sw&s | Social Work and Society International Online Journal

Using foresight practice to imagine the future(s) of mutual aid

***Annie Zean Dunbar**, University of Denver*

***Danielle Maude Littman,** University of Utah*

***Madi Boyett,** University of Denver*

***Kimberly Bender,** University of Denver*

***Kate Saavedra,** University of Denver*

***Colleen Cummings Melton,** University of Denver*

***Tara Milligan,** University of Denver*

***Colin Bogle,** University of Denver*

1 Introduction

Since the COVID-19 pandemic began in March of 2020, mutual aid has proliferated as a community-led intervention to meet more widespread unmet needs of individuals and communities. Mutual aid comprises reciprocal and horizontal ways of caring for one another versus the bureaucratic United States social safety net, which has failed many before (Abramovitz, 2005), and during the COVID-19 pandemic. Mutual aid includes practices such as providing food support, cash resources, and mitigating isolation, to name a few (Bender et al., 2021). Our research team conducted semi-structured interviews with participants, facilitators, and intentional community members in the U.S. about their experiences with mutual aid at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. We asked individuals to 1) describe their experience with mutual aid at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic and 2) what anticipatory or potential futures of mutual aid might emerge in 5-10 years.

The current paper provides insights into the use of a foresight lens/practice in the analyzing of our empirical data with mutual aid practitioners. Our team uses a futures lens to consider how participants imagine possible futures of mutual aid and barriers which may emerge within and between these futures they describe. We provide insights on how to inquire about the future, analyze qualitative interview data through a futures lens, and transform findings into artifacts from the future. We further discuss how global social work research and practice, as a profession, may prepare for unequal and plural futures using foresight as a practice and a tool. Mutual aid provides an ideal case study, as the rise of mutual aid among more people amidst the COVID-19 pandemic and compounding local crises in the U.S. (e.g., wildfires, political uprisings) signals a future where mutual aid is likely to remain necessary. This paper provides awareness of how professionalized social work interfaces with more radical social work practices and strategies, such as mutual aid, to cultivate futures that remediate harm and social inequities through expected compound crisis.

2 Using a Foresight Lens as Methodological Practice

Our paper uses a "futures" or "foresight" lens to consider the futures of mutual aid. A foresight lens, while rarely employed in empirical social work scholarship (Nissen, 2020), offers opportunities to "pre-experience different futures" (Dunagan, 2021) which may shape our world. Foresight practices range in disciplines and histories – from Afrofuturism and Black speculative fiction (Dery, 1994; Eshun, 2003; Morris, 2012; Nelson, 2000) - which allow us to imagine new worlds through crafting narratives; to Indigenous futurism (Dillon, 2012), which draws upon Indigenous wisdom to transcend past/future thinking, critical futurism (Ahlqvist & Rhisiart, 2015), which embeds critical social analysis into foresight practice; and experiential and participatory futures (Candy & Kornet, 2019). The present work is situated mainly within the lineage of narrative futurist, Jim Dator (2009), and the Institute for the Future [IFTF] (2021). Dator is a key scholar in foresight studies; and his work is widely used in forecasting for social change. Dator created the *Alternate Future Framework*, a model of four future archetypes which can be drawn upon when building future scenarios: *growth*, *constraint*, *collapse*, and *transformation* (Dator, 2009). *Growth* implies a future in which current trends continue with minimal disruption; *constraint* illustrates a future where a guiding principle or value disciplines change in some way, and constraints on growth are put in place to maintain some form of equilibrium; *collapse* envisions rapid and catastrophic breakdown of infrastructure; *transformation* envisions society fundamentally reorganizing around a new paradigm.

A complex tangle of escalating social issues impacts the social work profession (and social systems at large) in the imminent and distant future(s) – such as the climate crisis, calls for radical shifts to policing, and future health crises like pandemics; some have referred to the compounding of these complex social issues as a 'syndemic' (Gravlee, 2020). We join a small but growing body of social workers who implore the social work profession to expand our toolbox towards futures frameworks so we can be amply 'future ready' to face what comes (Nissen, 2020).

In drawing upon a futures lens within this paper, we rely on a few well-known narrative tools within foresight practice: *signals*, *drivers*, and *scenarios*. *Signals* are evidence that show the future seeping through the present moment (IFTF, 2021). For example, signals may include products or policies which point towards present trends that may continue. In our study, *signals* include reflections from our participants about how they envision mutual aid 5-10 years in the future, based on what they observe and experience today (e.g., new mutual aid groups forming, burnout and other organizational challenges, etc.). *Drivers* are long-term trends that are likely to meaningfully impact the future. These often include STEEP (social, technological, environmental, economic, and political) trends which are likely to shape the future of our world (IFTF, 2021). By way of example: the COVID-19 pandemic, in conjunction with racial political uprisings in the summer of 2020, and the complete overwhelm of the U.S. social safety net, left many without jobs and homes. Such drivers shape our collective present and are likely to shape our future (Benfer et al., 2020).

Lastly, we rely upon *scenarios* as a method of "pre-experiencing" different futures and exploring participant interpretations of those futures. Of course, the future is plural, in the sense that many of these scenarios may co-occur, to lesser or greater degrees, at the same time, in the same or different places, and differently for different people. Futurist Jose Ramos coined the term "mutant futures" to refer to the future's overlapping, simultaneous, contradictory nature (Ramos, 2019). Ramos's mutant futures also engage notion of time, temporality, and how each epoch or historical period is shaped by complex and continuous

events. While our paper aims to assist in drawing out multiple potential futures with which social workers are likely to reckon, we do so with full recognition that the future, like the present, is inequitably distributed and thus impacts individuals and groups inequitably. It is our responsibility, then, to use foresight lenses to decide how to invest our energy in desired and *equitable* futures.

This method may help the field of social work move towards what Tuck (2009) calls *desire-based research*, which challenges the dominant deficit-narrative of social work literature and intentionally centers the lives and experiences of individuals and communities who have experienced historical and present marginalization, exclusion, and exploitation in research. Tuck explains desire-based research as a framework:

> ...concerned with understanding complexity, contradiction, and the self-determination of lived lives... Desire, yes, 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 (p. 416-417).

This paper will show how a foresight lens can be used to analyze future-oriented social science topics. By illustrating a case example where we used a foresight lens to explore the plural possible futures of mutual aid, we offer specific processes and key insights for using a foresight lens as an underutilized, yet promising, social work approach to explore and shape our future social spheres.

2.1 History of Mutual Aid in the United States

Mutual aid comprises practices rooted in direct aid which aims to alleviate individual burdens (financial, material, etc.) during moments of crisis – both acute (e.g., a natural disaster) and prolonged (e.g., poverty and exclusion from social care structures) (Bell, 2020; Beito, 2000; Firth, 2020; Izlar, 2019; Kropotkin, 1902; Norman, 1997). Historically, U.S.-based mutual aid – both individual practice and organizational structures – emerged from strategic practices among marginalized groups in response to a lack of state support and intervention (Beito, 2000; Norman, 1997). For example, mutual aid has been practiced among the queer community as kinship structures that act as an alternative for insufficient family of origin support (Arnold & Bailey, 2009; Rio, 2020). Additional examples include lending circles in immigrant communities in the U.S. (Yoon, 2015) which often provided monetary needs for immigrants who may not be able to access financial institutions, and among Black communities through resource sharing within Black churches (Norman, 1997). One of the most famous U.S.-based examples of mutual aid is the Black Panther Party community breakfast program (Williams & Williams, 1984). Across these examples and more, mutual aid has a rich and deep history in communities that do not garner support from the White mainstream society or culture. Across social locations, mutual aid has threads in anarchist and radical traditions of "*solidarity, not charity*," recognizing the limited nature of governmental and nongovernmental support (Izlar, 2019; Spade, 2020a).

2.2 Mutual Aid in the United States at the Outset of the COVID-19 Pandemic

Indeed, mutual aid has been present in the United States for centuries, as it emerges by necessity when social and physical needs are unmet. However, the presence of mutual aid groups (and the popularization of the term *mutual aid*) took a new shape in the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic by those invested in supporting others, and receiving support, in the absence of meaningful government assistance. Since 2020, mutual aid has become part of

the international cultural zeitgeist. A search of Google trends shows that the term spiked in searches from March 1st to July 1st of 2020. During this time, mutual aid groups via Facebook and other social media sites emerged rapidly, filling in gaps for localized communities or responding to community requests transnationally. The role mutual aid has filled in varying international contexts has differed based on emergent local needs. The context of our study and writing is in the U. S., where the social safety net (e.g., government assistance to meet food, housing, employment, and other financial needs) has been woefully insufficient to meet the growing social needs of individuals and families – especially in the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic (Gulick et al., 2020; Sharfstein & Marx, 2020). As such, mutual aid groups in the U. S. have worked to meet individuals' and communities' most basic survival needs (e.g., food, cash assistance, housing, personal protective equipment) and needs for connection and relationships (Bender et al., 2021).

As mutual aid has spread during this time, burgeoning empirical research has begun to explore the role of mutual aid as a longer-term solidarity effort amidst the COVID-19 pandemic (Fernandes-Jesus et al., 2021), the values underlying mutual aid (Littman et al., 2021), mutual aid in creating localized health-system interventions (van Ryneveld et al., 2020), to name a few. Such research continues to broaden the ways in which we see and understand how different communities care for one another through what has become an endemic and prolonged crisis. Although mutual aid practices have long been part of the social work profession in the form of peer-support/self-help groups and within radical social work traditions (Bell et al. 2019; Izlar, 2019; Nelson et al., 1998; Watkins-Hayes, 2009).), there is growing but limited empirical research on the nexus of mutual aid within the future of community care practices. Our work furthers the extant literature by using foresight analysis lens to consider the future(s) of mutual aid amidst the many drivers of change that (will) impact our present and future social lives.

2.3 Paper Aims

This methods-focused paper illustrates how we used a foresight lens as a methodological approach to analyze the futures of mutual aid imagined by those engaged in mutual aid practices in the U.S. in the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic. Limited empirical work has used a foresight lens to study futures topics like climate change (e.g., Daniels et al., 2021), yet there has been a recent call for all social workers and social work researchers to engage in foresight-oriented research and practice (Nissen, 2020). Scholars such as Nissen suggest the use of foresight as a preparatory tool in social work can help account for widening disparity and the shifting acute crises of our time. To add to the growing empirical literature, our paper aims to illustrate how we used specific foresight tools to analyze participants' responses to the future of a particular social intervention using mutual aid as a case example. In doing so, we aim to offer a suggested methodological process, and key learnings, for using a foresight lens to analyze how signals in our present suggest how we may prepare for potential (plural) futures. While in forthcoming scholarship (Dunbar et al., under review) we will outline the *findings* from this endeavor, this paper offers a methodological roadmap for using foresight processes as an analytic framework in social work scholarship.

3 Positionality statement

Recognizing that mutual aid has historically existed in communities of color and queer and trans communities, it is important to acknowledge how our identities impact our research and analysis. Our team's racial and ethnic identities include Black, White, and Hispanic, with most team members identifying as White. Most of our team identify as cisgender women,

with one team member identifying as a cisgender man, and another as non-binary. All research team members currently live in the United States in an urban setting, with a few team members having long-time roots in rural areas. Additionally, all team members are currently enrolled in higher education programs (graduate and doctoral level) or have successfully obtained postsecondary degrees. Our team's academic positions were particularly important to this methods paper, as navigating through a methodological proposal was based on access to information and knowledge granted through our education and research experience, particularly among team members with a Ph.D. and Ph.D. candidates. Some individuals on our team belong to communities that have historically engaged in mutual aid practices (such as queer communities and communities of color), whereas others do not, which undoubtedly shapes the lens through which we approach our individual and collective work.

3.1 Study Design and Data Collection Overview

While our paper focuses primarily on our analysis and dissemination processes, it is helpful to briefly offer a study overview. Our study used a phenomenological approach (Creswell, 2013) to understand the specific ways participants conceptualized the future of mutual aid at the preliminary stages of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. After university IRB approval, our team of CITI-trained researchers conducted individual, qualitative, semi-structured interviews with participants and facilitators in mutual aid groups and intentional communities who were recruited after conducting a Google and Facebook Group search of mutual aid groups in the U.S. state of Colorado. In our interviews, we asked mutual aid organizers and group members to think 5-10 years in the future – e.g., *what types of mutual aid do they hope to carry forward beyond the pandemic, and what they want to leave behind*? The 5–10-year timeframe is an established framework within foresight practice, as it is far enough to allow for bigger picture thinking (avoiding incremental discussion only), near enough to feel within grasp (Institute for the Future, n.d.). This allowed for focus on the type of action needed to invest in participants' desired futures. It was also critical, in establishing inquiry about the future, that we allowed for *multiple* futures (both those more and less desirable), to get a broad picture of the signals participants were noticing.

Our team aimed to understand a variety of experiences from mutual aid groups emerging in response to the COVID-19 pandemic as well as those who had been practicing mutual aid for over a decade. In the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic (June-August 2020), we intentionally recruited members of groups explicitly calling themselves mutual aid groups as well as sampling intentional communities where mutual aid was integrated into residential spaces and was taking place in more informal ways. Greater detail on our sampling frames and details about the state of Colorado to aid in the transferability of our findings can be found in our earlier publication of this work (Littman et al., 2021). Our resulting sample (N=25) included mutual aid (n=17) and intentional community (n=8) members that spanned a wide age range (26-70) and shared the following identities/experiences: straight (50%), White (80%), women (60%), and living in urbanized areas (72%). For a more detailed description of our sample and the types of mutual practice by our participants, please see Littman et al. (2021).

3.2 Reflexivity in Qualitative Inquiry using a Futures Lens

During our study design, data collection, analysis, and as part of our dissemination efforts, our team spent a considerable amount of time learning about each other and developing an understanding of our biases, assumptions, and beliefs. These conversations ensured we understood, as members of a collective experience (being in the pandemic and experiencing

and witnessing government failure and the proliferation of mutual aid), what we needed to collaborate and what beliefs drove our protocol questions. Our time setting norms made it possible to do meaningful research team member checking and account for research biases (Padgett, 2016) before diving into the futures framework. This was particularly important as a futures framework is not values-agnostic, and we, as researchers, were living the reality we aimed to understand; we each held clear desires for specific futures and fears of future scenarios. We used bracketing, or setting aside our experiences as much as possible, to ensure bias and reactivity do not occur with participants and during the analytical process (Creswell and Poth, 2016; Padgett, 2016). Our team had continuous critical discussions about positionality and checked assumptions at every stage of the process. We acknowledged the futures we found ourselves drawn to and hopeful for while acknowledging multiple futures were possible. In future aligned processes, we recommend incorporating some form of critical conversation, as an aspect of the research team process, at the 'norming' stage and beyond.

Early in our analysis, a subset of our research team began to explore futures methods by presenting exemplary descriptions of the futures our participants described at the *Social Work Futures*? Research Group's virtual conference based out of Glasgow Caledonian University in June 2021. The conference presentation focused on the tensions between participant descriptions of the future of mutual aid and the role of social work in these futures. Although not a necessary step for all research projects, we found workshopping our analytical method and focusing on the multiplicity of futures helped ground the research for further iterations of the analytical process.

3.3 Inductive Qualitative Coding

After the conference, we utilized conventional qualitative analysis to inductively explore futures topics in relation to our data. This coding process involved excerpting, creating exemplary quotes, and then arranging codes based on the content of the excerpts through an inductive process. Using a conventional coding method (Saldaña, 2017) helped us understand our data and the primary themes arising from our participants prior to applying a foresight lens. Our initial inductive process allowed us to underscore what patterns were emerging in these data and lean into the tenets of pluralistic futures by developing codes for all possible notions emerging from the data. As examples of the diverse array of notions of the future of mutual aid that emerged, we developed codes related to *demolishing hierarchy*, *establishing alternative currencies*, *feeling artificial scarcity*, *creating trust*, *boosting community organizing*, and *burning out*. These codes provided signals to be organized into themes using a foresight lens.

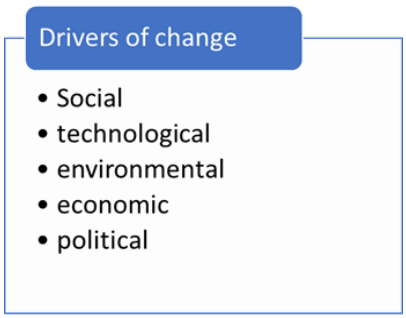
3.4 Applying a Foresight Framework during Theming

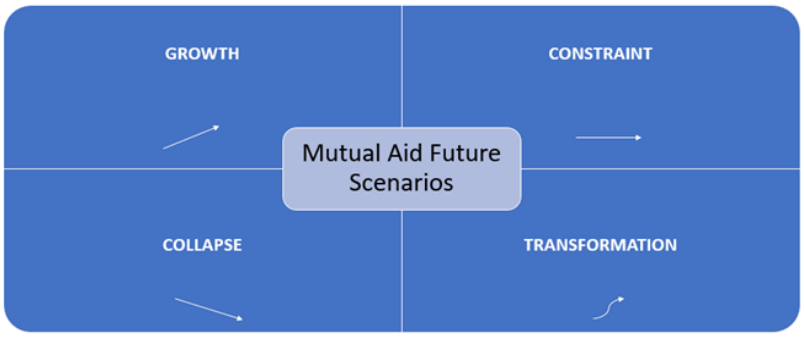
Our team then began a slow process of applying the coded excerpts (quotes) and mapping them onto the Institute of the Futures four-quadrant futures framework from their futures foresight lens toolkit. Using the digital whiteboard tool MURAL, we worked within the "envision alternative futures" worksheet (IFFTF, 2019) to apply individual codes onto the four futures frameworks in two steps. First, the team brainstormed and wrote down an exhaustive list of *drivers of change* that might account for the possible future scenarios (Howard, 2021). As we mentioned in the literature review, drivers of change are what events and activities are happening currently in our time, from politics to the environment, to technology. Accounting for drivers of change can be a form of bracketing by accounting for what priorities and signals the researchers are paying close attention to and how those signals shape narratives of possibilities, fears, and aspirations about the future.

Second, we mapped coded excerpts onto the respective quadrant they exemplified: *growth*, *collapse*, *constraint*, and *transformation*. An example of the four quadrants can be found in Figure 1. To determine where coded excerpts may be placed across quadrants, we asked ourselves, if this signal were to continue to grow, would we see a growth, collapse, constraint or transformational scenario. Our team began by placing codes that fit in the transformational quadrant because, upon reviewing our data, coded excerpts in this future quadrant provided the most concrete and clear visions of possible futures. For example, an excerpt coded "demolishing hierarchy" was placed in the *collapse* quadrant.

One challenge that emerged and is likely to create conversation among other scholars using a futures framework for analysis, was difficulty separating participant conceptions of the futures of society and social problems *generally* in contrast to their conceptions of the futures of mutual aid *specifically*. It is important that teams remind themselves what overarching question is being answered in their analysis, as problems are generally interrelated, and it is easy to drift and lose focus. We decided as a team to focus on the 'futures of mutual aid' as it more accurately reflected our participant visions - an– the recognition that *the future is plural* which made it imperative to include all quadrants of the framework. The shift in focus away from only the transformation quadrant of the futures tool helped the team define how and why this particular future differs from the other three types of future. As the team again expanded our analytical focus to place coded excerpts in the remaining three futures quadrants, organizing each quadrant became easier, as the quadrants were placed in relationship to one another. Within each of the four futures quadrants, our final step was to identify patterns by clustering coded excerpts into themes. Thus, within any particular quadrant, multiple futures were possible; several themes arose within *growth* for example. As we spent more time developing themes in each of the four quadrants, we found clarity in moving from understanding each future's scenarios to describing them using *artifacts*.

Figure 1. Four futures Quadrants and Drivers of Change





4 Disseminating Results through Artifacts

From the beginning of our analysis, we considered how to represent these data and discussed at length the role of *artifacts* as a tool to represent each future scenario. Within a futures framework, an artifact is one way of grounding discussions of the future into a more tangible experience – an object 'from' the future. Artifacts also follow threads from the present and exemplify signals and trends in our time we believe will live on, whether we desire them or are resigned to live with them (Institute of the Future, n.d.). As futures thinking also considers the present and the past, the idea of the message board emerged as our preferred artifact. Message boards are a tool that transcends borders, language, and cultural norms, and they are both inclusive and exclusive digital spaces. We selected a message board to place participant words in conversation with each other because of its utility since the creation of the internet and the ease with which any community or special interest group can use them.

First, we created a persona for each theme in our results within each future quadrant by applying a personified name to the theme and developing a short phrase that summarized the perspective of that theme (*See Table 1*). We then considered how the perspectives represented by our personas could be in conversation with one another. For example, one persona argued for formalizing mutual aid by becoming non-profits (a constraint scenario) while another perspective argued for dismantling current non-governmental organizational structures (a collapse scenario) (*See Figure 2*). We found that the message board centered participants' words and perspectives so we could use direct quotes to ground our scenarios, *and* it provided a space to bring to life the various futures through personas/avatars. Although not necessary for future research projects, using the avatar as a personification of each future scenario gave the research team time to consider the multiple strands within each future, how to convey the complexity within each quadrant, and how to demonstrate the convergence and divergence across future scenarios.

Table 1. Example Personas Representing Themes by Future Quadrant

Character name	Brief biography: future description + theme
CARA COLLAPSE	Our conventional care systems are defunded and closed under the weight of massive unmet need
CLAY CONSTRAINT	"Non-profitization" of mutual aid – creates longevity through formal systems
TRIXIE TRANSFORMATION	Paradigm shifts about power, privilege, and responsibility. We create a broader web of community care and develop new forms of exchange.
GARY GROWTH	Mutual aid continues through the same groups that existed during the pandemic, maybe not actively but the information and network system remains.

Figure 2. Example personas and message board excerpt representing themes across future quadrants.

4.1 Credibility and Trustworthiness

To ensure that our findings were credible and trustworthy, we found it is necessary to do member checking within the research team (as many team members have engaged in mutual aid work) and center our participants' voices 'in vivo' in our findings. As we built out our results message board, we ensured that participant voices and words were central within all aspects of the results, and we facilitated and structured the conversation. As qualitative researchers, we recognize having confirmability with the participants is central to the research process (Padgett, 2017). As such, our team spent enumerable sessions reviewing our results to

ensure the quotes we were constructing into our future avatars aligned with what the participant conveyed. Although the avatar process de-identified participants, we did our due diligence to review the context and ensure we were not projecting. The futures practice provided an opportunity for speculation rooted in analysis which stakeholders such as advocates, practitioners, policymakers, and community members can use to direct action and discern what futures are worthy of investment and actualizing.

5 Discussion

In this paper, we propose a methodological process for, first, joining with communities to envision the future through qualitative data collection, and then using a foresight lens to analyze community members' imaginings to generate possible scenarios of those futures. The aim was (1) to systematically gather wisdom and visions from multiple voices (ideally from those closest to an experience), and (2) to inform advocacy, action, and investment in the most desirable and equitable imagined futures. This method provided an additional overlay onto data analysis that allows for multiplicity of outcomes and insights into how to intervene or mitigate outcomes that maintain or perpetuate inequities.

Imagining the future requires new approaches that involve creativity and expansive thinking. While our process realized the immense value of social work researchers asking the communities with whom they study about the futures they imagine, answering such questions about our possible futures can be quite ambiguous and challenging. Research finds that individuals often struggle to imagine possible scenarios of their futures; at times our future can feel like a stranger, particularly when asked to imagine temporally distant futures (Kapogli & Quoidbach, 2022).

Indeed, in this study we received a diverse collection of ideas, values, hopes, and fears – many quite abstract, a few concrete; many incremental, a few quite enormous. While more conventional inductive content analysis aided us in identifying patterns in our data, we expanded our understanding by using a foresight lens as an analytic framework and deductively organizing our data. In using the four future archetypes proposed in the Alternate Future Framework (Dator, 2009) as an organizing structure, we could analyze how our data align with *growth*, *constraint*, *collapse*, and *transformation* scenarios. This allowed for greater interpretation of possible futures emerging from our participant responses and for clearer implications for action based on investing in certain desirable and equitable scenarios.

Several key tensions emerged in using a foresight lens in our research. First, as we used mutual aid (often conceptualized outside of present mainstream social work interventions) as a case study, we had to consider questions about the role of social work within the futures of mutual aid. Like many social work researchers, we recognized that our research area (mutual aid) is intricately intertwined with broader sociopolitical systems (capitalism) and broader social problems (poverty, food insecurity, climate change). Although our work joins the conversation of a larger speculative turn towards imaginings of futures, the example of mutual aid is a historical and present activity used by people who are disenfranchised and marginalized, often left out of the care networks social workers provide. Future research should consider what role, if any, social workers can play within and across non-state related care efforts such as mutual aid. Scholars may consider if social workers can and should align with mutual aid and other community care practices (Izlar, 2019) or if the field will co-opt mutual aid practices without mutual aid values.

Second, our focus on mutual aid as a case study underscores a particular crisis moment, one that we as individuals and as a team had never experienced before. The urgency and optimism of the moment of our data collection is reflected in our data. As we began analysis, however, the urgency waned, and the process took time. We recognized the necessity of making space for ambiguity and reflection. Within social work, our focus on social justice both requires a sense of urgency and a deep recognition of the speed at which justice can be achieved (Uehara, et al., 2014). As a team, we had to explicitly call on ourselves to temporarily suspend a desire toward a specific future, and to equally attend to the many possible futures whether they were hoped for or not. Sardar (2010) describes this period as "postnormal times" or "an in-between period where old orthodoxies are dying, new ones have yet to be born, and very few things seem to make sense" (p. 435).

As we navigate postnormal times, we must attend to the positions our research takes and consider the ways time and temporality are shaped by colonial expectations of linearity and "progress" (Hunfeld, 2022). We can, as Sardar (2021) says, see the future not as a horizontal point, but as a present "garden" for all to attend to and nurture. We suggest research that draws from and uses Afrofuturist and Black futurist theories (Phillips, 2015), Indigenous futurism (Dillon, 2012), and critical futurism to imbue additional critical insights and reflections into the analysis to make space for the impacts of colonialism, imperialism, and the ways cis-heteropatriarchy shapes ideas and imaginings of the futures. More critical understandings of how power, authority, and lineages of marginalization and oppression shape imaginations about future outcomes are necessary to understand both the stakes of interventions and the ways to intervene.

5.1 Limitations

Our participant sample demographic makeup only includes voices of the Global North, the western region of the U.S. The limitations of these voices do not provide a broad and diverse perspective of who is included in scenarios of transformation, and they did not explicitly identify more global visions of the future. Another limitation we found was the reality that these scenarios are contingent on location, time, and positionality. Our own lived experiences within the collective experience of COVID-19 are also a limitation that brings biases and emotions connected to our future analysis. We attempt to bracket these experiences during analysis and to remain faithful to individual participants' words while generating composite avatars of these futures. In this attempt, we aimed for an analysis of generosity for our participants who were sharing their perspectives at a certain time and place, even as these contexts were changing as ever-iteratively as our own.

5.2 Implications for Social Work Research

Foresight frameworks are a useful tool that are utilized across sectors including business, sociology, and philosophy, with particular potential in informing research on social change (Nissen, 2020). From an applied standpoint, foresight lens provides a unique structured yet highly creative and adaptive framework that can be used from research design to analysis and interpretation. In research design, researchers may consider using the four futures as a theoretical framework for methodology and questions. In analysis, the four futures may be used in qualitative studies for coding— coding data either by the four futures themselves, or tracking signals, drivers, or scenarios that arise in the data. However, this process requires great attention to the researchers' own worldview, as one's values will automatically guide the interpretation of findings. While value agnosticism is not the goal, researchers may use

member checking and consensus-building methods to ensure their stories are being interpreted and told in a way that reflects the intent of the data.

Using a foresight lens to inform research also allows participants' expertise and visions of the future to be centered and viewed not just as passive data points to study, but as architects that are actively involved in world-building and future-making (Gergen, 2015). Using a foresight lens with participatory approaches would provide an exciting way to extend this method by partnering with participants in research design, theming, interpretation, and dissemination. This would be an especially useful approach when exploring problems or possible solutions, as it challenges the dominant narrative of researchers as objective, outside observers who analyze gaps to create answers, solutions, and interventions and centers participants in future-making. Social work researchers must hold the complexity and tension of both anticipating futures of problems they study and looking towards futures where reparations, solutions, or transformations may occur. Using a foresight lens and the idea of multiple futures allows researchers to hold this tension of preparing for futures of deepening inequity and pain while also hoping and building toward alternative futures and recognizing that the futures are multiple and already occurring. Our research team found that this method infused hope throughout the process, and provided space to explore aspirations, solutions, and imagination while also attending to the ongoing, and future harms of our current systems.

5.3 Implications for Social Work Practice

The tools of foresight lens are deeply relevant to social work practice and give a toolbox and framework for social workers to engage in future-making. Beyond answering specific research questions, it gives power to individuals to express their visions of the future, gathering the diverse voices of a community to inform preparation for the future we want to invest in with the community at different levels of social work practice. As a tool, this may be used to inform community-based asset mapping or other assessment tools in direct social work practice. Further, social work practitioners can learn to recognize, listen, and analyze signals (e.g., things that point to possible future scenarios), and incorporate these as points of assessment or intervention in working towards social change and just futures. Drivers are another tool that can be used to analyze power and leverage points at micro, mezzo, and macro levels to understand what and how the present and future are being shaped and provide access points for intervention and advocacy to shape the future (and present) towards just social change. These tools can inform social work practice, as well as the profession itself. This can be seen in signals in the U.S. abolition movement and drivers of police-killings (especially of Black folks and people of color), that have opened conversations for social work as a profession to examine its own complicity in the carceral state. Responding to these signals and drivers allows social work practitioners to begin imagining (and building) a future built on care and empowerment rather than paternalism and carcerality (Richie & Martensen, 2020). The proposed futures practice helps us make sense of these contradictory notions of our commitment to promoting social justice and the benefits our profession receives in close proximity—and even perpetuation or protection of—the status quo. Using the four quadrants, practitioners can decide as individual social workers and as a field what future we want to promote and work towards while also preparing for those that may come/are already occurring.

Futures practice and foresight lenses do more than just provide a tool for advocacy and intervention — they provide a nuanced framework that builds space for hope and holds tensions of the multitudes of futures. As social workers, we are often engaged in tending to

the suffering caused by collapse, constraint, or even growth futures (e.g., market growth at the expense of humans and the ecological world). Infusing futures/foresight frameworks into social work practice allows us to fight apathy and hopelessness by first imagining—and then building—transformative futures. Imagining is not a frivolous practice; is necessary in maintaining hope and working towards social change. It provides social workers "a way to practice the future together... practicing justice together, living into new stories. It is our right and responsibility to create a new world" (brown, 2017, p.19).

6 Conclusion

The paper provides insight into the use of futures practice and a futures lens as a methodology for analysis of qualitative data. Our research team suggests insights for using foresight as a guiding applied theory and analytical framework to counter problems-focused research practices and invite creative, generative, and imaginative group processes as a central tenant of the analytical process. We use the case study of mutual aid during the COVID-19 pandemic as a grassroots community intervention which is shaping the future of social work practice. We suggest that research on the formal and informal care structures within the United States can inform and push the towards our more radical roots, reviving diverse conceptions of care and shaking us out of our bureaucratic inching forward mindsets. Futures practice emboldens us to consider that all sides are worth considering, and all solutions require the collective imagination to create the types of change needed for more equitable futures.

References:

Abramovitz, M. (2005). The largely untold story of Welfare Reform and the human services. *Social Work*, 50(2), 175–186. https://doi.org/10.1093/sw/50.2.175

Ahlqvist, T. & Rhisiart, M. (2015). Emerging pathways for critical futures research: Changing contexts and impacts of social theory. *Futures*, 71, 91-104.

Arampatzi, A. (2020). Social solidarity economy and urban commoning in post-crisis contexts: Madried and Athens in a comparative perspective. *Journal of Urban Affairs*. https://doi-org.du.idm.oclc.org/10.1080/07352166.2020.1814677

Arnold, E. A., & Bailey, M. M. (2009). Constructing home and family: How the ballroom community supports African American GLBTQ youth in the face of HIV/AIDS. *Journal of Gay and Lesbian Social Services*, 21(2–3), 171–188. https://doi.org/10.1080/10538720902772006

Beito, D. T. (2000). *From mutual aid to the welfare state: fraternal societies and social services*, 1890-1967. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

Bell, F. M., Dennis, M. K., & Krings, A. (2019). Collective survival strategies and anti-colonial practice in ecosocial work. *Journal of Community Practice*, 27(3-4), 279-295.

Bell, F. (2020). Amplified injustices and mutual aid in the COVID-19 pandemic. *Qualitative Social Work*, 20(1-2), 410-415. https://doi-org.du.idm.oclc.org/10.1177/1473325020973326

Bender, K., Littman, D. M., Dunbar, A. Z., Boyett, M., Milligan, T., Santarella, M., & Becker-Hafnor, T. (2021). Emergent media scan of digital mutual aid organizing during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Journal of Community Practice*, 29(3), 280-298.

Benfer, E. A., & Wiley, L. F. (2020). Health justice strategies to combat COVID-19: protecting vulnerable communities during a pandemic. *Health affairs blog*, 10.

brown, a. m. (2017). *Emergent strategy: Shaping change, changing worlds*. AK Press.

Candy, S. & Kornet, K. (2019). Turning foresight inside out an introduction to ethnographic experiential futures. *Journal of Futures Studies*, 23(3), 3-22.

Creswell, J. W. (2013). *Qualitative inquiry & research design: Choosing among the five approaches* (3rd ed.). Sage Publications.

Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2016). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches*. Sage publications.

Daniels, K. Grim, T., and Morgan, T. (2021). Using foresight to explore the impacts of flooding in Houston on health, poverty, and equity out to 2050. *Futures*, 131, 102754.

Dator, J. (2009). Alternative futures at the Manoa school. *Journal of Futures Studies*, 14(2), 1-18.

Dery, M. (1994). Black to the future: Interviews with Samuel R. Delany, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose. In M. Dery (Ed.), Flame wars: *The discourse of cyberculture* (pp. 179–222). Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Dillon, G.L. (2012). Walking the clouds: An anthology of Indigenous science fiction. University of Arizona Press.

Dunagan, J. (2021). Personal communication.

Eshun, K. (2003). Further considerations of Afrofuturism. CR: *The New Centennial Review*, 3(2), 287–302.

Fernandes-Jesus, M., Mao, G., Ntontis, E., Cocking, C., McTague, M., Schwarz, A., Semlyen, J., & Drury, J. (2021). More than a COVID-19 response: *Sustaining mutual aid groups during and beyond the pandemic* [Preprint]. SocArXiv. https://doi.org/10.31235/osf.io/p5sfd

Firth, R. (2020). Mutual aid, anarchist preparedness and COVID-19. In *Coronavirus, class and mutual aid in the United Kingdom* (pp. 57-111). Palgrave Macmillan, Cham.

Gergen, K. J. (2015). From mirroring to world-making: Research as future forming. *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour*, 45(3). https://doi-org.du.idm.oclc.org/10.1111/jtsb.12075

Gravlee, C. C. (2020). Systemic racism, chronic health inequities, and COVID-19: A syndemic in the making? *American Journal of Human Biology*, 32(5), 1–8. https://doi.org/10.1002/ajhb.23482

Gulick, J., Araujo, J., Roelofs, C., Kerssen, T., Figueroa, M., Dupain, E., ... & Neighborhoods, P. (2020). What is mutual aid? A COVID-19 primer. *PReP Neighborhoods, Pandemic Research for the People*, Dispatch, 2, 14.

Howard, S. (2021, June 28). *Drivers and Signals: How Are They Different?* IFTF. https://www.iftf.org/future-now/article-detail/drivers-and-signals-how-are-they-different/

The Institute for the Future. (n.d.) *Artifacts from the Future*. IFTF. https://www.iftf.org/what-we-do/artifacts-from-the-future/.

The Institute for the Future. (n.d.). *Forecasting Skills. Futures Thinking*.

Izlar, J. (2019). Radical social welfare and anti-authoritarian mutual aid. *Critical and Radical Social Work*, 7(3), 349-366.

Jacobs, L. A., Kim, M. E., Whitfield, D. L., Gartner, R. E., Panichelli, M., Kattari, S. K., ... & Mountz, S. E. (2021). Defund the police: Moving towards an anti-carceral social work. *Journal of Progressive Human Services*, 32(1), 37-62.

Kapogli, E., & Quoidbach, J. (2022). Stranger or a clone? Future self-connectedness depends on who you ask, when you ask, and what dimension you focus on. *Current opinion in psychology*, 43, 266-270.

Kropotkin, P. (1902). "Mutual Aid: A factor of evolution." https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/petr-kropotkin-mutual-aid-a-factor-of-evolution.pdf.

Littman, D., Boyett, M., Bender, K., Dunbar, A. Z., Santarella, M., Becker-Hafnor, T., & Milligan, T. (2021). Values and beliefs underlying mutual aid: An exploration of collective care during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Journal of the Society of Social Work and Research* https://doi.org/10.1086/716884

Morris, S. M. (2012). Black girls are from the future: Afrofuturist feminism in Octavia E. Butler's "Fledgling." WSQ: *Women's Studies Quarterly*, 40(3&4), 146–166.

Nelson, A. (2000). Afrofuturism: Past-future visions. *Color Lines* (Spring), 34–37.

Nelson, G., Ochocka, J., Griffin, K., & Lord, J. (1998). "Nothing about me, without me": Participatory Action Research with self-help/mutual aid organizations for psychiatric consumer/survivors. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 26(6), 881–912. https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1022298129812

Nissen, L. (2020). Social work and the future in a post-covid-19 world: A foresight lens and a call to action for the profession. *Journal of Technology in Human Services*, 38(4), 309-330.

Norman, A. J. (1977). Mutual aid: A key to survival for Black Americans. *The Black Scholar*, 9(4), 44–49.

Padgett, D. K. (2016). *Qualitative methods in social work research* (Vol. 36). Sage publications.

Phillips, R. (2015). *Black Quantum Futurism Theory & Practice*. (Vol. 1). AfroFuturist Affair. Philadelphia.

Ramos, J. (2019). Mutating the future: The anticipatory experimentation method. *Medium*. https://our-better-selves.medium.com/mutating-the-future-the-anticipatory-experimentation-method-17ca1244da8

Richie, B. E., & Martensen, K. M. (2020). Resisting carcerality, embracing abolition: Implications for feminist social work practice. *Affilia*, 35(1), 12-16.

Rio, M. (2020). Architecture Is Burning: An Urbanism of Queer Kinship in Ballroom Culture. *Thresholds*, 48, 122–132. https://doi.org/10.1162/thld_a_00716

Sardar, Z. (2010). Welcome to postnormal times. *Futures*, 42(5), 435–444. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.futures.2009.11.028

Sardar, Z. (2021). On the Nature of Time in Postnormal Times. *Journal of Futures Studies*, 25(4), 17–30.

Saldaña, J. (2016). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers*. SAGE Publications.

Sharfstein, J. M. & Marx, M. A. (2020, March 30). Testing is just the beginning in the battle against covid-19. *The New York Times*. https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/30/opinion/coronavirus-testing.html

Spade, D. (2020a). *Mutual aid: Building solidarity during this crisis* (and the next). Verso Books.

Spade, D. (2020b, November 20). Mutual Aid will Help us Survive the Biden Presidency. *ROAR Magazine*. https://roarmag.org/essays/dean-spade-mutual-aid-excerpt/

Taylor, D.B. (2021, November 25). George Floyd protests: A timeline. *The New York Times*. https://www.nytimes.com/article/george-floyd-protests-timeline.html

The Washington Post (2022, January 26). Police Shoots Database 2015-2022. *Washington Post*. https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/investigations/police-shootings-database/

Tuck, E. (2009). Suspending damage: A letter to communities. *Harvard Educational Review*, 79(3): 409–27.

Uehara, E. S., Barth, R. P., Olson, S., Catalano, R. F., Hawkins, J. D., Kemp, S., & Sherraden, M. (2014). Identifying and tackling grand challenges for social work. Baltimore, MD: *American Academy of Social Work and Social Welfare*.

van Ryneveld, M., Whyle, E., & Brady, L. (2022). What is COVID-19 teaching us about community health systems? A reflection from a rapid Community-Led mutual aid response in Cape town, South Africa. *International journal of health policy and management*, 11(Special Issue on CHS-Connect), 5-8.

Watkins-Hayes, C. (2009). Human services as 'race work'? Historical lessons and contemporary challenges of Black providers. In Y. Hasenfeld (Ed.), *Human services as complex organizations*, (2nd Edition ed.). Sage Publications.

Williams Jr, C., & Williams, H. B. (1984). Contemporary voluntary associations in the urban black church: The development and growth of mutual aid societies. *Journal of Voluntary Action Research*, 13(4), 19-30.

Yoon, I. (2015). Mutual Financial Aid and Saving Associations (MFASAs) among Asian Americans. In *Encyclopedia of Social Work*.

Author´s Address:
Annie Zean Dunbar
Graduate School of Social Work, University of Denver, 2148 S High St., Denver, CO, USA 80208
zean.dunbar@du.edu

Author´s Address:
Danielle Maude Littman
University of Utah College of Social Work, 395 1500 E, Salt Lake City, UT, 84112
danielle.littman@utah.edu

Author´s Address:
Madi Boyett
Graduate School of Social Work, University of Denver, 2148 S High St., Denver, CO, USA 80208
maveryck.boyett@du.edu

Author´s Address:
Kimberly Bender
Graduate School of Social Work, University of Denver, 2148 S High St., Denver, CO, USA 80208
kimberly.bender@du.edu

Author´s Address:
Kate Saavedra
Graduate School of Social Work, University of Denver, 2148 S High St., Denver, CO, USA 80208
kate.saavedra@du.edu

Author´s Address:
Colleen Cummings Melton
Graduate School of Social Work, University of Denver, 2148 S High St., Denver, CO, USA 80208
colleen.cummings@du.edu

Author´s Address:
Tara Milligan
Graduate School of Social Work, University of Denver, 2148 S High St., Denver, CO, USA 80208 r
tara.milligan@du.edu

Author´s Address:
Colin Bogle

Josef Korbel School of International Studies, University of Denver
Anna and John J. Sie International Relations Complex 2201 S. Gaylord St., Denver, CO, USA 80208
colin.bogle@yahoo.com