

“Fuck Capitalism”: Mutual Aid Participants’ Experiences of Burnout During the Early Months of the COVID-19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT Amidst the intentional failures of the U.S. government and social service systems to respond to the care and survival needs created by the COVID-19 pandemic, *mutual aid*—collective survival work which both aims to meet individual and community needs *and* demand structural change—has proliferated. Along with an increase in mutual aid efforts has come a proliferation of burnout among those engaged in mutual aid work. Our paper shares findings from interviews ($N = 25$) with individuals engaged in mutual aid in the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic in Colorado. Drawing upon Gorski et al.’s (2019) model of burnout, which includes emotional exhaustion, physical exhaustion, and cynicism/hopelessness, we use critical phenomenological analysis to explore participants’ experiences of burnout while engaging in mutual aid work. While participants’ experiences largely align with Gorski’s burnout framework, the pressures of capitalism dominate and pervade participants’ experiences. These findings suggest a need for (a) greater understanding of burnout that connects to the structural harms of capitalism, and (b) futures of mutual aid and collective care that displace capitalism entirely. We end by exploring the question: *how could mutual aid practices replace capitalist “care” structures in the future?*

KEYWORDS mutual aid, burnout, capitalism, collective care

IN THE EARLY PERIOD OF THE ONGOING COVID-19 PANDEMIC, many people experienced a call to collective action through mutual aid, which aims to meet basic needs and transform structures of care (Spade, 2020). However, as the pandemic continued, many mutual aid participants, organizations, and initiatives dissolved despite ongoing need (Carreras, 2021; Jones, 2020). Many participants reflected burnout: feelings of unsustainable overwork and exhaustion, among others (Spade, 2019). Long-term participants in mutual aid are no strangers to burnout; filling intentional deficits of basic needs structures is like treating a chronic illness in the fabric of society. This paper explores capitalism as a central factor of that illness, and attempts to unravel the interconnections between capitalism, mutual aid, and burnout. many people experienced a call to collective action through mutual aid, which aims to meet basic needs and transform structures of care (Spade, 2020). However, as the pandemic continued, many mutual aid participants, organizations, and initiatives dissolved despite ongoing need (Carreras, 2021; Jones, 2020). Many participants reflected burnout:

feelings of unsustainable overwork and exhaustion, among others (Spade, 2019). Long-term participants in mutual aid are no strangers to burnout; filling intentional deficits of basic needs structures is like treating a chronic illness in the fabric of society. This paper explores capitalism as a central factor of that illness, and attempts to unravel the interconnections between capitalism, mutual aid, and burnout.

Experiences of burnout emerged from participants' narratives of mutual aid, collective care, and adaptation in the early months of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Our exploration applies Gorski's (2019) burnout model, including categories of *emotional exhaustion*, *physical exhaustion*, and *cynicism/hopelessness*. However, our conceptualization is distinct from Gorski in that we allowed the experience of burnout to be self-defined, as inherent in phenomenological approaches. An emergent theme of our findings was the *pervasiveness of capitalistic drivers* in experiences of burnout. To discuss burnout in the context of capitalism, we incorporate an abolitionist lens and an explicitly anti-capitalist perspective, including capitalism's role in informing government and non-government service providers, such as non-profits, charities, and other traditional models of care. We would like to make explicit that these relationships of burnout are exclusively related to United States capitalism, and do not serve as an overarching or generalizable way of processing burnout from capitalism globally. Abolition and mutual aid are historically linked and share key tenets, most importantly for our purposes, an emphasis on community care over traditional services. In contrast, social work is often aligned with traditional services in principle and practice; adoption of mutual aid as the predominant form of service work will lead to community-driven outcomes.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Mutual Aid

The COVID-19 pandemic is still here (World Health Organization [WHO], 2022). The climate crisis is now (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change [IPCC], 2022). Anti-transgender legislation has reached an all-time high (American Civil Liberties Union [ACLU], 2022), and white supremacy is continuing to harm and kill Black communities (Taylor, 2021). Governments and formal systems are not only failing to respond to these crises, but often perpetuating them (Gilmore, 2022). In response to this systemic failure, people are creating and discovering collective ways to support one another in order to survive. This survival work, often done alongside social movements to demand structural and systemic transformative change, is referred to as *mutual aid* (Spade, 2021).

Although mutual aid gained significant popularity in response to the lack of governmental support during the COVID-19 pandemic (Solnit, 2020), it is not a new concept. Humans have collectively worked together to survive since the beginning of humankind. Coined by Kropotkin (1902), mutual aid was initially described as century-long practices of collective care. Since that debut in the literature, mutual aid has been re-defined and re-conceptualized across time and contexts. Nelson et al. (1998) described mutual aid as settings where people with a shared problem or experience share knowledge, resources, and provide/receive social support from one another. Wang (2013) defined mutual aid as a short-term, acute crisis response with a primary focus on disaster relief. More recently, Spade (2021) conceptualized mutual aid as ongoing collective coordination to meet each other's needs—both social and material—while working toward transformative change. Guiding this inquiry, we align ourselves with Spade's (2021) definition of

mutual aid, viewing mutual aid as a long-term response to address systemic inequities and work toward transformative change.

Most often, mutual aid has been utilized in social movements, specifically in movements impacting and led by marginalized communities. In official records, mutual aid has been traced back to 1787 in the United States when Black mutual aid societies were formed by the Free African Society (GO Humanity, 2022). These mutual aid societies were created to provide support to Black Americans who were newly freed from slavery. The Free African Society later evolved into additional Black mutual aid societies, including The Black Panther Party in the 1960s, who created an expansive mutual aid network (Aberg-Riger, 2020). Additionally in the 20th century, we began to see mutual aid efforts expand to Latinx and Chinese American communities, including the *sociedades mutualistas* (mutual societies) in the Southwest United States and family associations who provided housing when Chinese American immigrants arrived in the United States (GO Humanity, 2022). Mutual aid has also been essential in LGBTQ+ communities. For example, trans women of color have created safe spaces and provided shelter for decades to young Black and Latino queer and trans individuals who were rejected from their biological families (Podhurst & Credle, 2007; Young, 2019). Another example of mutual aid in LGBTQ+ communities was during the HIV/AIDS epidemic when many physicians were unwilling to treat gay men presenting with symptoms of HIV/AIDS (Geiling, 2013). As a result, many HIV/AIDS patients, who were disproportionately Black and Brown gay men and trans women, created mutual aid support systems for community members impacted by HIV/AIDS (Geiling, 2013). The most documented and well-known mutual aid efforts throughout U.S. history have been for and led by marginalized communities who were (and are) not getting their needs met by the U.S. government.

Burnout in Social Movements, Collective Action, and Activism

Engaging in mutual aid is often satisfying and celebratory work (Spade, 2020a). As highlighted by Spade (2020), being engaged with the painful and hard realities of the world alongside others for justice feels much better than being numb to those inequities. However, burnout can and does occur within these spaces, particularly in activism and volunteer spaces, though burnout is not well-documented in mutual aid literature.

There is a growing body of literature examining burnout in social movements, collective action, and activist settings (Bivens, 2021; Brown & Pickerill, 2009; Chen & Gorski, 2015; Gorski & Chen, 2015). Some scholars note that activists may have higher rates of burnout due to the emotional labor of engaging in social movements (Bivens, 2021; Gorski & Chen, 2015).

Three common origins of burnout in social movements include: 1) *internal*; 2) *external*; and 3) *within-movement* (Danquah et al., 2021; Gorski et al., 2018; Plyler, 2006). *Internal* causes related to deep feelings of responsibility and commitment to the cause may lead to despair or hopelessness because of the magnitude of change needed to make an impact. Many scholars noted the emotional labor of not only looking at injustice but being knee-deep in issues that most people are “unable or unwilling to face” (Maslach & Gomes, 2006, p. 43). *External* causes of burnout were defined as “actual or potential threats of violence... rang[ing] from harassment and character assassination to physical violence” (Danquah et al., 2021, p. 520). Finally, *within-movement* causes described burnout caused by the cultures of social movements including in-fighting, oppression, and “how we treat each other” (Plyler, 2006, para 14). Plyler (2006, para 17) explained “although social justice movements strive for social change that is based on justice, equality, respect, and accessibility, we

actually have to train ourselves and work hard at modeling these values in how we organize,” a sentiment highlighted in Spade’s (2021) chapter on the Dangers and Pitfalls of Mutual Aid. Notably, all three causes of burnout are amplified for activists with marginalized or politicized identities, such as women of color and Indigenous peoples, especially external factors with higher rates of violence and targeting by those in power and in-movement causes, experiencing racism, sexism, homophobia, and harassment within their own organizations (Chapman, 2013; Danquah et al., 2021; Gorski, 2018). However, sharing identities with other activists—especially marginalized or politicized identities—has been found to be a protective factor from burnout (Rao & Power, 2021), suggesting that shared identities and lived experiences among activists may buffer against the oppression faced in activism work.

Burnout in Mutual Aid as Narrated in Popular Media

There is a multitude of writing about burnout within mutual aid in “non-academic” outlets, including in popular media, zines, and blogs—platforms we highlight as they provide the direct perspective of mutual aid organizations or workers. Much of the discussion around burnout in popular media was situated in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic; while the COVID-19 pandemic led to increased mutual aid work, it was also named as a factor in burnout, as mutual aid workers were dealing with the intersecting crises (health, social, economic) themselves and in their communities. Gathright (2020) and others highlighted burnout in mutual aid groups only months into the pandemic; naming that, while the need for mutual aid work was far from over, pandemic fatigue (of both mutual aid workers and the public) was leading to burnout, as funding sources and donations dwindled and society went “back to normal” (Carreras, 2021; Jones, 2020). In fact, some organizations had to pause their work entirely due to lack of funding and burnout (NBC Southern California, 2021) with one participant stating, “I think a lot of people are super burnt out, burnt out because of the pandemic itself. Burnt out from politicians saying they’re going to do stuff and they don’t do it” (Carreras, 2021).

Popular media provided a more critical and nuanced context of burnout than scholarly literature, pointing to the problem of social structures as related to internal causes for burnout. While it named personal difficulties and fatigue leading to burnout, it attributed much of this to the larger failings of societal structures, recognizing that these are not individual failings but system failures that impact individuals.

Capitalism

Burnout cannot be fully examined without understanding the impact of capitalism. Capitalism is often presented as a natural law, a force beyond human control, or an enigma that escapes definition yet permeates our daily lives (Klabnik, 2012; Oduor, 2021). While scholars do not agree on a single definition for capitalism, we understand capitalism “as an economic system characterized by private ownership of property or capital... sale of commodities on the open market, the purchase of labour for wages, and the impetus to generate profit and thereby accumulate wealth” (Little, 2014, p. 559). Robinson (2019) explains that capitalism is the “core of Western identity” (p. 78) and cannot be understood as separate from race or racism, as capitalism and racism are “historical concomitants” (p. 79). Building on this, Gilmore (2020a) explains *racial capitalism* stating, “capitalism requires inequality and racism enshrines it.” Gilmore (2022) explains non-elites are never “passive pawns,” and that racial capitalism is steeped into our everyday lives, whether benefiting from racial

capitalism, trying to dismantle it, or both. This paper uses the term *capitalism* generally but is informed by racial capitalism, abolition praxis, and uses an explicitly anti-capitalist framework. Informed by multiple definitions of capitalism and anti-capitalist critiques (Little, 2014; Chomsky & Waterstone, 2021; Gilmore, 2022; Klabnik, 2012; we have identified the following core tenets of capitalism and how they are inherently opposed to values of mutual aid (see Table 1).

Table 1
Tenets and Values of Capitalism vs Mutual Aid

Capitalism	Mutual Aid
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Competition • Relies on exploitation of labor 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cooperation • Based in collective care to meet material needs
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus on accumulation of capital and wealth • Hierarchical • Individual and independent • Growth-focused 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus on individual and collective well-being • Horizontal • Collective and interdependent • Reciprocal, regenerative, and sustainable
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Profit over people and environment • Inherently linked to racism, classism, and other intersecting oppressions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • People and environment over profit • Based in solidarity and liberation

The tension of values can be seen in mutual aid efforts during the COVID-19 pandemic, with multiple layers of crises leading to burnout. An overwhelming majority of popular media named the capitalistic push to get “back to normal” during the pandemic had a negative impact on mutual aid groups through lack of funding, dwindling donations, and a cognitive dissonance of living in a pandemic and meeting critical needs while being told everything is “normal” (Carreras, 2021; Clarke, 2021; Gathright, 2020; Jones, 2020). Further, COVID provides a global-scale example of *disaster capitalism*, in which private industries profit from large-scale crises—at the expense of front-line workers (Solis, 2020). It is within this landscape—of widespread capitalistic pushes for ‘normalcy’ amidst ongoing social and economic devastation—that our study explores the experiences of burnout among mutual aid organizers.

Though literature does not name burnout as a symptom of capitalism explicitly, it discusses overarching themes of *culture of martyrdom and selflessness* and a *lack of space to discuss emotions* which lead to burnout (Bivens, 2021; Brown & Pickerill, 2009; Gorski et al., 2018; Gorski & Chen, 2015). The fear of discussing one’s emotions that lead to burnout was attributed to the need to “live up to the ‘perfect standard’ of activist engagement” and a culture of martyrdom or selflessness as a badge of honor (Brown & Pickerill, 2009). These symptoms point to ways that capitalism and white supremacy’s values of individualism, perfection, and constant production have permeated into social movement settings. Plyler (2006) and Spade (2021) warn against perpetuating these systems and ways of being in social movements, stating we must identify and unlearn internalized capitalism wrapped up in saviorism, martyrdom, and constant production—even if that production is in activist spaces.

METHODS

Positionality Statement

Mutual aid has historically existed in marginalized communities, particularly in communities of color, disabled communities, and queer and trans communities. We recognize that studying (and practicing) mutual aid places our praxis in tension within academic social work structures. As such, we want to recognize how our identities as authors impact this research. Authors' racial identities include Latinx and white, with most of the team being white. Half of the team's authors identify as nonbinary or ungendered, while the other half identify as cisgender women. Most of the authors identify as queer, with one identifying as questioning their sexuality, and one as straight. With this, many of our team members are a part of communities that have historically engaged in mutual aid. Some members of the team have engaged in mutual aid and aligned forms of community organizing and practice for years, while others are relatively new to mutual aid practice, especially in Denver. Lastly, all members of the team have been formally educated in social work, with some team members currently engaged in graduate programs. These identities, occupations, and education ultimately shape the lens we use when approaching this work—one which is situated in conventional social care structures and the academy, while simultaneously searching for care structures which better meet our communities' needs.

Study Overview and Design

This study relied on a critical phenomenological approach (Guenther, 2019) to understand how mutual aid participants and facilitators described experiences of burnout. Our research team conducted semi-structured qualitative interviews with participants in mutual aid groups and intentional communities in the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic and administered a brief survey one year after initial interviews.

Critical phenomenology, extending from conventional phenomenological methods (Creswell & Poth, 2016), attends to participants' overarching lived experiences, while further attuning to the ways that "structures like patriarchy, white supremacy, and heteronormativity permeate, organize, and reproduce the natural attitude in ways that go beyond any particular object" (Guenther, 2019, p. 12). This approach allowed us to understand experiences of burnout in the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as how overarching social structures—like capitalism—interwove with and informed with participants' experiences.

Sampling and Recruitment

We aimed to understand experiences from mutual aid groups emerging in response to the pandemic, as well as groups who had been practicing mutual aid for quite some time. In the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic (June-August 2020), we recruited members of groups which were explicitly calling themselves mutual aid groups; we further sampled intentional and cohousing communities where mutual aid was integrated into residential spaces and was taking place in more informal ways (i.e., cohousing intentional communities). All groups were identified via Google and Facebook searches or through word-of-mouth networks. We confined our sample to the state of Colorado, where our team was located—our rationale being that early responses to COVID-19 varied considerably by state. For more details on our sampling frame and the state of Colorado to aid in the transferability of our findings, we redirect readers to an earlier publication from our broader study (Littman et al., 2022).

Potential participants were invited to an hourlong interview focused on understanding how mutual aid proliferated during COVID-19 as a form of collective care. Interviews took place via video conferencing (Zoom) or phone (if preferred and/or to increase accessibility). After interviews, participants were asked to share our study description and invitation with others in their networks who may be interested in being interviewed to aid in snowball sampling.

Our resulting sample ($N=25$) included mutual aid ($n=17$) and intentional community ($n=8$) members that spanned a wide age range (26-70). Participants were most commonly 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 aid practiced by our participants, please see Littman et al. (2022).

Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews began with eliciting verbal informed consent, followed by participation in a brief online demographic survey, then participation in a semi-structured conversation. Participants were assigned a personal identification code to connect demographic data with qualitative interview data. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed with participant permission. Interviews were conducted by a human-subjects trained researcher, and all protocols were approved by the University of Denver IRB. Participants were sent a \$20 gift card to honor their time participating.

One year after our interviews took place (Summer 2021), we sent participants a Qualtrics survey via email with 10 brief questions about how participants' mutual aid work may have changed since the prior year. Participants were sent a \$5 gift card to honor their time participating.

Measures

The initial demographic survey collected the following information: participants' age, gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, country of origin, marital status, education level, employment status, whether one was considered an essential worker, housing situation, household composition, and length of involvement in mutual aid work.

The initial semi-structured interviews asked participants about a variety of experiences related to their mutual and collective care (e.g., history of their work, motivation, technology use, values and beliefs underlying mutual aid, benefits and challenges of the work, and the future they foresee for mutual aid practice). Participants were asked to share more about the details of their mutual aid work, types of which included meeting basic needs (e.g., providing food and caretaking), supporting community convenings, and creating and delivering personal protective equipment. A deeper description of the semi structured interview protocol can be found in Littman et al. (2022) or shared via request to the lead author. Our analysis for this paper, while inclusive of all interview material, primarily focused on the following interview questions:

- We are grappling with how to understand the formality vs. informality of mutual aid work. Tell us a little bit about the structure of your mutual aid work. (Probe: Is there someone or a group of people who are leaders/in charge? How are decisions made about who receives mutual aid in your work? Who makes those decisions?) When you step back and think about it, how do you feel about this structure—is there anything you think should change?

- What have been some of the biggest successes in your mutual aid work? Biggest challenges?
- Most people have limits to the ways they are willing to provide aid. Can you describe moments when you have noticed yourself saying no or passing on opportunities to provide aid to others? (Probe: What reflections do you have about the type of aid or type of individuals where you are hesitant to engage in mutual aid? How have these boundaries shifted, if at all, during COVID?)

The follow-up Qualtrics survey consisted of open-ended questions asking about participants continued (or ended) involvement in mutual aid work and shifts in roles and/or perspectives regarding mutual aid work since the year prior. We also asked about participants' interest in continued discussion and/or support around mutual aid topics, such as burnout, political underpinnings of mutual aid, and sustaining mutual aid work.

Data Analysis

To analyze the qualitative interviews, a thematic analysis process was employed in three stages: excerpting, coding, and theming with a critical lens. One research team member identified all excerpts related to burnout from the interviews, and one additional team member scanned all interviews to confirm these excerpts captured every reference to burnout in our data (adding a couple excerpts). At the initial coding of these data, a team of two researchers used a priori descriptive coding frames (Saldaña, 2016) to code these excerpts, based on Gorski's (2019) burnout framework: *emotional exhaustion*, *physical exhaustion*, and *cynicism or hopelessness*. These categories of experience were correlated to Gorski's final outcomes: emotional disposition, backlash, structural, and in-movement causes. While we could not attribute any causation in our sample, we followed the three initial categories with inclusion of specific framing around capitalism.

An iterative process was used to develop a final codebook with member-checking between team members at each phase of the process. Excerpts were coded independently by the two primary coders who then met to clarify, combine, or delete codes as needed to develop consensus. Team members met to establish coding consistency, combining codes and creating umbrella codes and subcodes, ensuring consensus to the final codebook. Codes were then applied to all excerpts.

The two primary coders, in addition to two research team members who were not involved in coding, met to identify key themes in the data, with a critical lens toward the structural factors which impacted burnout in the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic. The team used the online whiteboard tool MURAL to cluster codes together, exploring resonances and shifts from Gorski's (2019) burnout framework. At this stage, the research team identified the threads of *capitalism* and *communication* as interwoven between the physical and emotional exhaustion, and cynicism/hopelessness experienced by those involved in mutual aid in the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic.

FINDINGS

Gorski's Framework

Interviewee quotes were organized according to three tenets of Gorski's 2019 framework: cynicism and hopelessness; emotional exhaustion; and physical exhaustion. Upon analysis of experiences of

participant burnout within Gorski's framework, conceptual aspects of the relationship between capitalism and burnout emerged.

Cynicism and Hopelessness

Mutual aid participants expressed a sense of hopelessness, indicating misaligned expectations for how they thought mutual aid work would be versus how they experienced it: "I had very high hopes...and then it felt like pretty unsustainable" (white, queer, woman, 2 years in MA work). This participant also visually illustrated their struggle in the work as "bumping up against walls" and burned out after seeing "zero progress." Other participants expressed cynicism in the work, suggesting their work was fruitless with respect to the social aspects of their community. One participant discussed their inability to have an impact on gentrification suggesting, "Denver is dead...[the] people here are not from Denver...Denver doesn't exist anymore" (Black, straight, male, 10 years in MA work). Participants' sense of cynicism and hopelessness often aligned with an inability to meet capitalistic ideations of success and progress.

Emotional Exhaustion

Burnout categorized as *emotional exhaustion* was another common theme amongst our participants. This exhaustion was born from maintaining a sense of urgency throughout the pandemic, newcomers joining mutual aid groups with misaligned expectations, close proximity to people's hardships, and differences in structure and work allocation within mutual aid organizations.

Participants described how a sense of social responsibility in combination with second-hand adversity (i.e., witnessing others' experience of social, cultural, and/or financial adversity) contributed to emotional exhaustion. This was especially true for one participant whose job was to read the mutual aid requests of community members writing to ask support from their mutual aid group:

Because it's, you know, when I'm donating to a nonprofit, I'm just like giving money and trusting that those people are, are the ones connecting with people experiencing these challenges and are using that money in a wise way. But when I am the one who is like reading the testimonials, saying like, *I can't feed my seven-year-old, unless someone gives me money* and it's, you know, it's up to me to figure out how to get that person money. And then just seeing like literally thousands of stories like that, way more than I can manage and way more than our team of 25 people can manage. (white, queer, 5 months in MA work)

Again, this participant was placed in a position where they (along with a small mutual aid team) were seemingly solely responsible for meeting dire community needs that could be met by systems if they were not deeply aligned with capitalism and punishment. Along with fatigue associated with empathy comes an unsustainable sense of urgency, as the needs being met by mutual aid efforts during the pandemic have always been there but were amplified during unprecedented crisis. One participant reflected on the ways that urgency and support has waned:

I think what's been really hard about everyone dealing with COVID is how long it's been going on...There's a fair amount of COVID fatigue, or quarantine fatigue that we've

noticed. So, it's important to me to keep working as hard, I think, despite the fact that like the, the public interest level in like aid projects has gone down a bit. (Asian, straight, 0 months in MA/newer to the work)

Participants further expressed frustrations over discordant expectations versus the reality of mutual aid: a “lot of upset happens from misaligned expectations. And a lot of that could be solved with having really clear agreements...” (white, queer, 5 years in MA work). Others suggested enhanced communication and transparency of these expectations via definition and structure: “... if we had hard and fast, you know, defined rules that we can step out of, I couldn't just be like, bro, can you? Can you? Can you deal with this for a week, like, I don't have the energy for this” (white, queer, nonbinary/transgender, 2 years in MA work). These frustrations reflected participants’ familiarity and comfort with capitalistic structures and the very real barriers of imagining the shape alternative work could and does take.

Physical Exhaustion

Our last primary theme addresses the physical manifestation of burnout—how our bodies inevitably break down under the pressure of emotional burnout and non-stop participation in never-ending work. One participant discussed how involvement has decreased over time due to a combination of burnout in communication, but also a shift in personal capacity: “...we’re starting to see the numbers trail down. And some of that is just burnout to communicate, but it also can be burnout of capability” (white, 2 years 6 months in MA work). This participant went on to state the need for continuous new involvement to help sustain efforts: “...at some point, you’ve got to get fresh legs.”

Participants reiterated the struggle of physical instability and inability to sustain work beyond the most immediate parts of the emergency such as the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic: “it's [inherently unsustainable] to just run around and do whatever people need just like, "yeah, I'll totally deliver groceries for everybody. I got all day; I got all night...” (Black, straight, 10 years in MA work). This participant went on to describe the desire for a more sustained way of doing mutual aid work, again illustrating the tension to rely on models of already existing capitalistic systems like non-profits and charity efforts instead of what they described as “the sandbagging pattern” of mutual aid. They described mutual aid’s ability to respond to the COVID-19 crisis as bare minimum prevention that is reactionary and would likely erode overtime—like sandbags used for flooding prevention.

Burnout and Capitalism

While Gorski’s framework helps to expose relationships between conceptualizations of burnout and capitalism, other participants’ comments directly suggested an antagonism between capitalism and mutual aid, contributing to burning out. One participant, most explicitly, suggested, “Fuck capitalism” (white, pansexual, nonbinary/transgender, 1 year in MA work).

Participants’ comments drew attention to capitalistic frameworks of supply and demand (i.e., manufactured scarcity and commodification). One participant suggested that the concept of scarcity that is artificially created to sustain a capitalistic framework is inherently at odds with the goal of sustainable mutual aid, stating, “capitalism... is drowning us and we are keeping ourselves just above water, mak[ing] mutual aid very challenging” (white, pansexual, male, 9 years in MA work). Additionally, when time allocated to work within a capitalistic framework was paused for many,

mutual aid was “easier to do, [such as] in the early days of the pandemic, when everybody’s lives were disrupted, and we had a lot of time at home” (white, straight, male, 4 months in MA work).

Participants also suggested that capitalistic structures tend to co-opt and replace mutual aid. For example, “...when masks started getting sold for real, it really killed the mutual aid vibe” (white, pansexual, nonbinary/transgender, 1 year in MA work). Other participants also suggested capitalistic structures tend to be self-supporting, but do not support mutual aid work. As one participant questioned “...how do you bring in the systems and bureaucracy without stifling the creativity and energy... created by emergent systems [of mutual aid] ... [that are] resilient...” (white, pansexual, male, 9 years in MA work). Others concluded that even nonprofits “steal energy from social movements” (white, queer, woman, 2 years in MA work), which suggests the ability to support capitalistic structures of scarcity may be at odds with sustaining mutual aid.

Finally, participants’ conceptualization of burnout was informed when a capitalistic lens was adopted. One participant suggests that, under capitalism, unending labor is normalized: “...I strongly believe like never retire, never stop working. I will fall over dead on this desk. Like, and I’m fine with that” (Black, straight, male, 10 years in MA work). This participant reflects how capitalistic expectations regarding labor—whether emotional or physical—seem at odds with the ability to accept “burn out.”

One Year After the Interviews

To assess the status of our participants’ continued involvement in mutual aid work, we conducted a survey one year after the semi-structured interviews. From our original sample size of participants ($N=25$), we received responses from 16 participants for this follow-up survey. Of these 16 respondents, 10 (62.5%) stated that the mutual aid network/group they had previously engaged in was still active, one (6.25%) respondent stated that their previous network was inactive, and five (31.25%) did not respond to the question. For the one mutual aid network that became inactive, the participant shared that the reason was due to “interpersonal group conflict/a problematic and a highly challenging person joined the group.”

Ten (62.5%) participants described how their mutual aid group’s work had shifted since the semi-structured interviews. Some participants shared that their mutual aid group had slowed down due to reasons including burnout, structural issues, or a shift in focus. One participant shared, “...the group has slowed down a lot due to the burnout entailed with matching volunteer helpers with those in need and a lack of clear structures.” Others, however, shared that their mutual aid group had not slowed down and the work had shifted to meet current needs: “Information about vaccines [prior focus of the group] is very present. [Now providing] A lot of informational meetings and posts [about] mental health, racial matters, etc.”

In addition to organizational shifts among mutual aid networks, personal involvement also transformed, extended, and ended. Only six (37.5%) of the 16 respondents were still active with any form of mutual aid work a year into the COVID-19 pandemic; five (31.25%) were no longer involved, and five (31.25%) did not respond to the question. For those who were still active with a mutual aid network, involvement shifted due to moving toward different purposes (e.g., no longer making masks, but more focus on community engagement) or based on their capacity (e.g., no longer directly active but still available as needed). Individuals whose involvement ended with their mutual aid network cited that this was due to a shift in capacity, needing to leave the community due to discrimination-based housing insecurity, and feeling exhausted and/or burned out.

DISCUSSION

This study analyzed semi-structured interviews ($N=25$) and brief follow-up survey data ($n=16$) with individuals engaged in mutual aid to understand how they described experiences of burnout in the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic. Their experiences of burnout were underscored by the pressures of U.S. capitalism, aligned with categories of burnout previously documented by Gorski (2019): emotional exhaustion, physical exhaustion, and cynicism/hopelessness. The interviews reinforced several ideas that gained traction throughout the compounding global crises—namely, heightened awareness of the pervasiveness of capitalistic structures in daily life, the intentional inability of capitalism to ensure everyone's basic needs are met, and, especially relevant to this discussion, that capitalism molds our idea of work and care so significantly that it becomes the conceptual underpinning of burnout itself.

Our findings build upon Gorski's (2019) suggestion that those who participate in activism and change work care deeply about the health and wellbeing of their communities. Additionally, these community members often feel responsible for filling the gaps of care that systems and/or government have purposefully created, creating a sense of urgency and personal responsibility amidst widespread system failure. Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, capitalistic systems/entities, in conjunction with the U.S government, chose to operate at levels that prioritized profit and maintenance of imperialism over the wellbeing of individuals and communities (Stevano et al., 2021)—an insidious form of capitalism that Naomi Klein named *disaster capitalism* (Solis, 2020). We witnessed this through early lifting of mask mandates, forceful return to in-person work, and planned abandonment in care (aside from mutual aid efforts) (Spade, 2021).

If our goal is to create a “post-capitalist world, then we are the ones who have to make it and prepare for it. We have to be thinking ahead and creating the very things we want to see replace the things which oppress us” (Goldman & Nasir, 2021). Building this dream, this post-capitalist world, is happening all over the world in pockets of mutual aid. However, interlocking crises continue to lead to burnout even within these spaces, and it must be addressed in a similar *radical* (e.g., “grasping at the root”) way.

However, external factors force and inform participants in mutual aid to step away from the work all the time. As observed in our one-year later follow-up survey, many of those involved in mutual aid in the early months of the pandemic were no longer—individually or collectively—involved in the work despite the ongoing needs associated with the pandemic. The demands that capitalism places upon existing systems, the community, and the individual are at odds with the realities of those parties' actual capacity. Even in an idealized system that meets community and individuals' needs, there will be factors that influence an individual to choose to leave a mutual aid project. Describing these scenarios as ending in “failure” seems inaccurate and does not illustrate the success of the project, regardless of its stage of implementation. This is especially true for mutual aid, which best characterizes success in an anticapitalistic framework, despite the predominance of capitalistic benchmarks used to define the success of a mutual aid project in our findings. This discordance suggests there is value in reframing mutual aid beyond capitalistic frameworks.

Essentially, in a capitalistic framework, burnout and sustainability are directly at odds. However, in an anticapitalistic framework, sustainability may involve some of the actions taken that would be described as burnout under capitalism. For example, temporarily changing the scope or scale of work, or even temporarily stepping away from the work, while at odds with capitalistic notions of success, may otherwise support long term sustainability of mutual aid. As our participants

describe their experiences of burnout, it seems their language firmly reflects the use of a capitalistic ideology, leading to misalignment with participant expectations and a subsequent disappointment with mutual aid as a whole.

We offer a conceptual response to burnout and subsequent recommendations to improve sustainable practice—essentially allowing for and expecting burnout to happen and creating fluid engagement options which in turn sustain the work. First, we can reframe participants' experiences of stepping away from the work not as failure due to burnout, but as an acceptable and anticipated outcome of mutual aid practices. From an anticapitalistic lens, it is acceptable and desirable for mutual aid projects to end while participants' focuses may change to new projects according to dynamic community needs. Practices such as political education, regular trainings, nonhierarchical frameworks, and equitable work structure are increasingly important to support participants' ability to work across roles and adapt to changing needs (Spade, 2021). Non-hierarchy and equity foster a structure that enables participants to step away from the work without undue emotional exhaustion or guilt.

In addition to this anti-capitalist reframing and training to accommodate burning out, structural change is needed to support long term sustainability by alleviating the social, emotional, and physical burdens placed on participants. While burnout occurs naturally, capitalistic drivers operate to exacerbate the deficits that oppress and disenfranchise, leading to unjust burnout. Carceral abolition, universal income, and community-driven services and support are the crucial current/future oriented tools to achieve and sustain collective models of community care.

Implications for Mutual Aid and Social Work

Our findings have important implications for mutual aid workers and organizations, as well as for social work education and practice. Both entities (e.g., mutual aid and social work) are impacted by internalized capitalism, especially saviorism, martyrdom, and self-sacrifice. This can be seen in the neoliberalized solution of “self-care” as an antidote to burnout, which aligns with extant scholarship on mutual aid (Bivens, 2021) and is deeply embedded in social work classrooms and practice (Moore et al., 2011). While practicing self-care is necessary (Moraes et al., 2020) and often improves emotional health (Alkema et al., 2008), the findings from our study emphasize the importance of also implementing collective and community care into the classroom. Based on these findings, social work educators, practitioners, and mutual aid workers may benefit from utilizing a framework of self-care *and* collective care in classroom, practice, or organizing structures. This moves away from the capitalistic notion of self-reliance and individualism and reinforces one of the core tenets of mutual aid: collective care.

Building a world based on care is not some idealized far-off future but is something social work and mutual aid groups must do in the here and now. As Gilmore (2020b) said, “Abolition is presence, it is life in rehearsal.” If the ultimate goal is to abolish capitalism, this is not some future we wait for, but one that we actively build and rehearse in the here and now. One way organizations—whether mutual aid, social work education, or social work practice—can build this future now is by creating spaces where burnout is prevented, but also understood, expected, and accepted. This is different than understanding burnout as a reasonable response to the status quo or that over-working ourselves is our duty, but rather understanding that humans have ebbs and flows of capacity, and that work and care structures should adapt to meet those fluctuating rhythms. Creating alternative structures centered on care and where we “do not dream of labor” provides flexibility as we work

to abolish capitalism—that perpetuates burnout—and simultaneously creates pockets to divest from capitalism in the here and now, within organizations and ourselves.

One way to incorporate life-sustaining practices into mutual aid and movement work is to learn from activist elders who have sustained this work for decades. For example, Suzanne Pharr (2021) shares her wisdom after six decades of organizing and activism against intersectional oppression in her book *Transformation: Toward a People's Democracy*, in which she shares her wins, losses, strategies, and lessons learned as inspiration and guidance to those in movement work. As another example, Miss Major Griffin-Gracy, a veteran of the Stonewall Rebellion, has spent the last 40 years organizing for incarcerated trans rights and shares her wisdom through the Trans, Gender-Variant and Intersex Justice project (Floating Ophelia Production, 2022). Plyler (2006) suggests such engagement may help us “envision an avenue through which to infuse our activist communities with greater respect for, and celebration of, those older organizers with long histories of struggle who can share their knowledge and skills—through intergenerational dialogues—with activists of all ages and movements” (para 4). This may be especially true for new mutual aid workers, or those who come to the work during a time of crisis, who are not connected to deep community networks and may feel the internalized capitalistic ideology of urgency and self-reliance to re-create the wheel instead of connecting with long-term community activists and mutual aid groups. Our findings suggest this may also be related to identity, with white, upper/middle class folks waking up to crises that marginalized communities have been awake to, and organizing within, for centuries. Those new to mutual aid, and especially those with privileged identities, may benefit from asking: *is it you who needs to create the work, or are there are others in your community with existing community networks whom you can connect with and support?*

The needs to fight saviorism, internalized capitalism, and reflect on one's role in the work are even more imperative for social work education and practice, as it does not have the pre-existing politic of mutual aid and is deeply embedded in capitalist structures. Our findings of burnout as deeply entrenched and caused by life under capitalism implies that capitalism is the problem, an idea that social work at large has yet to fully grasp. Social work education may benefit from using explicit liberation praxis, such as mutual aid and abolition, in educational settings and learning from these movements to incorporate liberation praxis in practice. A necessary first step is for social work to reflect on the ways we benefit and uphold neoliberalism and capitalism and learning from radical social change workers—including some social workers—to work toward creating systems that divest from capitalism with the goal of abolishing it and building new worlds based on collective care.

LIMITATIONS

Our primary limitation is overrepresentation of white participants in our sample compared to mutual aid and burnout in Black, Indigenous, and communities of color (BIPOC communities). Without adequate representation of diverse populations, there is a lack of adequate intersectionalism to inform our findings. BIPOC communities are often frontline communities most impacted by systems of oppression, specifically capitalistic and white supremacist structures which drive these groups toward harm reduction and mutual aid in outsized rates. Therefore, burnout and mutual aid are more likely to be experienced in these communities, which, when combined with other distinct cultural factors will lend significant nuance that has gone uncaptured in this space. In future

research, it will be important to address this with culturally relevant and meaningful methodology that is intersectional and transformative.

CONCLUSION

Our study documented the proliferation of burnout amidst the proliferation of mutual aid in the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic. Using Gorski's (2019) model of burnout as a guiding framework, we explored the emotional, physical, and cynical dimensions of burnout through a critical phenomenological lens. Ultimately, we found that the pressures of capitalism dominated, pervaded, and shaped burnout amongst participants—palpably—even though (and perhaps precisely because) mutual aid values and practices are in direct opposition to capitalist paradigms. Ultimately, we urge social workers, and social change workers, to push for explicitly anti-capitalist care structures to sustain and shape our future practices: paradigms where collective care reigns over self-care, where basic needs are met, and where it is possible to fluidly move in and out of 'the work' as capacities allow—in doing so, shaping sustainable care structures and disentangling burnout and failure.

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