

MUTUAL AID AND THIRD PLACES DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC: INTERSECTIONS IN NOVA SCOTIA & NEW BRUNSWICK

JOHN DALE
UNIVERSITY OF GUELPH

INTRODUCTION

The Maritimes have, through a comparative lens, suffered historically as an economic periphery of Canada. At a new crossroad of growth, the region has to some extent shed its story of decline, 'defeatism' and intra-regional outmigration. In turn, the Maritimes are faced with new challenges tied to the rising cost of living.^{1 2 3}

The introduction of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020 has not only accelerated key pressures reflective of this growth, but it has, much like elsewhere, created unique challenges for Maritimers. With this in mind, caring economies, more specifically geographies of Mutual Aid, have shifted in response to this and have taken form in some cases around digital 'third places'.

This poster highlights literature, actors of interest and research design as part of an ongoing MSc thesis project.

MUTUAL AID

Mutual Aid is a way in which people help one another. This is distinct from charity, which has a distinct provider and receiver of help, and which can choose to withdraw aid.^{4 5} Mutual Aid involves an exchange with others relatively equal in power, such as wider family, friends, or community members. It involves building and sustaining relationships, serves to fill policy and program gaps, and addresses community needs.⁵

Mutual Aid can be anything as involved as joining a tenants union or creating a community garden together. It can also be as simple as carpooling with others, doing yardwork for a neighbour, or sharing information online. While Mutual Aid doesn't need to have an immediate exchange of benefits, it contributes to a relationship that can ultimately benefit everyone involved.

(DIGITAL) THIRD PLACES

Coined by American sociologist Ray Oldenburg, the term "Third Place" refers to the spots 'in-between' in a community.^{6 7} This is contrasted to with first places (one's home) and second places (one's workplace). Third places serve a variety of roles, while also functioning as venues for conversation, knowledge mobilization and community-building.⁷ In rural Canadian communities, these can take the shape of a variety of spaces: community halls, recreation centers, places of worship, parks, restaurants, and more. Tons of mutual aid happens in these spaces!

Third places have somewhat more recently transcended to the digital plane in literature.^{8 9} With a move online in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, to what extent have the geographies of Mutual Aid digitized?

PROPOSED RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- What is the relationship between mutual aid and third places in rural Nova Scotia?
- What do these geographies look like?
- How has this relationship changed with the COVID-19 pandemic, if at all?
- What gaps might we reveal if we answer these questions, and how do these items change the way we think about social capital and community welfare?

METHODOLOGY

- Academic & gray literature review: due to the decentralized nature of Mutual Aid, most place-based literature on the topic is gray, 'informal', and often generated collectively or alone in a non-professional channel, thus an emphasis has been placed on such literature to reflect this.
- Semi-structured interviews with the 'organizers' or spokespeople of ~10 pre-identified Mutual Aid groups in Nova Scotia and New Brunswick (housing advocacy groups, health-centered groups, community stipend funds, migrant advocacy collectives, food security projects, etc.).
 - Interviewing public-facing informants in these roles is important as aid groups are built on mutual trust, often between vulnerable or insecure persons. Research work could erode or undermine this.
- eSurvey to get a sense of Mutual Aid outside of explicitly defined community-level groups, and to explore everyday actors who are not outward-facing (qualitative and quantitative components).

GRAY LITERATURE

- Suggests that a number of explicit Mutual Aid projects have popped up in 2020 and 2021 as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic and the obstacles it posed
- A non-insignificant portion of these groups are based primarily online
- Some of these projects proved themselves temporary; are now defunct as restrictions have lifted, some have explicitly cited there no longer being a need for the communities they serve
- Other groups have slightly shifted their raison d'être or purpose when this occurs

WHAT'S NEXT?

- Tweaks to Research Design
- Data Collection and Analysis

What key literature or tools could be valuable in this research work that we might have missed?

Feedback encouraged!

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