Mutual Aid in New York City: Student-led Aid and Efforts

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I. Introduction

After Covid-19 onset, mutual aid networks responded to neighborhood needs. The emergence of mutual aid has served as a means for timely responding to the needs of the residents of a city while localizing the layer of aid to specific community needs.

Through this study, I will be focusing on college-campus mutual aid by conducting a case study of the 116th Initiative of Barnard College. By analyzing the organizing and mobilizing efforts of the 116th Initiative, I hope to examine the parallels between college campus mutual aid and neighborhood mutual aid groups and neighborhood-based initiatives. Additionally, I aim to uncover a deeper connection between current mutual aid operations and the existing literature surrounding mutual aid, radical care, and collective action.

II. Research Question(s)

- How do student-led mutual aid efforts model other forms of neighborhood mutual aid networks, or how have they created a new strain of the larger mutual aid framework?
- How has the role of COVID-19 led to the formation of a mutual aid group on campus?

III. Research Scope

This research is building on a 3-year study conducted by Dr. Mary Rocco, my mentor. The research focuses on college-campus mutual aid by conducting a case study of Barnard College's mutual aid group, 116th Initiative (a connection made by my mentor and Barnard faculty, Dr. Rocco).

IV. Methods & Data Collection

- Formulating a case study through fieldwork, interviews, etc.
- Mutual aid content tracking and analysis via websites, social media, and news reports
- Site visits to Astoria Mutual Aid
- Interviews with 116th Initiative’s organizers
- Coded interviews
- Content analysis of Barnard Zine archives
- Extracting neighborhood & demographic data of Barnard, Morningside Heights & NYC
- Content analysis of articles of 116th Initiative

V. Literature Review

- Term mutual aid was first coined by Pyrrce (Peter) Kropotkin (1902)
- Community organizing was seen after the devastation of Hurricane Sandy in 2012. This included the “Occupy Sandy” relief efforts. Therefore, mutual aid is not a “post-2020” awakening. (Shepard & Burghardi, 2015)
- According to Spade (2020), the Black Panther Party “inspired many other organizations to “build shared analysis of problems as collective rather than individual”
- Mutual aid inflated due to inefficiencies within the system/institution. (Mould et al., 2022)
- Continual transformation of the mutual aid model vs prescribed model (Alonso & Samway, 2022)
- Breaking away from the non-profit-industrial-complex (NPIC) (Alonso & Samway, 2022)

VI. Findings

- Major similarities to neighborhood based mutual aid groups & the existing literature
- Key differences point out the specific challenges of being a college aid mutual aid group/led by students
- “We’re college students, we have midterms, we’re at an institution that’s like supposed to be academically rigorous” (Kristen, organizer of 116th)
- Replication at other college campuses
- Barnard’s culture of aid: notable alumni like Dean Spade, who has written books and informational guides on mutual aid, COVID-19 related zines to share resources to communities
- Reciprocal relationship between community members (ones attaining/benefiting from aid) & those organizing mutual aid – ensure sustainability in mutual aid efforts, center the efforts based on community needs – expand this movement of community-based care and support

VII. Data Analysis

- Barnard Student Population's Family Income Bracket
- Columbia Student Population's Family Income Bracket
- Astoria Mutual Aid's Free Store Wednesday Event

Leadership Structure: 
- "116th operates using horizontal means, having no clear “head” titles. This form of leadership is very “experimental” and believes that it does not function all the time." (Menasha/Fern, organizer of 116th Initiative)

Fragility:
- "closed during the early portion of the year, simply because” they “didn’t have enough people running it” and many of the students felt “kind of...burnt out.” (Kristen, organizer of 116th Initiative)

Grassroots-led & insistence on anti-institutional lens:
- “that like, mutual aid is a leftist practice...based in grassroots practices...don’t think it should...belong to any higher up or institution.” (Kristen, organizer of 116th Initiative)
- "It’s for student by student.” (Jaella, volunteer of 116th Initiative)

Learning, unlearning, & release:
- "But I think as we like, grow and learn the different ways that fundraising can occur, we get better each time, and we’re able to raise more money or raise money in different ways that we haven’t before, we haven’t thought of before." (Menasha/Fern, organizer of 116th Initiative)

VIII. Implications

- Major similarities to neighborhood based mutual aid groups & the existing literature
- Key differences point out the specific challenges of being a college aid mutual aid group by students
- “We’re college students, we have midterms, we’re at an institution that’s like supposed to be academically rigorous” (Kristen, organizer of 116th)
- Replication at other college campuses
- Barnard’s culture of aid: notable alumni like Dean Spade, who has written books and informational guides on mutual aid, COVID-19 related zines to share resources to communities
- Reciprocal relationship between community members (ones attaining/benefiting from aid) & those organizing mutual aid – ensure sustainability in mutual aid efforts, center the efforts based on community needs – expand this movement of community-based care and support

References:
- Thomas, M. (2023, April 15th). Interview. [Zoom call].