences with and research on safe spaces in university classrooms and community disability groups.

## Community-Diversity Dialectic

Community is founded on a sense of shared identity and experience, developed through membership, fulfillment of needs, emotional connection, and influence (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Determining those in the in-group allows for the identification of others who are similar to oneself, an important aspect of community development, which provides a sense of safety (Townley, Kloos, Green, & Franco, 2011). For example, ethnic homogeneity is significantly related to social cohesion among residents in the United Kingdom (Sampson, 1991) and African Americans have higher sense of community in racially homogenous communities than racially heterogeneous communities (Caughy, O'Campo, & Muntaner, 2003). However, conditions that foster sense of community run counter to those that promote respect for diversity (Neal & Neal, 2014; Townley et al., 2011). Communities with high levels of diversity among members may experience difficulty developing a sense of community, identity, and comfort in risk taking, which are all indicators of safety. This tension, the community-diversity dialectic (Townley et al., 2011), is not well understood in social science literature.

While prefigurative groups utilizing safe spaces may focus on similarities among group members to build cohesion (Polletta, 2002), an intersectional analysis of any community will find that perfect homogeneity does not exist and rather as an individual's multiple identities are taken into account the illusion of homogeneity fades (Collins, 1999). For example, a group may be made up of all women but these women likely have different identities and statuses with regard to class, sexuality, or ability. Suggesting the group of women are homogenous and share the same concerns does not account for the diversity of other identities. Further, power is involved in this process as the dominant narrative (e.g., white, heterosexual, middle class, able) is often presumed to be normative both inside and outside the group. Thus, individuals who initially feel safe and a sense of community within a group may experience marginalization over time in a way that mirrors broader society (Gruber & Trickett, 1987). Such power dynamics challenge the group's ability to create relationships that share power, a necessary step in modeling relationships that differ from mainstream society. These areas of tension have caused conflict in many prefigurative groups (e.g., consciousness raising groups of the women's movement, groups in the Occupy Wall Street Movement) and are at the root of the community-diversity dialectic.

Groups that acknowledge diversity within the group may experience challenges building group cohesion but they may have success in solving problems by adding diverse abilities and life experiences (Maznevski, 1994). While groups constructed as more homogenous are often better able to solve simple tasks in a short time period, more diverse groups benefit from a range of perspectives that can help create innovative solutions to complex issues, such as social change. However, coming to these elucidations may involve considerable time and emotional work. That said, acknowledging and working with diversity within a group may help avoid the silencing and marginalization of members of the group by addressing the intersectionality of identity upfront. However, important the roles of fostering an understanding and appreciation of diversity within groups, shared identity and sense of community have important roles to play, particularly within prefigurative politics. Understanding and working with the tension between sense of community and diversity is important to all safe spaces.

## Safe Spaces

Fetner, Elafros, Bortolin, and Drechsler (2012) suggest safe spaces include three areas: context (safe from what?), membership (safe for whom?), and activities (safe for what activities?). In the next section we explore these three dimensions of safe spaces within two settings. Notably, both studies did not initially intend to explore safe spaces but discussions relating to safe spaces emerged through individual interviews.

### Safe for Whom?

Often safe spaces are created around a shared identity, such as “women” or “people with disabilities,” but members of any group will have other identities that intersect with the identity the safe space is being formed around. The term safe space implies being free of some outside threatening “other,” requiring delineation of in- and out-group members. While this may seem exclusionary to some, it serves as a protective or buffering function for historically marginalized groups.

Safe spaces are credited with giving group members the tools to succeed in an otherwise hostile environment (e.g., being a student of color on a predominately white campus; Deo, 2013). While the benefits of safe spaces for historically marginalized groups have been documented (see Deo, 2013; Tatum, 2003), dominant groups may react negatively to the formation of a group free of their gaze and control (Collins, 1999). The absence of the dominant group allows minorities to define what is normative and what inclusion should look like (Deo, 2013).

That said, the tension in the question “safe for whom?” is not exclusively felt from outside forces. More challenging and less addressed are tensions *within* safe spaces. These groups may not be equally beneficial for members that have multiple marginalized identities in regard to their class, gender, sexual orientation, age, or ability. The intersection of social identities presents a challenge for safe space ideology. Through our research, we have seen that there is often a conflation that safety involves a lack of conflict, which leads to the silencing of members who have alternative points of view.

### Safe From What?

Once the in-group is defined by asking “safe for whom,” the out-group must also be explored. Fetner and colleagues (2012) suggest that the “level of hostility or insecurity of the environment is a key factor in participants’ need for safe spaces” (p. 196) and “more hostile contexts, for example, are likely to restrict membership practices and the activities in which students participate” (p. 204). The terms of the safe space are created and shaped in response to the outside environment and as the outside environment shifts, the terms of the safe space may also change.

The very idea that a safe space is needed suggests the presence of some threatening outsider. Defining the in-group is not enough; the out-group must also be defined. As suggested by social identity theory, groups define themselves, at least in part, in opposition to some outside other (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). However, members of safe spaces often are not the originators of group demarcations. Generally, the dominant group chooses who is labeled as opposite, different, or bad. Individuals seeking a safe space are often those that have been marginalized by dominant culture and society and are searching for a place away from oppression and oppressors. This may cause these individuals or groups to over-emphasize the community aspect of the community-diversity dialectic, leading to unacknowledged challenges related to diversity within the group, as discussed previously.

## Safe for What Activities?

While the exclusion of certain individuals is one aspect of defining a safe space, once the community is established, the norms of acceptable and unacceptable behavior must be created. When working toward a vision of creating safe spaces, it is common to begin by having group members create guidelines of what they need to feel open to participate, take risks, and be vulnerable (Chan & Treacy, 1996). Because safe spaces are focused on creating an ideal, open, and supportive environment outside of the alienation and oppression present in mainstream society, new “rules of engagement” must be created. In our experience in creating community guidelines, common themes include: respect, active listening, speaking from your own experience, participation, open mindedness, bring your best self, and dialogue.

The process of creating community standards lays the groundwork for marking an inclusive area while acknowledging that safety is context specific. The process of creating guidelines relies on participants speaking up. However, members of historically marginalized identities may be less likely to state their needs, particularly if they are part of the minority in the group (e.g., a sexual minority in a group of heterosexual women) or have been overshadowed by support providers (e.g., caregivers for people with disabilities). By creating guidelines, the values of some group members are held as more appropriate, thus potentially violating the values of other individuals. Even when the values of the safe space include important aspects of civil discourse and dialogue it is important to consider how these even seemingly innocuous and positive goals may make some groups feel more comfortable than others.

## Safe Spaces in College Classrooms

The first author conducted a participant observation<sup>ii</sup> at an urban university in a senior capstone course<sup>iii</sup> focused on developing feminist consciousness. The six-hour course integrated classroom time with community engagement where students conducted “rap sessions” with groups of adolescent girls in community settings. The course content was interdisciplinary in nature but concentrated on understanding issues of gender oppression, particularly in relation to adolescent girls. The course instructor was highly committed to Critical and Feminist Pedagogies and utilized aspects of each, including: group work, discussion, focusing on the intersection of social identities, and voice. Class time occurred seated in a circle and was spent building community through activities, such as daily check-ins and practicing skills necessary for conducting the community engagement component of the course. The course involved self-reflection and activities, such as identity mapping, which facilitated students’ ability to understand how broad socio-political structures influence them and the adolescent girls they worked with in the community. The course consisted of 15 women and one man and students were diverse in regard to race, age and sexual orientation. Following completion of the course 10 semi-structured interviews were conducted with women students. A modified version of the listening guide (Gilligan, Spencer, Weinberg, & Bertsch, 2003) was used for analysis.

## Safe for Whom?

In our work in college classrooms that utilize Feminist and Critical pedagogical techniques, the process of demarcating a space and separating it from some outside “other” is seen through a number of practices; for example, in the capstone we observed the instructor closing the door to “protect the space.” That said, the biggest challenges to the idea of “safe for whom” came from inside the group.

In individual interviews with students, months after completion of the course, they suggested some degree of power imbalance had existed among students in the course. One of the few older students in the course talked of “not fitting in.” Another repeatedly stated how much she enjoyed and learned from the course but also expressed how “hard” the class had been and how on some days she “just didn’t want to be there.” This same student expressed her frustration:

For me it’s difficult sometime being the only women of color sitting in the classroom, because, usually when we talk about what’s happening in the world we’re talking about it from a dominant perspective. Well that’s not me and so, to find a way in which I fit into all of this, it’s not always easy.

In the heterogenous environment of the college classroom, the ideal of a safe space was not always realized. In fact, students with more areas of marginalization or students that were the only representative of a group seemed to particularly struggle.

Another theme centered on the emotional toll of being in a classroom that utilized aspects of safe space ideology. A white traditional age student in the course said:

... when we were talking about like social mapping, I was like hell no, identity circle, that was so tolling ... It was like, yes this was unifying, but it was also taking a toll on my psychological well-being. Luckily I still see a therapist regularly so I got to be like I’m tired, I’m drained, help.

While some activities in the course worked to build community, these same activities stretched individuals’ abilities to cope. Literature on safe spaces has generally not discussed these potential regressive effects of such experiences on individuals, particularly those that have more traumatic histories or limited resources (e.g., therapy, social support; Wallin-Ruschman, 2014).

## Safe From What?

To justify the need for a safe space, an environment has to be labeled as problematic. The relatively heterogeneous nature of the safe space in college classrooms makes the defined outside other fairly generic. Because there are people of various social locations within the classroom, one does not see the same division one might see in a more homogeneous space. In the classroom, dominant culture and mainstream media were labeled as the other to which the space is defined in opposition. When defined in this way the space becomes an area to foster critical consciousness that critiques norms and values of dominant culture and mainstream media. A student in the capstone discussed the hostility of the dominant culture by stating:

I mean you have to create a safe space for people to say what they feel, to think what they feel, because I think a lot of people struggle with allowing themselves just to think about something without beating themselves up.

The quote suggests that the class played an important role in helping students transfer emotions and thoughts that previously felt deviant into acceptable thoughts and feelings.

While defining the safe space in opposition to dominant culture can foster the development of critical consciousness, it can also be regressive. First, placing all “badness” on an outside other does not allow individuals to work through the internal and even unconscious biases they have developed through living in the dominant culture. Second, labeling and critiquing all mainstream media can become exhausting. This changing orientation can take some

of the fun and humor out of previously enjoyed activities. A woman from the capstone class articulated her dissonance:

... there's TV shows and there's music that I like on some levels that I now have trouble listening to ... and that's where a lot of these negative stereotypes are being propagated is in like mainstream music and videos ... I know that that's offensive and not okay, but I still really like this song ...

### Safe for What Activities?

The creation of classroom guidelines was used to negotiate what activities were appropriate for the space. While this activity seemed to put students at ease and facilitate community building, it was unclear how much it actually changed the tenor of the class. Despite students agreeing to step up (i.e., if they are usually quiet, challenge themselves to talk) or step down (i.e., if they are usually talkative challenge themselves to listen more), the same students spoke from day to day and some almost never verbally participated during class. Another common guideline raised was engaging in dialogue. The process of dialogue is important because it allows for hearing others perspective and is a fundamental driver of critical consciousness development (Wallin-Ruschman, 2014). However, the very idea of dialogue hints that there are diverse perspectives in the room. Students seemed to struggle with the community-diversity dialectic and perceive the presence of diversity or disagreement as threatening to their sense of community.

In the capstone course any area of disagreement was generally perceived negatively. This was the case even when the conflict was a part of the participatory decision-making process. One student was surprised when the structure of the course led to disagreement:

I was surprised that people did not agree and there was just so much back and forth going on. But I don't know, maybe they were just very opinionated and they were advocating for themselves I guess. But it was just really hard for us to, like, find common ground on a lot of topics.

This woman and a number of other participants stated that they preferred to avoid conflict whenever possible. Additionally, dialogue in the class itself was often viewed as rife with tension. Participants preferred that everyone "get along" and agree. This tendency does not leave room for critical dialogue and limits progressive capacities including the ability to tolerate ambivalence and conflict (Haaken, Wallin-Ruschman, & Patange, 2012).

## "Inclusive" Faith Communities

The second author conducted a study<sup>iv</sup> to understand how Catholic religious leaders (i.e., pastors, parochial vicars, deacons) made meaning of intellectual disabilities and perceptions toward the participation of individuals with intellectual disabilities within the faith community. Through participant observation and semi-structured interviews, adaptive liturgies – mass with adaptations intended to promote the participation of individuals with developmental disabilities – were explored using grounded theory.

When learning about the position of people with intellectual disabilities in Catholic faith communities, participants often discussed the experience of the family members of individuals with intellectual disabilities. Some religious leaders believed that family members and individuals with intellectual disabilities preferred segregated settings and that parishioners of the mainstream mass felt more comfortable with people without intellectual disabilities.

In some cases, families with a member with an intellectual disability stopped participating in their faith communities because they did not feel welcomed. In reaction, the Catholic Archdiocese in collaboration with other religious leaders created adaptive liturgies. Adaptive liturgies involve all of the components of mass but with accommodations. Depending on the religious leader and parishioners, the adaptive liturgy took different forms. For example, one group used story telling with parishioners with and without disabilities acting out parts of the gospel and singing followed by the religious leader connecting religious concepts to day-to-day activities and popular topics (e.g., sports). In contrast, another group adapted parts of the liturgy but centered on family members without disabilities. For example, parishioners without disabilities participated in roles, while parishioners with developmental disabilities served as passive recipients of information in the pews.

## Safe for Whom?

“Nothing about us, without us!” is a slogan used by the disability movement, yet as [Radermacher, Sonn, Keys, and Duckett \(2010\)](#) contend, “It’s about us but still without us.” Spaces that intend to serve individuals with disabilities evolve into spaces for family members and caregivers, which further silences people with disabilities ([Patka & McDonald, 2015](#)).

Adaptive liturgies were created to serve as an intentionally inclusive community. Within the context of the adaptive liturgy, families are able to attend worship with individuals who do not stare at them, complain when the family member with intellectual disabilities does something outside of the norm of the Catholic mass, or simply deny people with intellectual disabilities entry. The adaptive liturgy was intended to serve all parishioners including those with disabilities, yet it evolved into a setting for people with intellectual disabilities and their family members.

Parishioners at the adaptive liturgy shared the goal of worship, but it mimicked the social roles and expectations of outside settings. Some involve individuals with and without intellectual disabilities to create a liturgy that is accessible for everyone. However, others perpetuate the social imbalances of external settings where family members without intellectual disabilities participate in meaningful ways while the individuals with disabilities served as observers. While the former makes a conscious effort to be participatory and respectful of diversity within the group, the latter has unknowingly moved away from serving the worship needs of individuals with developmental disabilities.

## Safe From What?

In the United States, the [Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990](#) protects the rights of individuals with disabilities, but adherence is not required by religious organizations including places of worship and services provided to the public. Within this context, religious institutions are able to legally deny entry into churches and in some instances have made decisions to exclude individuals with disabilities (e.g., [Posner v. Central Synagogue, 1993](#)). While none of the religious leaders interviewed explicitly stated that they would deny people with developmental disabilities entry, a few participants expressed exclusionary attitudes. One religious leader stated:

Normal people are just going so fast, things that we do that I feel that they’re probably left to the side. Um, unless somebody can slow down and say hello to them ... I guess an extended sense they’re not productive, you know, what good are they? They’re in the aisle; they’re in the way.

Relatedly, another religious leader described his definition of inclusion within the faith community as follows:

I don't think we need to promote inclusion in that specific area [sacraments] that you know, it may not be for people with disabilities ... so inclusion doesn't mean that everyone needs to have access to everything, you know because that's not true of the world either ...

Among some Catholic religious leaders, disability status is not recognized as a dimension of human diversity, and such quotes demonstrate how people with intellectual disabilities are disparaged. However, the long-term solution should not be to create a separate safe space *or* an inclusive mainstream setting, but rather both. Segregated settings provide spaces for people to engage with those like themselves while inclusive mainstream settings provide opportunities to engage with others different from oneself. Of particular importance though, inclusive mainstream settings must provide opportunities for meaningful inclusion and participation. For example, some religious settings welcome individuals with disabilities by allowing their physical presence without meaningful participation. However, each parish is charged with the authority to determine boundaries for membership and level of participation. We found that many faith leaders preferred parishioner groups to be divided by disability status thereby valuing homogeneity in regard to ability and devaluing the diversity of its parishioners.

### Safe for What Activities?

The goal of each parish is for parishioners to come together for worship and its implementation is entirely under the control of the pastor. The pastor of each faith community had the final say in all decisions relating to his church. Some pastors expressed that they made decisions based on the expressed needs of the majority of parishioners, while others chose to make decisions based on what they wanted as individuals for their faith community. However, mainstream Catholic mass adheres to a specific script with little to no deviation. Given this context, the alternative setting of an adaptive liturgy ran counter to the typical protocol used in Catholic mass. The adaptive liturgy was more open to the diversity of its parishioners by allowing parishioners to participate in whichever way they could which sometimes included calling out during the sermon.

While disagreements were not observed within the adaptive liturgy, changes were made within some adaptive liturgies to accommodate the varying needs of parishioners. For example, religious leaders involved in the adaptive liturgies that promoted participation of individuals with intellectual disabilities described instances where new members needed or requested changes, which led to discussion and decision making with the pastor and parishioners. Thus, the community engaged in dialogue to maintain a balance between both sense of community and the multiple diversities represented within the community. Generally though, the community opted to maintain openness to allow for unexpected occurrences during mass like parishioners moving about and singing along. On the other hand, adaptive liturgies catering to the needs of family members without intellectual disabilities created an inflexible script that was tailored to the needs of family members without developmental disabilities. They essentially created a dominant group within the adaptive liturgy and opted to focus on their needs rather than the entire community. They undervalued the diversity of their community at the expense of their family members with intellectual disabilities.

## Discussion

A major critique has developed around the term safe spaces. The term promises a potentially false sense of security, particularly to those that have multiple marginalized identities. Our experiences suggest that the community-diversity dialectic is a real challenge for some so called safe spaces which carry a degree of hostility, and hierarchies

of marginalization are recreated within their boundaries. One critique focuses on the very term safe space because of its false promise of security. We contend that the term is problematic; it does not adequately capture the complexity of safe spaces and it does not address the community-diversity dialectic. That said, we think the ideal and practices of safe spaces hold value. Safe spaces are important for many historically marginalized groups and have played a major role in developing members' identity, pride, and critical consciousness; nonetheless, another term could better capture the complexity of the spaces without promising a false sense of all encompassing safety. Therefore, we propose the term *critical collective spaces*; we believe it represents the importance of community and also a commitment to offering an alternative to oppressive and hierarchical cultures. We recognize that changing a label will not solve problematic issues within these groups. We offer this alternative label to move popular and academic discourse away from debating about how "safe" these spaces are (or are not) and toward a more nuanced discussion of the community-diversity dialectic and other tensions within critical collective spaces.

While safe spaces have clear utility for consciousness raising, sense of community, and social movement organization the idea of a critical collective space as a final act of resistance is problematic; instead they could be better understood as a tool. Reagon (1983) likens critical collective spaces to a "barred room" (p. 358) where a group enters to find protection and build community away from a society that is hostile toward them thereby creating a barred room. However, barred rooms possess limitations, as we discuss earlier where "... there ain't nobody in there but folk like you, which by implication means you wouldn't know what to do if you were running it with all of the other people who are out there in the world" (Reagon, 1983, p. 358). Focusing on the community building aspect of the community-diversity dialectic may be useful in the early stages of prefigurative movements use of safe spaces but not attending to diversity inhibits the progress in broader society.

Similar to prefigurative politics, critical collective spaces could provide individuals a way to begin practicing alternative relationship building strategies that counter alienating and hierarchical relations found in many organizations and institutions. Further, critical collective spaces may help facilitate group pride and social movement strategy (Polletta, 2002). However, it is important for groups to also take steps to acknowledge and work through the diversity of intersecting identities within any one group. In her analysis of social movement organizations Polletta (2002) similarly tracks the problems of overreliance on friendship. The social movement groups she studied often struggled to disagree or diminished differences within the group to maintain friendship ties. Working with the community-diversity dialectic could aid this process. Further, critical collective spaces could benefit from being aware of defensive splitting or dividing the world into a "good" in-group and a "bad" out-group. Such dichotomies preclude the dialectic thinking that would allow for consideration of the power of community *and* diversity.

Membership in a critical collective space has the potential to maintain and expand critical consciousness. However, critical collective spaces may also have the tendency to become insular thereby limiting opportunities for exposure to new ideas and opportunities for creating change in broader society (Polletta, 2002). If group members learned to balance the tension inherent in the community-diversity dialectic, they could begin to relate to those both inside and outside of the group's boundaries while also remaining strategically potent. By learning to think and relate to others in a more dialogic fashion, group members may be able to keep a strong identification and pride in their own identity while also working across difference and forming coalitions between different critical collective spaces.

Of note, the environments we studied are embedded within larger institutions. This coupled with the hierarchy within each context – the teacher assigns grades and the priests give sacraments – influenced our research. Critical collective spaces are embedded in larger society and may specifically emerge out of formalized institution-

alized structures. To move away from the hierarchical organization of society prefigurative political movements strive to eliminate hierarchy within the group. Further, the motivation for participation in our contexts (i.e., grades, faith) differ from a more exclusively social change focus of members of prefigurative groups. Despite these limitations we believe that our documentation of the struggle with the community-diversity dialectic may highlight areas of concern in critical collective spaces and ideas for addressing these issues.

## Conclusion

We have shared our experiences and research related to safe spaces in university classrooms and community disability groups to explore the regressive and progressive aspects of these locations to inform the benefits and challenges faced by many critical collective spaces. We offer the community-diversity dialectic as a way to understand the benefits of these spaces (e.g., sense of community, nurturing, identity, pride, buffering effect) and the disadvantages (e.g., lack of openness to diversity, separatism, lack of focus on intersection, potential for recreating hierarchies).

Based on our experiences and reflection on prior literature, prefigurative political movements that utilize critical collective spaces may benefit from value-based partnerships when working with diverse individuals with a common goal where all stakeholders value “caring, compassion, community, health, self-determination, participation, power sharing, human diversity, and social justice” (p. 651) for the oppressed (Nelson, Prilleltensky, & MacGillivray, 2001) and the oppressor (Freire, 2000). For example, when working with people with intellectual disabilities, opportunities to participate meaningfully in decision-making roles are important. However, in order to avoid tokenizing, individuals with intellectual disabilities should be adequately supported within their role. Thus, critical collective spaces could benefit from recognizing the necessity of accommodations such as accessible settings, personal assistants, and documents in accessible formats. The idea of accommodations could be used to enable critical community spaces to better deal with the diversity inherent in them and avoid recreating hierarchies present in dominant culture. Finally, engaging in prefiguration is an immensely time consuming process that may be less available or desirable to those with high family, financial, or employment demands (Polletta, 2002). Ignoring this barrier to participation is likely to drive these individuals out of groups, particularly if these limitations are not recognized. This is another area where the idea of accommodations could be developed to enhance diversity.

Reagon (1983) advocates a coalition building strategy to counter the insular nature of some social change oriented groups. When discussing the difficulty of working in coalitions with different others she states, “Most of the time you feel threatened to the core and if you don’t, you’re not really doing no coalescing” (p. 343). Social change work is difficult and scary. While it is important to engage in self-care and have spaces that recharge, heal, and model a better society, only working and living within these spaces may become limiting. Having access to a critical collective space is a form of privilege not available to all members of society. Critical collective spaces provide important avenues to practice a society based on community, inclusion, compassion, and sustainability, and this practice is essential to avoid recreating hierarchies (see Freire, 2000). However, if you are constantly feeling safe in your social change efforts, you may not be challenging power structures and thus unlikely to be creating lasting change that will benefit a wide swath of society.

Critical collective spaces could benefit from putting in procedures to focus on within-group diversity. This would open the opportunity for dialogue within the group so that a wider range of individuals are able to benefit from the space. Practicing dialogue within critical collective spaces may teach skills necessary for broader-scale social change. Finally, dialogue among different groups will ensure the strategies for social change we pursue are innov-

ative as they are not coming from the same voices and individuals but rather people with diverse social locations and histories. Anzaldúa and Keating (2002) write of the power of bridge spaces:

Transformations occur in this in-between space ... living in this liminal zone means being in a constant state of displacement—and uncomfortable even alarming feeling. (p. 1)

No matter the strategy, social change happens when risks are taken. Tension and discomfort are necessary for learning. To thrive and survive, critical collective spaces could use differences within their boundaries as a strength and build “bridges” within and outside their group. But to accomplish this integration, critical collective spaces could benefit from embracing the doldrums and discomfort of diversity. While the community-diversity dialectic cannot be fully resolved, group members can work to find strategies to balance working towards these two essential values. Future research should examine the processes and strategies social change groups use to reach a synthesis in this dialectic and the appropriateness of different strategies within varying social movement and institutional contexts.

## Notes

- i) We place the term safe space in quotations here because we acknowledge this is a problematic term. We will not utilize quotations marks for the remainder of the paper but we will address the problems inherent in this term later in the paper.
- ii) More information on this project is available in Wallin-Ruschman (2014).
- iii) A capstone is an upper division course that represents a culminating educational experience in some colleges and universities in the United States.
- iv) More information on this project is available in Patka and McDonald (2015).

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