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# “We’re All We Have”: Envisioning the Future of Mutual Aid from Queer and Trans Perspectives

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*Mutual aid has prevailed for as long as humans have existed. However, the concept of mutual aid became popularized in 2020 as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the racial uprisings in response to the continued police brutality toward Black people, and an increase in global climate crises. Mutual aid spread as a way of survival and collective care when formal systems, such as federal and local governments within the U.S., were failing to meet people’s needs. Using a subset of data from semi-structured interviews, the current study relied on a desire-based research framework and foresight lens to capture the perspectives of queer and trans individuals (n=10) and how they envision mutual aid in the future. Findings show*

*how queer and trans participants of mutual aid envision the structure of the future of mutual aid and the need for a system overhaul to world build. Implications for social work practice and education will be discussed.*

*Keywords: mutual aid, queer mutual aid, transgender mutual aid, mutual aid COVID-19, foresight lens, desire-based research*

In the United States, people are experiencing a multitude of crises seemingly simultaneously, from climate-induced wildfires and the COVID-19 pandemic, to the hyper-incarceration and unjustified killings of Black people. For queer and trans people, these crises are compounded by anti-queer and anti-trans state violence that is happening in state legislatures across the United States. In 2022, there were over 100 anti-queer and anti-trans bills introduced during the legislative session, with 16 states passing such bills (Freedom for All Americans, 2022). As a result of this state-sanctioned violence, many queer and trans people are focused on community support and restorative growth, often referred to as *mutual aid*. Building on this understanding, the present paper seeks to acknowledge what queer and trans people have accomplished in terms of mutual aid to imagine what the future of mutual aid may look like. As such, we analyzed 10 interviews with queer and trans participants of mutual aid to capture how they envision the future of mutual aid in five to 10 years.

Before proceeding, we want to acknowledge that we use the term *queer* to encompass individuals who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, pansexual, or any other sexual minority identity. We choose to use *queer* because of the political underpinnings of mutual aid and queerness (Cohen, 1997). When sharing quotes from participants in the study, we will share specifically what they self-described as their sexual orientation. Additionally, we choose to use the term *trans* to represent those whose gender differs from Western social expectations related to the sex they were assigned at birth. This includes individuals who may transition from one binary gender to another—such as transwomen or transmen—and those who identify outside of a gender binary, such as nonbinary, genderqueer, genderfluid, and agender people.

## Background

### *Mutual Aid*

While mutual aid has recently become more recognized in our society, it has a long history among marginalized communities. Official records within the United States date mutual aid back to 1787 when Black mutual aid societies were established by the Free African Society (GO Humanity, 2022). The immediate need for mutual aid societies was driven by the failure of the United States government to provide support to Black Americans newly freed from slavery. The Free African Society later evolved into Black mutual aid societies, including the Black Panther Party, which was founded in 1966. They were renowned for creating an expansive mutual aid network, such as their free breakfast program (Aberg-Riger, 2020). In the 20th century, we began to see mutual aid practices in Latinx and Chinese-American communities within the U.S. These programs have been integral to forming mutual aid as we know it now and have led to the increased awareness of community organizing practices for activists and revolutionists (GO Humanity, 2022).

The term *mutual aid* was not introduced into Western literature until 1902 (Kropotkin, 1902). In Kropotkin's work, he states that mutual aid occurs when members of the same species (i.e., animals and humans) provide support and care to each other when confronting environmental obstacles (Gammage, 2021). Though historically this term was used as a temporary response to natural disasters (Wang, 2013), recently, the meaning has shifted to what Spade describes as radical collective care that meets one another's needs while simultaneously acknowledging that the systems in place are not meeting those needs (Spade, 2020). Mutual aid work is founded on the principles of supporting communities in all manners necessary (Spade, 2020).

### *Mutual Aid in Queer and Trans Communities*

Mutual aid has a long history within queer and trans communities. Much of this work comes from trans women of color who fostered spaces for queer and trans mutual aid groups to collectivize.

In the 1980s, during the ballroom scene, houses led by “house mothers,” who most commonly were trans women of color, created communities of support their house members, who were often Black and Latinx queer and trans individuals (Bailey, 2011). Two influential trans women of color involved in this work were Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera. One of their most notable forms of mutual aid in queer and trans communities was the creation of Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries (STAR). Created in 1970, Johnson and Rivera created STAR in response to an increased number of trans youth becoming unhoused after being rejected by their biological families (Feinberg, 2006; Young, 2019). STAR not only functioned as a shelter but as a social space for queer and trans street youth (Feinberg, 2006; Shepard, 2013). Johnson and Rivera provided mutual aid in the form of housing, money, food, and community emotional support.

Another prominent example of mutual aid in queer and trans communities was during the HIV/AIDS epidemic, which took the lives of over 100,000 individuals (Geiling, 2013). Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (AIDS) is an autoimmune disorder that attacks one’s immune system, causing it to become compromised (Kher, 1982). Between 1981–1984, AIDS primarily impacted men who had sex with men, hemophiliacs, and intravenous substance users (Painter et al., 2019). During this time, society saw a divide between citizens’ needs and the lack of government recognition of this ongoing deadly epidemic. The number of physicians willing to treat gay men with AIDS symptoms was small (Geiling, 2013). Because there was a lack of response from the healthcare system and the U.S. government, queer and trans communities across North America began to create their own mutual aid support systems for those impacted by HIV/AIDS (Finkelstein, 2020). Care systems were largely started by AIDS patients, who were disproportionately gay and/or trans Black and Brown individuals. These communal support groups were intentionally created with the awareness that HIV/AIDS was a public health crisis that was not being taken seriously because of whom it was predominantly affecting. A foundation of collective care was created to provide direct caregiving to those impacted. Some examples were free legal services (e.g., will

writing), grief counseling, and practical support (e.g., running errands) (Turner & Catania, 1997). Research for treatment quickly began as a result of the epidemic. People with HIV/AIDS went from knowing that they were going to die to learning how to live with this diagnosis.

### *Mutual Aid in Queer and Trans Communities Today*

As mentioned previously, queer and trans communities have historically relied on mutual aid. Certain methods have adapted over time to match the needs of the 21st century (e.g., online forums), though some acts of mutual aid look the same as they did in the 1960s (e.g., in-person support). Today, these national, statewide, and local groups provide assistance ranging from microgrants (e.g., to help with name/gender marker changes and other legal documents) to emergency and disaster relief (e.g., COVID-19 related or otherwise) (National Center for Transgender Equality, 2022). These groups provide support to various regional areas (e.g., rural and urban) ranging in topics from safety for trans sex workers to supporting trans individuals who are incarcerated through mail programs, book clubs, and financial assistance (Farrow, 2019; Out in the Open, 2021). These are just a few examples within the U.S. of ways queer and trans communities continue to rely on mutual aid to bring their community together. Even within these examples, little research has examined mutual aid among queer and trans communities, a gap the current study begins to fill.

### *Theoretical Framework*

The current study relied on a foresight lens to consider the future of mutual aid for queer and trans communities. Nissen (2020) describes foresight practice as a “collection of ideas that intend to make individuals and groups more collectively effective (and foresightful) in navigating intensely and increasingly turbulent economic, political, natural, and social ecosystems” (p. 314). Furthermore, Gariboldi and colleagues (2021) explain foresight as an effective tool to prepare for the future when uncertainties prevail. Using a foresight lens conflicts with the dominant narrative found in research with historically marginalized communities. The current narrative focuses on the harm and suffering

experienced by communities previously, and how to respond to this harm presently. As highlighted by Shuster and Westbrook (2022), the consequences of focusing on misery do not stay contained within academia. These narratives instead shape everyday understandings of being part of a historically marginalized group (Ferber, 2000). When these narratives are shared, they are what most people believe about a specific group, including members who are a part of that group (Harwood, 2004). Through this centering of suffering, “we are as likely to be shackled by the stories we tell (or that are culturally available for our telling) as we are by the form of oppression they might seek to reveal” (Ewick & Silbey, 1995, p. 212). This is what Shuster and Westbrook (2022) refer to as a *joy deficit* in sociological scholarship. Given the increase in global climate crises, hyper-incarceration and criminalization, anti-queer and trans state violence, and health crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the social work profession should use foresight practices to be more future-ready and strengths-focused for what is yet to come (Nissen, 2020).

Utilizing a foresight lens may help social work and sociology move toward desire-based research rather than centering the historical and present-day suffering and pain of communities (Tuck, 2009). As described by Tuck (2009), desire-based research, accounts for the loss and despair, but also for the hope, the visions, the wisdom of lived lives and communities. Desire is involved with the *not yet* and, at times, the *not anymore*...Desire is about longing, about a present that is enriched by both the past and the future (pp. 416–417).

The dominant narrative found in queer and trans scholarship highlights loss and despair. With the present study, we intentionally used a foresight lens to challenge the damage-centered narrative that currently exists, moving to a place where hope, wisdom, and imagination are illuminated.

## Methods

### *Research Question*

Recognizing the need for desire-based, futures-oriented research that centers the perspectives of queer and trans communities, the present study was guided by the research question: How

do queer and trans people participating in mutual aid envision the future of mutual aid?

### *Positionality Statement*

This work brings the transformative praxis of mutual aid into the academic world. As the authors of this work, we understand the complexities and conflicts of this, as mutual aid exists outside of government institutions for a reason. We, a team of queer and nonbinary authors and social workers, come to this work with the goal of deepening our collective understanding of how mutual aid transpires in queer and trans communities. Our team includes individuals who are Latinx, white, lower class, and middle class, with all authors previously engaging in mutual aid work. We have participated in mutual aid work with trans people receiving gender-affirming surgeries (e.g., coordinating meal trains, offering financial support, providing housing, providing transportation to and from appointments) and with other communities, such as supporting unhoused folks and our incarcerated neighbors. Through participating in mutual aid, we have seen firsthand the collective care and community support that goes into this work. As such, we approach this work through a desire-based lens (Tuck, 2009), seeking to understand the desires, hopes, and visions of queer and trans people and how they imagine the future of mutual aid.

### *Study Overview*

This study utilized a critical phenomenological approach (Guenther, 2019) to examine how queer and trans mutual aid participants envision the future of mutual aid. Critical phenomenology, an extension of traditional phenomenology (Creswell & Poth, 2016), addresses participants' lived experiences and the ways that structures, such as heteronormativity and cisnormativity are perpetuated and ingrained in society (Guenther, 2019). As mutual aid has historically occurred among marginalized communities, given the focus on queer and trans participants within this study, this approach allowed us to understand how participants envision mutual aid in the future and how participants' gender and sexual orientation were interwoven with their future imaginings.



*Sampling and Recruitment*

Recognizing that mutual aid proliferated during the COVID-19 pandemic and that many were participating in mutual aid prior to the pandemic, we sought to capture a range of experiences. We sampled from groups that explicitly referred to themselves as mutual aid groups as well as intentional communities where mutual aid was embedded into residential spaces. A sampling frame was crafted using a Google search to create a list of mutual aid groups (on Facebook and Google groups) in Colorado. A second sampling frame was created to specifically reach intentional communities (cohousing and cooperative housing) in the metropolitan Denver area and northern Colorado region based on research team members' familiarity with this network. Research team members invited potential respondents from both sampling frames to participate via email using a standard recruitment script.

Recruitment took place between June and August 2020 amidst the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic. Recruitment was restricted to the state of Colorado due to the geographic location of the research team. Participants were invited to take part in hour-long interviews to better understand the ways that mutual aid emerged and was understood throughout the initial months of the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as how they envision mutual aid in the future. Once participants completed the interview, they were asked to share this study with others in their mutual aid network(s) who may have an interest in completing an interview via snowball sampling. The final overall sample included 25 individuals; for the present study, we analyzed the interviews with queer and trans participants ( $n = 10$ ) to specifically capture how queer and trans mutual aid participants envisioned mutual aid five to 10 years in the future.

Our final analytic sample ( $n=10$ ) included queer ( $n=5$ ), pansexual ( $n=3$ ), bisexual ( $n=1$ ), and gay ( $n=1$ ) individuals who were self-defined participants of mutual aid. In terms of gender identity, our sample included women ( $n=5$ ), trans individuals ( $n=3$ ), and men ( $n=2$ ). However, it is important to note that the men and women in our sample were not explicitly asked if they were cisgender or trans. Participants were white ( $n=8$ ), multiracial ( $n=2$ ), and had an age range spanning from 26 to 38 ( $M=31.7$ ). Of the 10 participants,

three were from intentional communities. Participants were asked how long they had participated in mutual aid efforts. This spanned from five months to nine years, with the average time being two years and nine months. Finally, participants were asked to share what type of mutual aid work they participated in. Some examples of mutual aid work participants engaged in included creating events to connect with others, organizing meal and grocery deliveries, cooking community meals, making and distributing masks with community members, and caretaking for individuals in intentional communities.

### *Data Collection*

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with participants via video conferencing (Zoom) or phone. Interviews consisted of participating in a brief online demographic survey and a semi-structured conversation about their experiences participating in mutual aid during the COVID-19 pandemic and how they envision mutual aid in the future. Example questions we asked participants included: Think 5-10 years in the future. What kinds of mutual aid do you hope we carry forward beyond COVID; what do you want to leave behind?; and what do you see as the role of mutual aid in society, more broadly? Interviews lasted approximately one hour and were audio recorded with participants' consent and transcribed verbatim. All protocols were approved by the University of Denver Institutional Review Board. Participants received a \$20 gift card for participating in the interview.

### *Data Analysis*

Thematic analysis of the data was conducted to best understand and capture common themes across participants. Two transcripts were preliminarily open-coded by three authors to consider all the content presented and form an initial codebook (Padgett, 2016; Saldaña, 2013). Authors then met to review the codebook, ensuring consensus and clarity of all parent codes and subcodes. Any discrepancies among the codes were reconciled through a process of consensus. A final codebook was developed and utilized for focused coding of all transcripts to further aggregate codes and

conceptualize patterns (Padgett, 2016). All transcripts were organized using the online qualitative data platform, Dedoose.

Upon completion of all coding, the data analysis team reviewed all codes to begin the theming process (Saldaña, 2013). The data analysis team met virtually multiple times and used the virtual board, Miro, to visually display codes via digital sticky notes. Then, the team began clustering similar codes together on Miro to begin identifying themes. Saturation was reached when further coding was no longer necessary and content from the interviews became repetitive (Padgett, 2016). Themes were determined through an iterative process, confirming that all salient concepts had been captured. All themes were then reviewed by all authors for clarity and consensus.

## Findings

After the coding and theming process, the research team identified two salient themes: the structure of the future of mutual aid, and system overhaul to world build. As a note, we will list the social identities of each participant after each quote in this order: sexual orientation, gender identity, if the participant is from an intentional community (IC), time active in mutual aid (MA).

*The Structure of the Future of Mutual Aid:  
"The Secret is That We Actually Do Need Each Other"*

Numerous subcomponents emerged from participant interviews that culminated in qualities, skills, and pathways that structured the future of mutual aid work. These subcategories that built the imagined future included: non-hierarchical, interdependence, radicalizing others, sustainability, and technology. While these sections have been parsed out for conceptual accessibility, alignment between participant perspectives varied.

*Non-hierarchical.* Most of our participants described an ideal structure of mutual aid as non-hierarchical, "being in solidarity with people and just giving and receiving horizontally" (pansexual, trans, 7 months in MA). Proponents of a non-hierarchical structure suggested success was contingent on the equitable distribution of task-based responsibilities, to avoid the need for management or the emergence of a manager. Participants cautioned the inadvertent

emergence of a de facto vertical structure, suggesting when there is a lack of task orientation and the distribution of responsibility becomes skewed, then “maybe five or six people who have informal power...are really calling the shots” (queer, man, 5 months in MA).

*Interdependence.* Participants discussed the importance of interdependence in mutual aid and the role of trust and relationship between members of a community, rather than trust or reliance on an intermediary or external structure or institution. Participants described an ideal where “we cannot and should not have to rely on structures outside of our community, we should be able to rely on one another” (queer, trans, 2 years in MA). Participants suggested interdependent relationships should be a goal of mutual aid, rather than “going to go back to the way it was when we don’t need each other anymore but...the secret is that we actually do need each other” (queer, woman, IC, 5 years in MA). These participants suggested mutual aid can “reweave...these networks of social capital... that have been...disintegrated over the last several generations... because...neoliberalism have allowed us to not need each other” (queer, man, 5 months in MA).

Participants encouraged rebuilding social capital in communities rather than institutions. Participants suggested trust in mutual aid structures may differ from trust in authority as long as mutual aid outcomes like meeting basic needs are in place. According to one participant, “[it is] kind of an honor system to say you’re in need. So, we’re going to give you food because worst case scenario, if you scam us out of food...you got fed” (queer, woman, 5 months in MA).

Community connections also aid in building community resilience. Participants spoke about how much stronger we are together as opposed to working independently. With this, communities can directly provide funds and resources to those who need them, bypassing potential expenses associated with charity and/or non-profit organizations. Resiliency is built through these connections, providing earnest and genuine support to each other. One participant shared:

You know, the more I do this kind of work, the more I really believe that if we can build true authentic relationships where we are depending on each other as human beings to meet each

other's needs, and not on like greater institutions, that, that is an end in itself [...] For me, one of the most important things about this work is the way it is connecting, you know, an upper middle class, liberal, young white person in a gentrifying neighborhood with a Black grandmother who's lived in that neighborhood for 40 years, in a way that's not through like, community input meetings or a non-profit program, but just neighbor to neighbor, human to human (queer, man, 5 months in MA).

*Radicalize Others.* Participants discussed intersections between radicalization toward leftist politics and participation in mutual aid. Some suggested "a lot of our work right now is recruiting more members, educating the public, and trying to help...our community" (queer, trans, 2 years in MA), or using vehicles of radicalization, such as community organizing, political education, and direct action, to support recruitment into mutual aid. Others observed radicalization occurring as an emergent reaction to crises, such as the climate crisis, the Black Lives Matter and anti-police brutality movements, in turn shifting participants toward hands-on action, "[realizing]...we can...not pay our mortgages and rent and then we have this enormous bargaining chip against...oppression [and]...the super-rich" (pansexual, man, 9 years in MA). One participant suggested participating in mutual aid is radicalizing, describing mutual aid as "a Trojan horse for anarchy" (pansexual, trans, 7 months in MA). Mutual aid requires ongoing radicalization, community outreach, and recruitment to support its ongoing sustainability and expansion—to put it simply so that the work is done.

*Sustainability.* Aspects of sustainability included structure, time and financial resources, demand, avoiding burnout, and tapping into community resources. Participants suggested mutual aid work required long-term sustainability, suggesting the need to address the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the climate crisis, and the ability to "...help our community as things honestly continue to get worse" (queer, trans, 2 years in MA). However, another participant suggested mutual aid lacked the establishment of non-profit work, acknowledging "when it's someone's job, it's more sustainable" (queer, woman, 2 years in MA), noting the need to meet the basic needs of organizers. Others discussed interactions between initial organizing energy and long-term sustainability, suggesting

“there’s lots of energy and, and it’s done informally...but that creates brittleness” (pansexual, man, 9 years in MA).

Participants further noted the continued need to tap into the abundance of community resources, as well as recognize ways that scarcity of basic needs is often artificially created. One participant also noted that many tangible resources are currently derived from a cheap and exploitative system, which is not sustainable, nor healthy for our ecosystems. Another participant shared:

The whole thing is just this enormous waste of energy to maintain a system of artificial scarcity. We have abundance, that is what’s so clear...And rather than tapping into the abundance, which is what we are doing in the Mutual Aid world, society is stifling the abundance...because white supremacy is scared that it’s gonna fuckin lose its shit, when really, everything would be better (pansexual, man, 9 years in MA).

Participants noted that acts of support can include things such as giving money and offering community housing but also include supporting locally owned businesses, sharing excess produce from the garden, and informal resource sharing.

*Technology.* Participants discussed the present and envisioned the use of technology to support mutual aid, and potential benefits and barriers to increased adoption of new technologies. Participants reported the use of open source and/or social media platforms, such as Facebook, Slack, or “a Discord channel...to create a decentralized network” (pansexual, trans, 7 months in MA) to support structure and organization. Participants also encouraged flexibility as technological systems are developed, suggesting it was more important to take action with existing technological infrastructure than wait for perfect systems to be developed. Some suggested “a lot of younger, whiter or at least...middle class... are...comfortable in digital realm” (pansexual, man, 9 years in MA), potentially excluding some participants on the basis of age or class. However, another participant noted that individuals with internet access could serve to bridge gaps in digital infrastructure, describing a system where previously unhoused folks “who then get housed still maintain connection to houseless folks who don’t have internet access” (queer, woman, 5 months in MA).

*System Overhaul to World Build: "We Have the Power as Communities to Meet Our Own Needs"*

Participants expressed an immense desire to build a new world and way of operating, overhauling current social, economic, and governmental structures. They spoke about components of resisting capitalism and creating a new currency, as well as abolition and liberation. These components, in tandem, are core to the future of mutual aid for their communities.

*Economic Transformation.* Numerous participants spoke of the need for an economic transformation. This included aspects of de-prioritizing the current monetary and credit system, as well as ways to build alternatives that can sustain without relying on a capitalistic system of finances and resources. This transformation is necessary on individual as well as large-scale levels. Participants spoke about aspects such as trading and bartering and alternative systems that facilitate procuring goods and services, ensuring everyone has access to what they need. Another participant further spoke of the idea that if everyone were to have what they needed, systems of oppression would not feel so drastic. Some individuals also addressed the problematic aspects of large corporations and investors holding so much of the wealth across the nation, hindering community access to funds.

Mutual aid as a mindset that we don't need either the free market and all of the like large corporations that comes with that, nor do we need government programs at the federal or state or local level to meet our needs, that we have the power as communities to meet our own needs (queer, man, 5 months in MA).

*Resisting Capitalism.* Encompassed within the need for economic transformation were two additional key factors, the first being resisting capitalism. One participant noted that "there is no ethical beneficiary of capitalism" (pansexual, NBTS, 7 months in MA), with many individuals speaking about the numerous societal issues that stem from capitalism. Capitalism also creates an artificial scarcity of necessary resources when the reality is a shortfall of how these resources are allocated, and a desire from the wealthy elite to maintain the status quo. As one participant noted, "we could stop spending all our money oppressing people" (pansexual, man, 9 years in MA). For these communities, mutual aid serves as a necessity to fill the

gaps where capitalism enables inequities and disparities. In striving to move towards a non-capitalist society, one participant shared:

But basically, the idea that, you know, we give what we can, and other folks give what they can. And realistically, in a non-capitalist system, that's how humanity has survived for tens of thousands of years. And we want to get back to the point where, you know, helping your neighbor isn't something you do because you expect a monetary reward (queer, trans, 2 years in MA).

*New Currency.* The other factor that fell under economic transformation was needing a new currency. Participants additionally discussed creating a system that is not based on the dollar and having available systems to accept something other than a monetary currency. Some participants spoke about new currencies and technologies their communities have been working on as alternatives to USD and the current credit system. In creating an alternate currency and credit system, mutual aid communities are hoping to circumvent these issues. Much of this also relies on more informal systems of trust, with the needs of individuals and communities being placed at the forefront, a contrast from current for-profit banking and corporate practices. One individual shared their stance on the economic components of mutual aid:

I think of mutual aid both as economic, transforming the way that we relate to each other economically, and community. I think mutual aid can look directly like neighbors helping neighbors. I think it can also look like alternate economic systems like alternate credit and alternate currencies, and trading and bartering (queer, woman, 5 months in MA).

*Transformed Governance.* Participants suggested that mutual aid also supports transforming governance structures. Some participants heavily leaned into an ideal alternative in which community needs would be met without reliance on external systems (e.g., the government, charities, etc.). Others suggested that community care models were far more resilient and reliable than government programs; for example, "your community should always be there. But, you know, the SNAP program could be defunded in a heartbeat" (queer, trans, 2 years in MA). Others further remarked, "nor do we



need government programs at the federal or state or local level to meet our needs” and “that we (i.e., communities that engage in mutual aid) have the power as communities to meet our own needs” (queer, man, 5 months in MA).

Another participant shared:

I think that when we don't think this non-profit is going to save us, the government is going to send that stimulus check every single month, like when we don't have that fantasy, then it's like, we're all we have. So, we have to take care of each other” (queer, woman, 2 years in MA).

Participants repeatedly demonstrated disdain for current forms of authority and engaged in a world-building framework that placed immense trust in a self-governed community.

*Political Identity.* While a majority of the mutual aid community (our sample included as mentioned above) reject traditional capitalistic conceptualizations of government, individual and collective political identity are still crucial to the guiding principles of mutual aid work. Several of our participants explicitly tied mutual aid to anarchist, leftist, socialist ideology stating “...a lot of us are more anarchist than anything else” (queer, trans, 2 years in MA) while simultaneously reflecting on the ways that mutual aid is born out of community and ideally operating at a grassroots level. Participants also reflected on the ways in which mutual aid (conceptualization, terms, and actual work) has recently been co-opted throughout the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic by performative progressives. According to one participant, “I think it's now more broadly associated just with kind of still very much like leftist like democratic socialist ideas, but maybe not quite as much as like, super grassroots way of doing things” (queer, man, 5 months in MA).

*Abolition.* Our participants proposed that community care and the work of mutual aid are essential pieces in steps towards a future free of the carceral state and “...abolition [of the] police and stuff like that [...] mutual aid is like, what has to happen in our society to move towards that [abolition]” (queer, woman, 2 years in MA). Participants also expressed gratitude and a sense of empowerment in the work despite continued injustices committed by

police, especially towards Black and Brown communities: “I feel pretty like heartened by the way that, I mean, not only like Black Lives Matter and like the anti-police brutality movement has influenced like everyone’s thought processes around like transformative justice and communities of care” (queer, trans, 2 years in MA).

They reflected on the ways that work in abolition and mutual aid have historically and currently existed, and how these will likely be essential to inform the future of transformative justice. Abolition also included broader (and related) systems of oppression, with participants touching on the ways in which landlords and unfair rates of housing should be eliminated, commenting “... ideally there’d be no rent” (queer, trans, 2 years in MA). Overall, participants commented on several systems of harm that can and should be abolished with the help of mutual aid in order for mutual aid to thrive.

*Liberation.* Participants suggested mutual aid is a critical aspect of societal and personal liberation, especially for our most marginalized communities, suggesting mutual aid was distinct from other systems of organization or power in its ability to create freedom from oppression: “We will never find liberation through capitalism, through communism or socialism without mutual aid...because it fills the gaps...we won’t have liberation as oppressed people under U.S. imperialism and capitalism, and then patriarchy, without mutual aid” (pansexual, trans, 7 months in MA). Participants also reflected a sense of common collectivism between mutual aid and liberation, with one participant suggesting their liberation was “not available until we are all liberated” (pansexual, man, 9 years in MA). While reflecting on the difficulties of “the work,” participants centered a vision of what the future could look like—a world free of oppression that values equity, rights, and celebratory queer liberation.

## Discussion

The present study examined how queer and trans participants of mutual aid envision the future of mutual aid. Our theme, the structure of the future of mutual aid, aligns with previous research in this area describing mutual aid’s structure as interdependent, non-hierarchical, sustainable, and radicalizing others to take collective and direct action (Spade, 2020). This suggests that those

currently participating in mutual aid view current components of mutual aid as applicable and relevant in the future.

Our participants discussed the need to resist capitalism as a way of overhauling the current systems in place to build a better and more just world. This finding ties into the popular mutual aid slogan, “solidarity, not charity,” which emphasizes horizontal networks of solidarity. Mutual aid efforts and networks center a “bottom-up” structure versus a “top down” hierarchical structure (Spade, 2020). This means that resources and support flow horizontally, sustaining the life of a community (Whitley, 2020). While capitalism relies on competition amongst each other, mutual aid centers interdependence and collaboration (Spade, 2020). Participants noted how capitalism creates an artificial scarcity of needed resources and that the issue is how resources are allocated. Mutual aid seeks to eliminate inequities and disparities created by capitalism and challenges the status quo, which aims to maintain social inequities.

As with previous research, our study finds that mutual aid can be a means of counteracting the cumulative negative impact of our capitalist, racist, classist, heterosexist, and cisgenderist society (Purnell, 2021; Spade, 2020). Mutual aid provides communities with a means of pushing back against systems that perpetuate oppression, discrimination, and poverty (Purnell, 2021). With mutual aid, communities are empowered to provide the things that their members need in ways that are accessible to their community members. It is support that can have a long-term effect on the well-being of the community; providing necessities to community members is investing in the future of the community. Relying on your community also means going outside of capitalism and moving from exploitation to investment and ownership (Purnell, 2021; Spade, 2020). In interviews, participants discussed the significant role that mutual aid plays for their communities and their communities’ well-being.

This study used a desire-based framework (Tuck, 2009) because spotlighting the challenges of being a queer and/or trans person facilitates pity from people outside of the community (shuster & Westbrook, 2022). Because society only focuses on the struggles of queer and trans people, cisgender and heterosexual people feel that queer and trans people need to be kept from harm. Instead of dismantling oppressive cisnormative and heteronormative systems,

pity ultimately exacerbates stigma and discrimination of queer and trans folks (Shuster & Westbrook, 2022). In a ripple effect, the act of spotlighting mutual aid within queer and trans communities demonstrates the strength, love, and support within queer and trans communities and challenges the existing narratives of struggle, misery, and shame.

This study also used a foresight (or futures) lens to capture how queer and trans people envision mutual aid five to 10 years into the future. While using this lens helped the research team identify salient themes in the data, using this lens allowed us to capture something even more important: queer and trans people see themselves in the future. Given the widespread discrimination and violence toward queer and trans people in the U.S. (Freedom for All Americans, 2022), this study is an act of resistance to the damage-centered narrative surrounding queer and trans people in the literature and the media. Queer and trans people see themselves in the future, which is worth celebrating.

### *Implications for Social Work Practice*

This study has important implications for social work practice and social work education. Incorporating mutual aid into clinical practice is a facet of providing healing-centered care (Ginwright, 2018; Voith et al., 2020). Healing-centered social work expands on trauma-informed practice. Whereas trauma-informed care seeks to shift practitioners' focus from deficits to trying to contextualize problematic behaviors as trauma responses, healing-centered practice proposes moving beyond trying to understand the underlying causes of behaviors to center practice around the pursuit of healing (Ginwright 2015; 2018). Mutual aid is a means of centering a communities' needs, strengths, and journey to healing. Rather than highlighting the impact of marginalization and structural violence, mutual aid shifts focus to what has worked, what the community is capable of, and how they have met their member'' needs (Jemal, 2022; Voith et al., 2020).

It is a powerful act to celebrate, practice, and educate about mutual aid. The consequences of acknowledging and honoring the rich history of marginalized groups providing for one another are far-reaching. Queer and trans people had participated in mutual

aid when most of society dismissed them in times of need (Shepard, 2013). The year 2022 yielded the highest number of anti-trans bills *ever* introduced (Branigin & Kirkpatrick, 2022). As of December 2022, 179 bills had been proposed that specifically target transgender individuals (American Civil Liberties Union, 2022), with most of those bills targeting the rights of trans youth (tracktranslegislation.com). These proposed policies do not include anti-trans directives (e.g. Texas governor changing the definition of child abuse to encompass gender-affirming health care). This large number of anti-trans bills, along with the violence faced by trans people, reifies the cisgenderist world that does not welcome the existence of trans people. These government-led efforts to restrict the rights of trans people make it clear that these communities cannot rely on government leaders. This political climate underlines the importance of mutual aid in queer and trans communities. The salience of our future-focused findings, despite the current political efforts to harm trans people, accentuates the significant role that mutual aid plays in reclaiming agency in community-led efforts to heal.

### *Implications for Social Work Education*

Within social work education, mutual aid is not discussed as part of fulfilling the nine competencies outlined in the Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards written by the Council of Social Work Education. Studies have examined applying a mutual aid framework in social work classrooms (Douville, 2013; Giacomucci & Skolnik, 2021; Saldanha et al., 2021; Wilke et al., 2009), as well as mutual aid as a framework for facilitating group work (Knight, 2014). These studies framed mutual aid as a means of connecting students to each other and engaging them in class; students found it beneficial to have a built-in community in their classes, and mutual aid could look like taking notes for someone, sharing knowledge, and emotional support. But this research about mutual aid in social work classrooms does not discuss mutual aid as a part of social work practice. Social work students should learn what mutual aid is, how to find mutual aid groups, how to work with mutual aid groups, and how to facilitate clients' access to mutual aid. Without introducing mutual aid as a part of practice, social work education fails to provide an essential strengths-based option for future social

workers to utilize with their clients. To include mutual aid as a part of social work education would demystify and destigmatize this underutilized tool in our social work tool belts. Learning about mutual aid in the classroom would help to legitimize this practice as a healing-centered means of empowerment and resilience. Offering mutual aid is a way to help meet clients' needs without forcing historically marginalized groups to engage with historically oppressive institutions.

### *Implications During the Rise of Anti-Trans Legislation*

In a world that often points to the challenges and barriers that queer and trans folks face, pivoting to emphasize the joy of community support is crucial to practicing strengths-based care and moving toward desire-based research. By centering practice and education around the negative experiences of queer and trans individuals, social work perpetuates that being queer and/or trans can only be a struggle with discrimination and shame (Shuster & Westbrook, 2022). With the rise of policies targeting queer and trans people, it is crucial that social workers recognize how essential mutual aid can be for these communities. This means that we should not only be teaching about mutual aid in social work classrooms but that mutual aid is a meaningful part of culturally appropriate practice.

As the rights of trans and queer people come up for political debate more often each year, social workers must play a part in challenging these attempts to harm queer and trans individuals. Standing against discriminatory policies can include writing letters to or calling politicians, learning more about local mutual aid, discussing the impact of these policies with social work students, and centering the strength and support within queer and trans communities. In pursuit of social work's ethical principles, we need to foreground the resilience, joy, and strength of queer and trans communities by actively incorporating mutual aid into social work practice and education.

## Limitations

Overarching limitations were primarily based on the ways in which our study was initially theorized and collected. First, the

overwhelming sense of urgency to capture how folks were conceptualizing and participating in mutual aid during the unprecedented and ongoing COVID-19 pandemic outweighed in-depth sampling practices. This rush to sample in conjunction with allowing participants to self-define their mutual aid involvement created a sample that may not reflect traditional mutual aid spaces or work that aligns with Dean Spade's definition (which guides this paper). This sample is likely not representative of all queer, trans, and BIPOC mutual aid participants, who are often overrepresented in mutual aid. Furthermore, some members of these mutual aid communities may not have consistent and reliable access to the internet and/or phone services to participate in interviews. Lastly, and quite crucially impactful for this paper, the sampling design lacked confirmation of cis/trans identity of participants identifying as men or women, thus potentially reporting fewer trans participants than actually present in the study. These limitations suggest future research should be more intentional in outreach to a more representative sample of mutual aid participants and confirm more explicitly trans and cis identities.

## Conclusion

Our exploration into the future of mutual aid for queer and trans communities utilized critical phenomenological methods alongside foresight and desire-based lenses (J. Dunagan, personal communication, 2021; Tuck, 2009). Despite the necessitation of mutual aid within queer and trans folks being borne of struggle, our findings speak to the strengths and vision of these communities to care for each other and create a more sustainable future. We found that participants placed high importance on maintaining the current structure of mutual aid and systemic overhaul for alternative world-building. This entails creating community connections and systems, as well as an unbinding from systems of harm. We encourage those interested in conducting mutual aid research in the future to interrogate their motivations to do so, assess their powers and privileges, and educate themselves on the histories and requisites of mutual aid.

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