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Summer Skye Allison

Hollins University, strix0907@gmail.com

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Fostering Inclusivity and Resilience:
Challenges to Community-Based Empowerment for Trans Elders in Roanoke, Virginia

Summer Allison
Sociology Thesis
Dr. Ashleigh Breske
May 11th, 2023

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my deepest appreciation to my two lovely thesis readers Dr. Ashleigh Breske and Dr. Abubakarr Jalloh. Dr. Breske, thank you from the bottom of my heart for encouraging me to complete this research, even when I was adamant that I did not want to. This experience has ignited confidence in my writing ability and is now my most proud academic achievement. Dr. Jalloh, thank you for giving me thoughtful feedback on how to craft a genuine piece of research. It has been an honor to learn from both of you.

I am indebted to Dr. Samantha Rosenthal for connecting me with trans activists in Roanoke, Virginia and being willing to lend a helping hand to me without a second thought. Likewise, I am extremely grateful for my interviewees Dolly-Davis and Erika Joyner, their accomplishments for the Queer community in Roanoke are unlike any other. Thank you both for advocating, despite hardships, to ensure Queer youth like myself can access organizations and resources that provide an oasis in our time of need.

Special thanks to Chanelle Sears, Dr. Chris Florio, Lindsey Breitwieser, and Courtney Chenette for being my personal cheerleaders and a continuous font of knowledge for me to benefit from. I am made more proud of my research knowing it has been shaped by your labor of mentorship and support.

You all have in one way or another enriched my research, and my life, indelibly.

Thank you.

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Abstract: As popular media disseminates harmful “culture war” rhetoric regarding trans folk it has become increasingly necessary to amplify their voices to give them power over how they are perceived by society. Though political discourse regarding trans children has become a hot-button topic, this paper seeks to explore the overlooked experiences of trans elders as they contend with intersecting instances of ageism and transphobia from individuals and institutions in Roanoke, Virginia. Since community-based organizations like the Roanoke Diversity Center and Ladies and Gents of the Blue Ridge have been instrumental to strengthening the LGBTQ+ community in Roanoke, this research focuses on their contributions, as well as the challenges they face, to meeting the unique social and medical needs of trans elders. To enlighten us, interviews with prominent elder trans activists have been conducted and dissected to reveal how we might cultivate empowering spaces for trans folk of all ages.

Keywords: Transgender, Elderly, Transphobia, Ageism, Empowerment, Intersectionality, Community-based organizations, Mutual aid, Nonprofits, Southwest Virginia, Roanoke,

Introduction

“I think the resources are very thin. And I think that the only way we're surviving right now is by the good graces of other people...” This was the response Dolly-Davis, co-founder of the Ladies and Gents of the Blue Ridge Transgender Alliance in Roanoke, Virginia gave when asked how helpful she perceives large nonprofits are to the transgender community living there. For marginalized populations like transgender people, the good graces of others are more reliable than trying to appeal to institutions that routinely fail to meet their needs. As if existing in an often unaccepting society were not challenging enough, many times gender identity overlaps with other disadvantaged identities like old age, further complicating an individual’s relationship with institutional and societal oppression. As of right now, one of the most blatant forms of systemic oppression facing LGBTQ+ people in the United States is a tremendous effort to legislate strategic attacks on our rights as people, our ability to access Queer-centered culture, and with a particularly heinous focus on erasing transgender people from society. While the vast majority of anti-LGBTQ+ bills have been defeated in the legislature, several have been signed into law as recently as March of 2023. For instance, on March 2, 2023, Tennessee Governor Bill Lee signed SB0001 and SB0003 into law at the same time. SB0001 prohibits health care providers from “...performing on a minor or administering to a minor a medical procedure if the performance or administration of the procedure is for the purpose of enabling a minor to identify with, or live as, a purported identity inconsistent with the minor’s sex” (Tennessee General Assembly, 2023). This bill prevents all trans kids from accessing life-saving health care and purposefully de-transitions those who are “out.” It also demonizes health care providers assisting trans patients to promote public fear and distrust surrounding their practice, exacerbating the

already aggravated relationship between people and health care institutions as a whole. SB0003, also known as the “drag felony bill,” by the bill’s opponents classifies drag performances as an “adult cabaret” performance and criminalizes drag performances, “...on public property or in a location [where it]...could be viewed by a person who is not an adult” Tennessee General Assembly, 2023). By classifying drag performances as adult cabaret performances, this confines them to night clubs and over twenty-one bar settings. This bill also claims drag performances are obscene and “pornographic” in nature. This malicious mischaracterization of drag artists and performances promotes public fear and seeks to erase displays of Queer culture from mainstream, heteronormative, society. This would make accessing Queer-centered culture more difficult for Queer folk as well, depriving them of full participation in society. Right now, LGBTQ+ advocates are seeking litigation to reverse these two bills that endanger young trans lives and infringe on drag artists’ first amendment right to perform drag outside of night clubs. These two bills alone offer insight as to the direction anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric is moving in the United States. With vigilance and swift action on the part of LGBTQ+ organizations and allies, hopefully we can weather this storm of hateful legislation with grace and love until it is over, for now.

Anti-LGBTQ+ legislation and rhetoric is by no means a new concept only seen in today’s political news broadcasts and legislative sessions. A typical public school curriculum dismisses the experiences of Queer Americans, ignoring historical instances of oppression and major civil rights successes alike. Recounting historical events, it is plain to see that each time a major attack (whether legislative or rhetorical) on Queer people occurs, it is met with extraordinary push-back from Queer people and allies that still make impressive strides in civil protections and general LGBTQ+ acceptance to this day. For this introduction, it is worth highlighting several influential

events that have demonstrated the resilient nature of Queer people in the face of widespread, ignorance-induced hatred and systemic oppression. As of 2023, only six states in the United States mandate LGBTQ+ history in public school curriculum, so it is safe to assume most readers will require this brief history lesson (Prescott, 2021).

In the 1950s, the well-known Red Scare occurred in the United States following World War II. American students will learn about this event almost certainly; but what public school curriculum does not typically address is the simultaneous Lavender Scare in which gay men and lesbian women were fired from government jobs and purged from the military. Gays and lesbians were dismissed from government and military positions because of a perceived inability to protect the country due to personal moral failing or risk of mental illness (Valocchi, 2004). Simultaneously, the Federal Investigation Bureau (FBI) launched “[an] obsessive [investigation]” (Charles, 2010) into three notable gay rights organizations: the Daughters of Bilitis, the Mattachine Society and ONE (formerly known as ONE, Inc.), that were primarily focused on pushing for the rights of gay men and lesbian women referring to themselves as homophiles. In the face of hostile interference from the FBI, gay and lesbian liberation activists continued to publish ONE magazine and The Ladder containing pro-gay literature and contributions from homophile authors and artists. ONE magazine and the Ladder are now credited as two of the most prolific publications of the 1950s helping to promote visibility for gays and lesbians and connect homophiles across the country as the magazines were available by mail order.

In 1969, the infamous Stonewall riots occurred at a gay bar in Greenwich Village, a neighborhood sitting in the lower west side of New York City. Police raids on LGBTQ+ spaces were common in large cities at the time, but what differentiated Stonewall from other raids was the courage patrons had to fight back. Instead of enduring humiliating treatment at the hands of

the police, the patrons' responses "...initiated a riot that lasted into the night," (Armstrong et al., 2006). Now, Stonewall is oftentimes credited with instigating the Gay Liberation Movement. That is to say, Stonewall became a mythic event denoting a collective resistance to the many years of mistreatment LGBTQ+ people had faced and the anger that their spaces were not safe nor respected, especially by the police.

Throughout the late 1970s and early 1980s, the HIV/AIDS epidemic was emerging in large cities across the United States, including New York and Los Angeles. At the time, HIV/AIDS primarily infected two marginalized populations: injection drug users and sexually active gay males (Ruel et al., 2006). As a result, the media was slow to direct attention to the emerging infectious disease; but once it had, the stigmatization of gay men was harsh, even going as far as to call the HIV/AIDS epidemic a "gay plague." Though the social and political landscape of the HIV/AIDS epidemic undoubtedly illuminated homophobic sentiments among institutions and individuals alike, the HIV/AIDS epidemic did ultimately lead to the progression of civil rights and liberties for gay men and lesbian women specifically due to heightened media coverage of the two populations.

By studying LGBTQ+ history, everyone stands to gain an enriched understanding of how Queer Americans, like many other communities seeking civil rights, have been profoundly adept at collectively organizing around a common identity and vision for the future. While the LGBTQ+ community celebrates more rights and privileges today than it has in the recent past, there is still much progression to be made for specific members of that diverse community of gender and sexual minorities. Transgender and gender non-conforming people are currently under intense attack by parents, politicians, the media, militant hate groups, and many members of society that believe anti-LGBTQ+ propaganda presented to them by authority figures.

Whereas gay men and lesbian women have achieved more acceptance from society than ever before, transgender individuals have not benefited from LGBTQ+ liberation movements to the same degree. Suffering from a lack of resources curated to assist and integrate them into an often unaccepting society, transgender people have unfortunately become one of today's most outstanding public enemies and culture war talking points.

Advocacy and support for the rights of transgender people can come from avenues beyond individual and political figures. Community-based and nonprofit organizations have made significant impacts on the larger movement by promoting visibility of LGBTQ+ people and raising public awareness regarding policies affecting their lives for better or worse. The ability of organizations to continue operating does not happen in a vacuum, however, it depends on proper application and sustained human, financial, and physical capital. A more comprehensive understanding of the barriers to Federal aid for community-based organizations can be gathered by examining an interesting source: the White House Archives website. In 2001, Former President George W. Bush signed two executive orders in an attempt to involve faith-based organizations in the distribution of Federal funds and services. Bush's concern was that small, faith-based organizations were not given equal consideration compared to secular institutions competing for Federal funding (Firoz & Matthews, 2002). Though Bush's Faith-Based Initiative was critiqued as being in violation of the First Amendment, the same barriers to local faith-based organizations apply to secular community-based organizations.

According to the White House Archives website, many of the barriers faced by local faith-based and secular community-based organizations arise due to lack of organization infrastructure. Federal funding is highly regulated and favors organizations with the ability to meet each, "...social, environmental, legal, and health concern," despite many of these being,

“...irrelevant to many social service providers,” (White House Archives, “Barriers to Community-Based Organizations”). Once organizations have passed these requirements to be considered for Federal funding they must still contend with limited access to information about Federal grant availability and, eventually, meet the detailed requirements and deadlines of completing a Federal grant application. More experienced organizations that have already obtained Federal funding are familiar with the process and may hire staff to watch for Federal funding opportunities and write Federal grant applications. Previous grantees have a competitive edge for future funding because their organization has networked with Federal programs. In some cases, Federal programs have been known to provide previous grantees an, “...unfair advantage...by building a bias into the application process,” (White House Archives, “Barriers to Community-Based Organizations”). Federal programs that purposefully reinforce biases in favor of previous grantees make it arduously difficult for community-based organizations to establish themselves and compete for funding that would help them build and develop their own organizational infrastructure.

Many Federal programs offering funding require applicants to have a formal 501(c)(3) designation, making them classified as a nonprofit organization. To prove an organization is a nonprofit it could take, “...hundreds of dollars in filing and attorney’s fees and require a number of months to prepare the application then win approval...” (White House Archives, “Barriers to Community-Based Organizations”). At the end of the day, though nonprofit organizations are given preferential treatment and are more likely to be awarded Federal funding over community-based organizations, they may not be as effective at local community engagement. Leaders of community-based organizations may be more aware of the needs of their target

population, including members with more than one marginalized identity, such as elderly transgender individuals contending with both age and gender discrimination.

Older transgender people are unique from others in that their age often denotes certain privileges like wisdom or wealth but their gender identity denotes certain adversities. Identities become intersectional when they are “...overlapping, creating multiple levels of social injustice” (Crenshaw, 2016). The social injustices faced by older transgender people stem from both their age which is often overlooked as not marginalized enough to warrant more assistance through social programming. And their identity as transgender, which garners more attention from community-based organizations and nonprofits, but is currently being subjected to a slew of anti-transgender legislation and ridicule. As independent concepts, old age and transgender identity encounter their own separate stigmas and negative associations that vary within cultures and throughout history.

Disclaimer On Lived Experiences and Monoliths

The perception that marginalized groups of people are monolithic is harmful and counterproductive to this research as a whole. As a researcher, I feel it is my personal responsibility to explain the concept of a monolith and debunk its existence. A monolithic society is one with a rigid, homogenous set of customs and values. Within the context of this research, the monolith would apply to all transgender individuals by presenting them as a homogenous group of people without unique experiences. This is simply untrue. In the same way that cisgendered individuals are recognized as unique from one another with diverging struggles, triumphs, and personalities, transgender people must be viewed the same way. To view them as homogenous is to devalue them as a whole by not recognizing them as independent people in the same way cisgendered people are viewed by default. With this in mind, the interviews with older

transgender people in this research express the thoughts and feelings of the interviewee alone.

Please keep this in mind when reading this research so as to not contribute to the prevailing monolithic standards wrongly placed on transgender individuals of all ages.

Chapter 1

Study Purpose & Research Questions

Despite decades of attempted erasure (especially of the Black, Indigenous, and People of Color Queer communities), Roanoke, Virginia contains a rich and vibrant Queer history. The city is regarded as a “progressive bubble” that is well endowed with activists and organizations seeking to serve marginalized and otherwise disadvantaged populations (Lichtenstein, 2020). The purpose of this research is to amplify the underrepresented experiences of trans elders living in Roanoke, Virginia and to analyze how two well-established community-based organizations operating there empower disadvantaged LGBTQ+ populations. To guide this analysis, I have devised a set of central questions that will help readers further understand the utility of this research. To answer the guiding questions listed below, I will rely on primary source data including interviews with trans elders and quotations from community-based organizations’ websites. The research questions are as follows:

What are the particular social and medical needs of trans elders living in Roanoke, Virginia?

How do community-based organizations in Roanoke, Virginia cater to these needs?

Are the services provided by community-based organizations more or less empowering to trans elders than large nonprofit organizations?
--

Methodology

Since the goal of this research is to convey the lived experiences of older transgender people and the ways community-based organizations assist them, this methodology will rely heavily on primary source data. This primary source data will come in two forms: interviews with older transgender people and community-based organization leaders as well as quotes from

the organizations' websites. In addition, this research will include a discourse analysis on the intersectional experiences of older transgender people and the theory of empowerment through mutual aid.

I chose to conduct interviews with my desired demographic for a couple particular reasons. First, because academic spaces in the United States have historically been created and maintained as a pipeline to societal positions of power and simultaneously excluded marginalized people from participation in an attempt to limit their prestige and influence. By studying United States history, one will discover that universities were created to be the wealthy white man's domain and exclude all else. Over time, the right to access higher education was gradually expanded to permit lower class white men, white women, people of color, and students with disabilities certain rights and protections pertaining to higher education. The history of higher education in the United States requires its own separate analysis paper; however, it is worth noting that the exclusionary practices within higher education that promote discrimination still persists despite affirmative action efforts. One need only understand that public four-year institutions, which continue to be the most accessible institutions for marginalized people, have reported a 78% increase in the average tuition cost (Jessica Bryant, 2023). It is crucial that these institutions remain affordable to the average American student because they, "...serve as an engine for upward mobility," (Marshall, 2019). Raising costs at public universities contributes to the continued exclusion of marginalized people from higher education who cannot possibly afford to pay their way through college, especially if they qualify as a non-traditional student. With all of this in mind, it is my hope that this research will elicit thought about how important it is for academics who are poised to assume positions of power to understand the needs of

overlooked marginalized communities of people including, but not limited to, trans elders. Empathetic, well-educated leaders are essential to continued social progression for all people.

Secondly, I chose to represent older transgender people in my research because though there has been an increase in public awareness of transgender identity, we as a people still disregard age as an identity capable of having a profound effect on our lives beyond the physical signs of aging. In fact, some people are of the staunch belief that identifying as transgender is a “new phenomena” made up by a generation of over-stimulated young people. This could not be farther from the truth. It is my hope that the interviews with older transgender people demonstrated in this research will stimulate curiosity about the diverse experiences of trans elders and how they might seek empowerment over their unique social and medical needs.

Research Design

I conducted interviews for this research because they provide trans elders with the opportunity to represent themselves, instead of relying on the researcher to make inferences about their feelings and thoughts based on literature alone. Relying too heavily on a researcher’s interpretation of a marginalized group of people increases the likelihood of bias on the part of the researcher and stands to disenfranchise the studied population. Additionally, I chose to conduct interviews because of the inherent value of documenting complex worthwhile experiences from overlooked populations. This idea is rooted in ‘critical humanism’ that seeks to bring a voice to marginalized people to invalidate misinformation perpetuated about them by official sources, such as the media (Hammersley, 2013).

To design this research, I considered the unbalanced sources of power that dictate the lives of trans elders and limit the operations of community-based organizations. Because trans

elders live on the margins of two disadvantaged identities, they are vulnerable to mistreatment by other members of society and large institutions such as government, healthcare, and the economy. Their lack of financial and social capital makes it difficult for trans elders to depend on themselves entirely so they must at some point engage with more powerful people and institutions. Similarly, community-based organizations that seek to serve trans elders are less well-funded and must rely on collaboration with wealthy well-resources nonprofit organizations that use an unbalanced power dynamic to its advantage. I believe studying and understanding these power dynamics that take advantage of trans elders and disempower community-based organizations is a necessary first step toward destigmatizing trans elders and strengthening the local organizations that allow them to exercise control over their social and medical needs that promote their overall happiness and well-being.

To recruit interviewees for this research, emails were sent to prominent LGBTQ+ organizations in southwest Virginia including Ladies and Gents of the Blue Ridge and the Roanoke Diversity Center. To qualify for participation in these interviews candidates needed to either identify as being transgender and be age 50 or older or be a representative from a community-based LGBTQ+ organization in southwest Virginia. Participants must have consented to an interview lasting between 60-90 minutes long with the option of skipping certain questions and opting out of the interview at any time. Interviewee quotes in this research represent dialogue that I have been given the expressed approval of said interviewee to use within this research. To help guide this study, a set of nine questions were devised on a range of topics such as intersectional experiences, access to medical and social assistance, and feelings on mutual aid versus nonprofit charities. The interview questions are as follows:

What is your age and how do you identify yourself?
Do you believe your age and gender identity in tandem have had a significant impact on your well-being such as social functioning, ability to make a living, and/or access to the same treatment and resources as younger, cisgendered people?
Do you know of any stigmas or hardships that older transgender people face that younger transgender people do not?
Would you say that your medical and social needs have changed over time and if so, how?
Do you believe there is a fair and equitable number of resources available to older transgender people or do you think there is still work to be done? Can you give specific examples of changes you believe are necessary?
Do you currently hold a position within a community-based organization like Ladies and Gents of the Blue Ridge or have you in the past?
Have you been a member of any LGBTQ+ focused community-based organizations and do you believe they empowered you in some way?
Are you familiar with the concept of mutual aid? How is mutual aid incorporated into the framework of the community-based organizations you're associated with?
Do you have experience that suggests community-based organizations have been more helpful to you as a marginalized person than traditional non-profits or charity?

These questions were deliberately left as open-ended questions to allow for the interviewee to feel like their intersectional experiences are valued and because some perspectives cannot be conveyed using an answer scale. The personal nature of these interview questions could lend themselves to euphemistic answers or silence from interviewees. To encourage honest answers and provide a sense of comfortable anonymity all interviewees were given the option of using a pseudonym instead of their legal names.¹ In addition to interviews with community-based organization leaders, an analysis of their organization's mission statement and areas of assistance was conducted to provide crucial information about the priorities of individual community-based

¹ The Institutional Review Board at Hollins University approved giving interviewees the *option* of using a pseudonym during their interviews. One participant chose to use her legal name and the other chose an altered version of her name to avoid further violence against her and her family.

organizations operating in Roanoke, Virginia and how they seek to empower their members. Furthermore, helpful interventions implemented by community-based organizations were compared and contrasted to intervention strategies used by nonprofit organizations combating the similar issues facing the transgender community. This study does not include an objective measure of which type of organization is more helpful; however, readers of this research will reach a conclusion of their own.

Over the course of two chapters, a discourse analysis will be conducted in an attempt to answer the research questions explained in the *research questions* section. The tentative answers to these questions will be derived from the interviews done with trans elders detailing their experiences within their identity and their perceptions of community-based organizations and nonprofit organizations. The discourse analysis will include quotations from the interviewees as well as my interpretation of how these terms, phrases, and observations fit into the larger theme of unbalanced power dynamics between trans elders and society as well as community-based and nonprofit organizations. The purpose of the discourse analysis is to guide readers in interpreting for themselves ways to dismantle unbalanced power dynamics within society and institutions to promote equitable outcomes for marginalized identities.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

In this chapter I examine sociological theories regarding a range of topics to ground this research within the context of existing knowledge on intersectional identity, ageism and transphobia, social justice, empowerment, and mutual aid to create a theoretical framework for understanding how age and trans identity influence the social and medical needs of trans elders as well as how community-based organizations empower them. By examining these theoretical concepts, the audience should be able to recognize how social identities are formed, the power imbalance social identities can create within institutions and society and, finally, how this applies to those of old age and transgender identity specifically. Once this connection is made, it will be possible to integrate the concepts of social justice and empowerment theory as a means of uplifting marginalized identities, particularly through the use of community-based mutual aid.

In addition to contextualizing existing theoretical concepts, this chapter also seeks to establish a common basis of understanding between the audience and those interviewed at the end of this research. Without the theoretical threads connecting intersectional identity to ageism and transphobia through the analysis of historical discrimination, power dynamics, and stigma, it might prove difficult for cisgendered, heterosexual audience members to truly grasp the lived experiences of older transgender people, including those highlighted via interviews.

Intersectionality

Activist and civil rights scholar, Kimberlé Crenshaw, was featured by TedTalk in 2016 to explain two new concepts she had devised in the 1990's to describe multidimensional discrimination on the basis of identity. The lecture began with an activity. Each audience member

was asked to stand up and if Crenshaw said aloud a name they were unfamiliar with, sit back down in their seat. A small handful of audience members were left standing at the end of Crenshaw's demonstration. The list of names was revealed to contain two sets, the first being African American men who were killed by the police within the last two and a half years, and the other being a list of African American women who were subjected to the same treatment by the police within the same time span. This activity that Crenshaw began her lecture with underscored the core message of her lecture: a person with multiple marginalized identities, such as race and gender, was less likely to receive acknowledgement of mistreatment and remain overlooked in society.

The only feature distinguishing the two groups was gender. Crenshaw notes that police violence against African American men and violence against women are two distinct issues that should theoretically overlap when African American women are killed by the police, but for some unconscionable reason they do not in the minds of many people (Crenshaw, 2016). In Crenshaw's opinion, one way to solve this issue is to "reframe" the way the media depicts police brutality. Since the media disproportionately depicts African American men as the victims of police violence, this leaves us functionally blind to the reality of how often African American women receive the same treatment. If intersectional identities were represented in the media as complicated, multidimensional experiences that highlight overlapping systems of oppression then perhaps the systemic issues of police brutality and violence against women would be acknowledged in the ways they affect African American women.

Crenshaw coined the term "intersectionality" to describe the idea of a converging intersection where a person's identity is subjected to multiple interlocking systems of social injustices, such as being a gender and racial minority in the case of African American women.

During her TedTalk lecture, Crenshaw also recounts an experience she had with a client during her time as a discrimination lawyer. The client, Emma DeGraffenreid, sued General Motors on the basis of racial and gender discrimination after their hiring practices excluded her from work at one of its facilities. At the time, there was no framing for the issue Emma was facing. General Motors hired white women for secretary work and African American men for industrial work, but would not hire her due to both her race and gender identity. Crenshaw recognized that Emma stood at the intersection of racist and sexist hiring policies, and coined the phrase “Emma’s dilemma” to describe what many intersectional identities experience as discrimination on multiple levels.

Sociologist Patricia Hill Collins examines how intersectionality is conceptualized and the possibility of a post-intersectionality future in her book, *Intersectionality as Critical Social Theory*. Collins begins by praising Kimberlé Crenshaw for explaining the concept of intersectionality with a metaphor. Describing Emma’s dilemma using the visual of two intersecting roads was ingenious according to Collins because, “racism and sexism may be conceptualized as distinctive [structures],...examining them from where they intersect provides new angles of vision of each system of power [and] how they cross and diverge from one another (Collins, 2019). Another advantage of explaining intersectionality as a metaphor is that any subordinated identities can stand in for race and gender. By introducing any two marginalized identities to Crenshaw’s hypothetical intersection Collins believes sociologists can, “...[solve] social problems brought on by multiple seemingly separate systems of power.”

Though Collins praises intersectionality as the beginning of reckoning with interwoven oppressed identities, she proposes there are better alternative metaphors to Crenshaw’s. One such metaphor was published by sociologist Ivy Ken and uses sugar to symbolize and envision a

“historically grounded, fluid understanding of intersectionality.” Sugar as a commodity is capable of traveling the globe to reveal the interconnectedness of capitalism, racism, and sexism. Another metaphor to rival Crenshaw’s is that of Chicana feminist Gloria Anzaldúa, who uses the borderlands between Texas and the United States as a symbol of social hierarchy, power relations, and navigating space as an outsider.

Collins argues that, while Crenshaw was pivotal for providing a basis for thinking about converging and diverging systems of oppression, Ken and Anzaldúa offer a deeper understanding of intersectionality with their examples grounded within social reality. However, Collins gives immense credit to Crenshaw’s theory of intersectionality for its ability to be used as a heuristic guide to social problem solving. Using intersectionality as a heuristic, Collins claims society has been able to transform social institutions like work, family, education, health, and similar spaces by asking questions about what the established power structure of a particular social institution is and how certain policies can be shifted to be more inclusive or less exploitative. According to Collins, this way of thinking has, “[signaled] a sea change in how to do scholarship.”

Ageism

In *Contemporary Perspectives on Ageism*, Scholars Liat Ayalon and Clemens Tesch-Römer deconstruct and analyze the theory of ageism in an attempt to find a cohesive definition of it. As we shall see, a precise definition of ageism is contested amongst age theorists and researchers.

The first person to use the term ageism was physician and leader of the National Institute on Aging, Rober Butler. In 1969, Butler defined ageism as, “prejudice by one age group against another group” (Ayalon et al., 2018). Remarkably, Butler’s early definition of ageism recognizes

biases perpetrated against young people as well as older people. In his definition, Butler specifically designates the, “middle age group,” as the soul source instigating oppressive forces onto the younger and older generations. Instead of focusing on the subtle ways that younger, middle, and older generations project their bias toward one another, Butler attempted to boil the attitudes of middle age people down to a single cause. Butler’s reasoning led him to conclude that since middle age people are expected to provide for the welfare of dependent children and the elderly they grow biased and resentful over time for the perceived helplessness of the other age groups. Butler would later reconceptualize his definition of ageism and attempt to make it more akin to racism or sexism. In 1975 Butler defined ageism as, “a process of systematic stereotyping and discrimination against people because they are old, just as racism and sexism accomplish this for color and gender.”

As for why Butler chose the term, “ageism,” the progression of social movements and pressure to recognize systemic forms of oppression caused a heightened awareness and usage of other well-known terms describing discrimination based on identity. In the 1980s, the better known, “isms,” included racism and sexism, which depicted negative stereotypes about how racial minorities and women should behave and what privileges they should receive within society. Similarly to racist and sexist stereotypes, “ageism can be either positive or negative, yet it tends to carry negative consequences by creating self-fulfilling prophecies.” Since ageism, “[manifests] as attitudes, behaviours, and institutional practices and policies directed towards older adults,” it is easy to understand why Butler aspired to compare it to racial and gender discrimination at the time.

Ayalon et al. (2018) introduces two micro-level theories to explain how ageism can arise from the actions of an individual. The first is social identity theory that proposes that everyone

identifies two distinct kinds of people, their in-group and an additional out-group. A person's in-group shares an identity with them they feel should be highly favored in society since that would benefit them directly. Because differences between a person's in-group and out-group leads to direct competition for privileges and a need to affirm one's own identity to the in-group, social identity theory, "posits that people want to have a positive self-identity [and] achieve this goal by demonstrating biases... between in-groups and out-groups." The out-group faces discrimination to varying degrees specifically in reference to their identity or intersectional identities.

Social identity theory can be applied to age groups to help further justify Robert Butler's definition of ageism. Butler identifies three main age groups, younger, middle, and older-age. For the sake of this example, the middle age group will consist of the in-group and younger and older ages will consist of the out-group. The middle age group benefits from certain privileges that the younger and older groups do not. For instance, middle age people are generally expected to provide for the welfare of the young and old. The young are their children that cannot fend for themselves and need mental stimulation and parental guidance. The old are their parents that may be experiencing mental and physical decline, thus creating the unique needs associated with caring for aging parents. Because the young and old rely on the middle age group, they face particular vulnerability due to the dependent versus independent power dynamic. If the middle age group decides to stigmatize the out-group they can benefit from elevating their social status and acquire advantages within society. This is why prejudice against young and old people is so popular amongst middle age people, though this example can be applied to many other instances of racism, sexism, classism, ableism, and the like.

The second micro-level theory is the stereotype embodiment theory. This theory demonstrates the harmful effect that stereotypes perpetuated by the in-group have on the out-group's self-perception. Stereotypes about how younger and older generations behave permeate throughout spaces reserved for middle aged people to hold discourse. In the specific case of older people, stereotyping can best be described as a, "lifetime exposure to negative stereotypes," that can eventually lead to, "internalization of ageism." Individuals may be harmed when they begin to internalize stereotypes, whether positive or negative, because holding these beliefs about oneself as true has been shown to produce self-fulfilling prophecies. A self-fulfilling prophecy occurs when internal beliefs influence the physical environment and are often adhered to unwittingly. For example, an older person exposed to the stereotype that age denotes wisdom may begin to take on the role of a teacher and deliberately seek out younger people in need of advice because they are so, "experienced," according to the stereotype.

Though it is easy to conceptualize ageism on an individual level, systemic ageism, much like systemic racism or sexism, is more covert yet still injurious. Systemic ageism is perpetuated at the meso-level amongst large groups, organizations, and social bodies. Depending on the organization, some of these bodies may prove to be quite impactful. Where a person attends school, goes to work, or eventually retires are each subject to the influence of larger, more powerful bodies of people not completely devoid of ageist policies and practices.

One particular practice encouraged by meso-level institutions is known as "age-based segregation." Similar to the rhetoric surrounding race-based segregation of the 18th and 19th centuries in the United States, current day age-based segregation is thought of as "natural" and goes largely unquestioned (sometimes even unrecognized) by society. The theory of age segregation proposes there are distinct, "pre-planned life scripts," for people of different ages.

Because these lifescrpts diverge for younger and older groups, they are significantly less likely to engage one another. This segregation allows for ageism to flourish. Conversely, this theory implies that if younger and older people interacted more regularly in institutions like school and work it would challenge the existing beliefs younger people have about the elderly. This mindset would persist as the younger become middle aged and assume positions of power over the elderly.

Efforts to eradicate age-based stereotyping rely on reducing the level of threat younger and middle aged people perceive the elderly to be towards their livelihoods and values. The intergroup threat theory suggests that, "...individuals react in hostile ways towards [potentially harmful] out-groups." This theory identifies realistic and symbolic threats that breed in-group hostility and intragroup conflict. Realistic threats, "...refer to threats to the [in-group's] power, resources, and welfare." Symbolic threats, "...are threats to one's world view, belief system, and values." As previously noted by Butler in his explanation of ageism among middle aged people, the elderly are viewed as a burden, a drain on tax revenue generated by working age people. Since middle aged people are more likely to perceive the elderly as inherently dependent and a wasteful strain on resources, the threat to them is most likely often a realistic one. As for younger people, they may be more likely to view the elderly as a source of conflicting values. Due to the historical political divide between younger (more progressive) and older (more conservative) generations, it is safe to assume the threat younger people perceive is most likely often a symbolic one. The intergroup threat theory can be used to account for ageism as well as other forms of bigotry including transphobia, which will be analyzed in a later section. Ayalon and Tesch-Römer also discuss macro-level theories to explain the origins of ageism, however they are not relevant to this particular research at this time.

Since the 1960's when Robert Butler coined the term ageism, theorists have contested his definition in favor of a more adequate one despite the popularity of Butler's definition and frequent usage in academic literature. Researchers Thomas Iversen, Lars Larsen, and Per Solem attempted to rewrite the definition of ageism in *A Conceptual Analysis of Ageism*. Iversen and colleagues recognizes the definition of ageism conceptualized by Butler is upheld as the, "ultimate definition" (Iversen et al., 2009) yet proposes it (and succeeding definitions in the many decades after it) are not clear and complex enough to capture the varying ways ageism presents itself within individual conversation and systemically within institutions. One reason why redefining ageism is a challenge is because research on the intersection of age is still lacking. In the early 2000s, Iversen et al. searched the Psychinfo database for the "definition of ageism" and "concept of ageism" to assess how often these subjects were explored compared to sexism and racism. Their research returned no articles containing the "definition of ageism" and a measly four containing the "concept of ageism." The Ageline database only returned one article for, "definition of ageism," and eight for, "concept of ageism." These results demonstrate an alarming gap in our collective understanding of age and the influence of age on a person's experiences.

The validity of the theory of ageism is called into question by theorist Bill Bytheway within Iversen et al.'s *A Conceptual Analysis of Ageism*. Bytheway suggests that the theory of ageism may not be a theory at all, but rather, an ideology. Bytheway justifies this by defining ageism as, "a coherent set of shared ideas and beliefs that constitute a particular justification of the interests of dominant groups...but also the belief that these age groups exist and are different" (Iversen et al., 2009). This definition alludes to the idea that old age may not even exist, might be a social construct created to distinguish the elderly from every other age group. In

accordance with this hypothesis, Bytheway proposes that a more accurate definition of ageism is one that acknowledges the social construction of age and the deliberate maintenance of ageism within society (Iversen et al., 2009).

Though ageism, like any other well known, “-ism,” holds the connotation of negative stereotyping and typically refers to prejudices that harm a group’s status within society, not all stereotyping is negative as previously explored. Iversen et al. proposes Butler’s definition of ageism is made further inaccurate due to its inability to account for positive stereotypes. The elderly are exposed to a plethora of positive stereotypes regarded as, “compassionate stereotypes,” (Iversen et al., 2009) that oftentimes result in, “...excessive care, patronizing and pacification...” Butler’s notion that ageism is comparable to racism and sexism is also challenged on several grounds. Primarily, the distinction between these three “isms” is that given enough time everyone will experience old age and the discrimination it may generate; whereas the discrimination faced by those of marginalized racial and gender identities is not experienced unilaterally. Additionally, ageism differs from racism and sexism in its level of acceptance from the general members of society. According to Iversen et al., “...there are no social sanctions against people who express negative prejudices or stereotypes against elderly people...It is generally accepted that one expresses a certain form of negativity against elderly people.” To conceptualize an acceptable definition of ageism, Iversen et al. suggest a definition that includes the, “...cognitive, affective, and behavioral components...positive and negative aspects...implicit and explicit forms of ageism and are...on micro-, meso-, and macro- levels...” A definition fitting this rubric is thought to possess the criteria necessary to usurp Butler’s widely-used 1975 definition of ageism. The alternative definition of ageism provided by Iversen et al. attempts to combine aspects of positive and negative stereotyping, exclude insensitive comparisons to other

forms of identity discrimination, and demonstrate the vast scope age prejudice has within society; it is as follows:

...negative or positive stereotypes, prejudice and/or discrimination against (or to the advantage of) elderly people on the basis of their chronological age or on the basis of a perception of them as being 'old' or 'elderly'. Ageism can be implicit or explicit and can be expressed on a micro-, meso- or macro-level.

It is worth analyzing the trajectory of age-based prejudice moving into the future, especially within the realm of medicine. Psychologists Michael North and Susan Fiske highlight the increasing scope of ageism year after year. In the future, ageism will be more encompassing, and affect a greater number of aging and elderly people. To support this assertion, Fiske et al. (2012) cites the Centers for Diseases Control and Prevention (CDC) as stating, "...with average life expectancy increasing and the proportion of people over 65 in the United States estimated to double by...2030, improving elder well-being undoubtedly warrants urgent investigation" (Fiske et al., 2012). They urge that academics begin to view ageism through a sociostructural, intergenerational lens that will help propel the study of ageism from just a concept with a tentative definition into the mainstream of psychological study. Fiske et al. (2012) are in agreeance with current theorists and researchers that ageism is, "...surprisingly pervasive," and, "...potentially infecting numerous societal facets," including those on the aforementioned micro-, meso-, and macro- levels suggested by Iversen et al. and Ayalon et al. (2018) in their publications. On the macro-level, health care is a vital institution responsible for treating and preventing diseases among the elderly that so far has been overlooked by this review. Health care institutions typically accessed by the elderly should theoretically be completely devoid of ageist

policy and practice, however, as Fiske et al. (2012) will point out these facilities can be covertly problematic and mistreatment of the elderly quite elusive to the general public.

As it stands, we do not know the fullest scope of ageism, how many people it affects or where else it might present obstacles to the very young or the very old. Indeed, Fiske et al. (2012) blatantly states in their article that because of a notable lack of research on ageism, “...some argue that this form of prejudice is currently more prevalent than racism and sexism.” Though this seems bleak, Fiske et al. (2012) agree that ageism is not one dimensional and always negative; it is capable of shockingly positive outcomes for the elderly. For instance, the United States spends a disproportionate amount of funding and resources towards care for the elderly who are at a greater risk of disease, chronic illness, and disability. Additionally, familial connections for the elderly are often a, “...source of positive elder interaction - to the point of helping foster positive attitudes towards older people in general.” Due to their biases, young people may perceive their well-being will diminish with age; however, “...despite ageism’s apparent prevalence, emotional well-being tends to increase with age.” Stereotyping elderly people as having a diminished quality of life due to physical and mental decline has been shown to produce harmful physiological effects in those that internalize these stereotypes. More specifically, “with age...via a process of self-stereotyping, [internalizing stereotypes presents] a host of...consequences, including failing memory, cognitive confusion, physical frailty, and...cardiovascular responses to stress.” One way to prevent the internalization of negative stereotypes about aging is to ensure the elderly have a positive self-perception. If older people are primed to have positive self-perceptions about their own aging process they can, on average, expect to benefit from, “...increased functional health and longevity...resistance to cardiovascular problems and hearing loss.” Fiske et al. (2012) agree that the separation of in and

out-groups results in ageism on a societal level, but they also offer two overlooked theories regarding ageism on a personal level: the negative halo effect and the overgeneralization effect. The negative halo effect occurs when people seen as generally unattractive have negative traits and abilities imposed on them by the public. The overgeneralization effect, on the other hand, occurs when a person's traits are inferred based on their physical appearance. For example, a young person viewing an elderly person with bent posture might infer they are a sad person.

Transphobia

Emilia Lombardi writes about the historical perceptions of gender vs sex and variations in transgender identity. Sexologist John Money was one of the first experts to make a clear distinction between a person's biological sex and gender role. Taken in tandem with one's self-understood gender identity, one's understanding of their role in society was crafted via internal thoughts and feelings instead of one's external genitalia. Over time, several feminist theorists have also fought to promote the narrative that sex refers to biological characteristics whereas gender is a socially constructed phenomena. Despite this, many researchers have not made the shift in perspective, using the terms "sex" and "gender" interchangeably and reflecting this in published research. Lombardi suggests that the label "transgender" is too narrow to encapsulate the myriad of gender identities outside of the binary. They state the importance of looking at all "...gender variant people..." as being better suited to explore "...the variety of experiences with discrimination..." Hill and Willoughby define transphobia as, "the feeling of unease or even revulsion towards those who express nonnormative expressions of gender identity and expression." Traditional beliefs about sex and gender dictate that one's gender identity is biologically constructed based on genitalia and that there being only two sexes (this view excludes intersex people) means there are only two genders. These traditional ideas about gender

along with heterosexism and authoritarianism are connected to transphobia and opposition to transgender peoples' civil rights progression. Transphobia contributes to, "...concerns about the appearance of transgender...individuals and to see them as being potentially disruptive and threatening, which is used as a reason to discriminate against such individuals." Some of the most harmful manifestations of transphobia result in barriers to transgender people, particularly pre-operation transwomen, accessing gender segregated services like housing in homeless shelters. The justification for this discrimination typically scapegoats cisgender women as need to be protected from potential predators in pre-operation transwomen.

Christopher Shelley would agree with Lombardi's definition of transgender as encompassing many more identities than generally thought of within society, including variations of gender from within specific cultures, such as Two-Spirits. However, Shelley argues that not all forms of transphobic discrimination are rooted in fear as the suffix "-phobia" highly suggests. Instead, transphobia may present as, "...loyalty to social and religious ideals, or moral convictions predicted by an 'ought'..." For example, "...political ideologies...that do not accept the legitimacy of trans lives." Adhering to a transphobic political ideology does not necessarily indicate fear as the motivation for transphobia. Shelley proposes using the term *repudiation* to refer to the rejection and hostility transgender people face that is not caused by fear. Repudiation is a more dynamic term demonstrating that the complexity of reactions to transgender people exists on a spectrum from, "...sympathy, pity, and saviour attitude for the 'misguided'...to enmity, hatred, and repulsion." Repudiation of transgender people has its roots in the boundaries one puts between "self" and "others." Within preexisting case law, the perceived threat of the, "other," (transgender individuals) to heteronormativity has been cited as inducing, "trans panic," resulting in serious harm or homicide of transgender victims.

Social Justice

Social justice theory is present within multiple social science disciplines including sociology, philosophy, and political studies. In general, social justice describes how resources are distributed within society, and special attention is given to how resources would ideally be distributed to promote social equality. This section will introduce political philosopher John Rawls' theory of social justice and one compelling contending theory created by philosophers Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum.

John Rawls' theory of justice, also called justice as fairness, appears in his 1971 publication, *A Theory of Justice*, and has since been upheld within many social science classrooms as a foundational theory. Rawls' primary goal is to establish how institutions within society must distribute primary goods (such as income, status, power, wealth, etc.) in order to promote the utmost, "fairness," among citizens of diverse identities and needs. Indeed, Rawls stresses that his theory is unconcerned with how individual citizens foster fairness among themselves because they do not comprise the traditional institutions many readers think of. Justice as fairness realizes two main principles: the principle of equal liberty and the difference principle. The principle of equal liberty establishes that in Rawls' ideal society, "...[everyone] has an equal right to the most extensive liberty compatible with a like liberty for all," (Abelson et al., 1975). Here, egalitarianism applies to not only liberties, but also opportunities to hold positions of power such as political office. The difference principle recognizes that primary goods are not distributed evenly but attempts to explain what kinds of inequalities are permissible. Because Rawls recognizes social inequality as an inevitability, he suggests that some inequality may be acceptable if these disadvantages, "...work out for everyone's advantage, and provided the positions and offices [they are attached to]...are open to all," (Abelson et al.,

1975). Additionally, this inequality is only permissible if it raises the living standards of the worse-off in a society and empowers their well-being. To accomplish this principle further, access to the most privileged positions in society must not be blocked off via discriminatory policies and practices.

Rawls' theory of justice has been challenged and enhanced by other prominent philosophers, most notably Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum in their 1993 publication, *The Quality of Life*. Sen and Nussbaum critique Rawls' theory of justice as not discussing resource distribution and well-being specifically enough and for still allowing for some social inequalities. The capabilities approach was devised as an answer to the question, how should society allocate resources so that no one falls through cracks in the newly devised system? Sen and Nussbaum denounce focusing on primary goods and instead propose, "...evaluating...[a person's] actual ability to achieve various valuable functionings as a part of living," (Sen & Nussbaum, 1993). To understand the capabilities approach one must be able to distinguish between functionings and capability. Functionings are representative of everything a person is able to do or become in life whereas capability represents different combinations of functionings a person is able to achieve (Sen & Nussbaum, 1993). In totality, a person's well-being and comfortability in life depends on the number of capabilities they have; a person who is able to achieve more functionings will ultimately lead a better life emotionally, physically, and materially than someone who is incapable of accessing the same resources. Functionings range from quite simple, such as the ability to feed oneself or be in overall good health, to more complex, such as being socially integrated and having self-esteem (Sen & Nussbaum, 1993). Because functionings are numerous in their impact and complexity, Sen and Nussbaum believe it is up to the individual to evaluate which holds the most importance to them. For instance, rudimentary functions like being well

fed are generally more universally valued while a complex functioning such as going to university may not be valued by every person, those people might opt to forego such a functioning in favor of something else. The freedom to decide which functionings are more important is central to Sen and Nussbaum's capability approach. Similarly to Rawls, Sen and Nussbaum place heavy emphasis on personal liberty; however, Sen and Nussbaum differ from Rawls in that they do not believe people should have the mere formal freedom to obtain their functionings (that is, that there are no formal or institutional barriers to access), rather, they believe there should be ample opportunity to achieve whichever functionings are most important to said person.

Empowerment Theory

Julian Rappaport and Edward Seidman explain two varying outlooks on empowerment theory in their book, *Handbook of Community Psychology*. Rappaport and Seidman make the distinction between the theory of empowerment and empowerment as a value orientation. The theory of empowerment. "...suggests ways to measure the construct in different contexts...study empowering processes, and to distinguish empowerment from other constructs, such as self-esteem, self-efficacy, or locus of control." A definition of empowerment by Rappaport (1984) attempts to account for a multi-level analysis: "empowerment is viewed as a process: the mechanism by which people, organizations, and communities gain mastery over their lives." This definition does not give examples of individual, community, organizational, or institutional instances of empowerment, but this may be because empowerment looks different across cultures, religious and political ideologies, groups of marginalized people, and so on.

A value orientation is a set of ethical principles agreed upon by a group of connected individuals. Empowerment as a value orientation is based on the perspective that, "...many social

problems exist due to unequal distribution of, and access to, resources.” The means by which a disadvantaged person meets their needs is highly individualized. For some, mutual aid is most beneficial, helping others or working for their rights may also be helpful avenues to justice; however, the empowerment approach goes beyond having needs fulfilled by benevolent professionals. Though empowerment encourages moving away from institutional help, Rappaport advocates for more “...empowerment-oriented language...” to address clients in need. An example of this includes replacing terms like “client” and “expert” that create yet another power dynamic with more equalizing terms such as “participant” and “collaborator.”

Rosemary McGee and Jethro Pettit analyze power frameworks in their textbook *Power, Empowerment and Social Change*. Power is synonymous with a form of agency, typically thought of in one of two ways: either the ability to dominate others against their will or the ability to resist and act in one’s self-interest despite pressures to the contrary (McGee et al., 2019). One of the reasons power dynamics are so potent within society is because they are internalized by both the oppressed and the powerful. Looking at power dynamics through the lens of agency reinforces the idea that, “...the powerful are...mobilising oppressive values intentionally in order to reinforce desired behavior.” On the other hand, viewing power dynamics through the lens of structure gives the impression that, “...the scope for exercising...resistance can seem...limited, leaving agents all but powerless.” This feeling of powerlessness that many marginalized groups have sometimes influences the collectivizing of community-based organizations seeking to promote a greater sense of self-agency. JASS is one such grassroots organization with the mission of empowering women by developing them into leaders with the power to influence public policy. JASS’s power framework emphasizes that the personal is both political and intersectional with, “...visible, hidden and invisible dimensions.” The term shadow

power was developed by JASS to describe the, “...collusion between state and often illegal and violent non-state actors...” coming to the forefront of society’s knowledge. In response to this and nationalistic ideologies meant to drum up hate and fear, JASS offers a “transformative power” framework focused on building, “...dignity, equity, inclusion, liberation, and democratic leadership” that has become a standard framework for many organizations aiming to increase self-agency and powerful resistance among marginalized people.

Mutual Aid

Throughout the world mutual aid organizations are prolific and ubiquitous, seeking to offer self-help and community to those in need of assistance, particularly help with fostering social ties amongst those with specialized medical needs. According to researcher Alfred Katz, there are distinct groups within society that practice mutual aid. Katz refers to these groups as, “self-help groups,” while this research refers to them as community-based organizations. These groups include, “...informal social networks of family, workmates, schoolmates, neighbors, friends, and peers,” in addition to the more formal, “...self-organized and self-directing educational, healing, economic, and socially supporting groups” (Katz, 1981). Indeed, there are so many community-based organizations in existence and taking form every day that Katz commends such a large catalog of groups as being unable to be fully documented. What distinguishes these organizations from large institutions and non-profits is their size and origin. In an effort to define self-help groups, Katz described the following:

...Voluntary, small group structures for mutual aid and the accomplishment of a special purpose...formed by peers who have come together for mutual assistance in satisfying a common need, overcoming a common handicap or life-disrupting problem, and bringing

about desired social and/or personal change...[Members] perceive that their needs are not, or cannot be, met by or through existing social institutions, (Katz, 1981).

Believing that one's condition or identity is not helped by social institutions leads to the feeling of powerlessness that encourages the formation of self-help groups and utilization of mutual aid. This is true of community-based organizations that help transgender people with their medical and social needs, since historically transgender and gender non-conforming people have had to create their own collectives to rely on. The Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries (S.T.A.R.) will be discussed in this chapter as the most rudimentary, yet legendary, example of a community-based organization centered around the needs and social integration of transgender and gender non-conforming folk.

American lawyer and trans activist Dean Spade defines mutual aid in his own terms that largely overlap with Katz's definition, but with the notable exception that Spade stresses mutual aid as a necessary means of survival for marginalized populations and provides his own building blocks for a successful mutual aid organization. Spade defines mutual aid as, "...collective coordination to meet each other's needs, usually from an awareness that the systems we have in place are not going to meet them," (Spade, 2020). This sentiment is reflected in Katz's definition as well as the perception that current social institutions will not, or cannot, accommodate the needs of the organization's members. In order for a mutual aid organization to be successful in advocating and providing for the needs of its members Spade has determined it must meet several critical metrics:

Mutual Aid projects work to meet survival needs and build shared understanding about why people do not have what they need; mobilize people, expand solidarity, and build

movements; mutual aid projects are participatory, solving problems through collective action rather than waiting for saviors (Spade, 2020).

To better exemplify Spade's three core parameters for mutual aid it will prove helpful to analyze the history of successful revolutionary action in the United States and how each organization collectivized with the strategy of dismantling social injustice, as well as exposing the major gap in availability of mutual aid targeting transgender elders.

United States history contains several exemplary models of community-based mutual aid aimed at improving the material conditions of marginalized identities. Arguably, the most renowned use of mutual aid was promoted by the Black Panther Party of the 1960s. For the Black Panther Party, mutual aid took the form of whatever help was needed by the community: feeding hungry children free breakfast, transporting people to the hospital in a free ambulance, and teaching children a liberation curriculum, to name a few services. The services were ever expanding as new gaps in institutional services provided were illuminated by the community. What remained constant was the strong sense of self-advocacy the Black Panther Party demonstrated while demanding equity access to the institutions utilized by wealthy white people. For instance, the Black Panther Party ensured to include discussions about systemic poverty to enlighten members to the idea that their suffering was not a personal or moral failure. These discussions, according to Spade, were vital to, "...[breaking] stigma and isolation, [meeting] material needs, and [getting] people fired up to work together for change," (Spade, 2020). Today, this same self-advocacy is wielded by community-based organizations not just concerned with racial disparities; these organizations are beginning to encompass the needs of varying gender identities and sexual orientations as well.

Across the country, LGBTQ+ organizations have been meeting the medical and social needs of transgender individuals for decades inspired by Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries (S.T.A.R.), the earliest proto-type for a trans and gender non-conforming centered organization founded in 1970 by queer activists Marsha P. Johnson and Slyvia Rivera. S.T.A.R. 's mission was to provide for the material and social needs of trans and gender non-conforming youth who were routinely subjected to discrimination producing homelessness, unemployment, and an overall sense of alienation from society and greater opportunities (Cohen, 2008). S.T.A.R. provided safe homes and an uplifting social environment for queer youth so they could avoid police violence and the loathsome prison conditions homeless individuals were subjected to. By providing safe places where trans and gender non-conforming people of various intersectional identities, experiences, and levels of need congregate and socialize, this is the foundation for Spade's second core principle of mutual aid: mobilizing people, expanding solidarity, and building movements. Connecting people under a unified identity though they may speak different languages, come from varying races and/or ethnic backgrounds, or may have ties to different social movements promotes the flourishing of a social movement because there is vastly more influence, power, and visibility in large numbers. In 2023, as young people across the United States ignite discourse concerning gender and sexual identity, community-based organizations and nonprofits alike are seeking ways to improve their material conditions and legal status within society. While this is beneficial for young transgender individuals who may be seeking assistance and guidance on their journey, it raises the question: how do community-based organizations utilize their resources to assist older transfolk that may have different medical and social needs than transgender youth?

The final metric Spade evaluates mutual aid on is its ability to encourage public participation in collective action rather than passively waiting for outside assistance, or, “saving,” by third party charities (Spade, 2020). Because mutual aid is community-driven by nature, Spade declares it a necessary means of demonstrating to traditionally disempowered populations that they do not always need to solve their problems through disingenuous or unhelpful institutions. According to Spade, mutual aid teaches us to, “... do things together in ways we [are] told not to imagine, and... organize human activity without coercion” (Spade, 2020). By collectivizing in a way that does not require a social hierarchy of leaders and followers, mutual aid also allows community members to, “...unlearn conditioning and build new skills and capacities... by participating in groups... and practicing new ways of being together...” (Spade, 2020). This method of organization and accomplishing social change could prove helpful at bettering the lives of chronically disenfranchised intersectional identities like older transgender people because the power struggle between transgender versus cisgender and middle aged versus elderly casts older transgender people at two particularly vulnerable disadvantages within society. If mutual aid resources promoted via accessible community-based organizations were more widely available to older transgender people, they could benefit not just socially, and possibly medically, from participating--they could very well experience a shift in their perception within society from totally dependent on the community to being viewed as a necessary part of community vitality.

As I began formulating my research questions these background theories served as an influential source of background knowledge. To begin pondering why it is that trans elders have a distinctive experience due to their age and gender identity it is necessary to understand intersectionality, transphobia, and ageism. Transphobia and ageism are treated as separate issues

in this literature review, but only because substantive academic research on the ways they intersect has yet to be done. Examining the effect of transphobia and ageism on society and social institutions makes it clear that trans elders do not currently have access to adequate social and medical resources despite unprecedented acknowledgment of Queer identities. Where institutions are failing to provide, trans elders and other activists create their own community-based organizations reliant on donations and mutual aid to empower members. It became apparent to me through conducting this research that power imbalances exist from above and below. Institutions and society hold more power than trans elders, yet trans elders who collectivize into a community-based organizational structure still must compete with the power held by larger nonprofit organizations. Community-based organizers do so by leveraging their own power from below.

Chapter 3

Institutions & Society vs. Trans Elders

Information for this chapter is derived from interviews conducted with two trans elders living in Roanoke, Virginia. I would like to preclude an analysis of the interviews by reminding readers that the experiences, feelings, thoughts, and opinions detailed here belong only to the participant expressing them. As discussed in the section *Disclaimer On Lived Experiences and Monoliths*, to attribute one person's words to an entire group of people, especially marginalized people, is harmful and counterproductive to an honest dialogue. Please, keep this in mind while reading the following chapters, this one on the personal experiences of the trans elders interviewed in particular.

Interviews were conducted with two trans elders of vast notoriety in the Roanoke Valley. Fifty-four year old Dolly-Davis and seventy-seven year old Erika Joyner, both women identify as transgender women. Specific information regarding their current positions within Roanoke-based organizations will be provided in the following chapter. This chapter will concern itself with detailing the personal experiences of each interviewee and how the similarities in their struggle provide insight to larger power dynamics trans elders face within society and institutions. Discourse analysis, as conceptualized by French philosopher Michel Foucault, focuses on the power relationships developed within society via the particular language institutions use to convey their messages. To conduct a discourse analysis, specific quotes and phrases are analyzed for the way they perpetuate unbalanced power dynamics between trans elders and the rest of society.

To begin each interview, I asked the interviewee a few foundational questions to encourage them to begin to think about their experiences that were explicitly influenced by either their age, gender identity, or both simultaneously. The questions are meant to stimulate reflection on their ability to access the same social and medical institutions that are theoretically available to trans youth including accessing Queer social spaces and receiving competent, non-judgemental gender affirming care. Additionally, the interviewees were encouraged to narrate any hardships they have, or understand trans elders do, experience while attempting to access social and medical care that they require. The purpose of these questions are to provide insight as to how the first of my research questions might be answered, which is: what are the particular social and medical needs of trans elders?

I began by asking simply, are the social and medical needs of trans elders different than that of trans youth? Both Dolly-Davis and Erika shot back an enthusiastic affirmative response, but Dolly-Davis used one word to categorize her experiences in totality, an *obstacle*. When asked to elaborate, Dolly-Davis expressed to me that trying to promote understanding between trans folk and cisgender members of society feels like, "...fighting the fight of trying to get people to understand and learn that [trans folk] are just the same as everybody else." "...Unfortunately," Dolly-Davis continued, "...there are a lot of folks out there that want to create culture wars or have religious ideas that erase us."

Michel Foucault described what he deemed the institutional apparatus as the forms of power the government (or any other institution) hold that are used to articulate discourse that influences the public's perception on an issue like transgender rights. When crafting legislation that is purposefully harmful to transgender people's right to civil liberties, expression, health care, etc., the government is using law as an apparatus. Similarly, when government officials

project intentionally inflammatory speech to their constituents about transgender people they are using the media as an apparatus. Dolly-Davis mentioned that trans identity has been made into a culture war topic recently. This idea can be explored through a brief analysis of popular political sayings in modern discourse today.

Discourse surrounding transgender identity in the media is overwhelmingly negative because, according to Tori Cooper, the director of community engagement for the Human Rights Campaign's Trans Justice Initiative, "there is an intentional effort to use misinformation and disinformation to deceive folks who don't know any trans...people personally to perpetuate harm." This political culture war that wedges transgender people's identities and right to exist as a political platform relies on several distinct talking points pertaining to protecting vulnerable children, among others. Most notably though are sayings like, "protect the children," "stop child sex abuse," and, "stop child sexual mutilation," all of which are phrases used by state lawmakers and Former President Donald Trump (Narea et al., 2023). Language like this is inherently inflammatory, it seeks to elicit an emotional response from the audience and serve as an accusation pointed at all transgender people to demonize them as predators within society. The goal of Conservative political figures when using this rhetoric is two fold: first, it is to provoke anger in those who already are suspicious of or hateful toward transgender people so they will continue to vote for Conservative politicians who vow to prohibit them from transitioning and second, to brandish an unbalanced system of power in favor of politicians looking to be reelected, despite the harms that will befall transgender people.

Dolly-Davis' commentary on trans identity being construed as a culture war topic or a scapegoat for bigoted religious "morals" shows us that there is an overwhelming need for truthful, supportive social discourse regarding trans identity from within and outside of the larger

Queer community. Because discourse has the power to create our sense of self it is instrumental for trans folk to have a place where they can reaffirm to themselves their sense of self-worth without outside influence from damaging popular media messaging about their identity. Part of the mission of community-based organizations like the Roanoke Diversity Center and Ladies and Gents of the Blue Ridge is to help foster social relationships and positive self-image for Queer folk, particularly transgender individuals of all ages.

Physician-patient privilege is recognized as the expectation that conversations had in private with one's doctor will remain confidential and protected from disclosure with outsiders. For this reason, I believe the discourse within health care between trans elders and their doctors, while it still holds significant, unbalanced power, is more elusive without speaking to trans elders about their experiences outright. Speaking with Dolly-Davis and Erika, their interviews revealed key similarities and differences between the medical needs of trans elders and those expected of other trans folk. Primarily, trans people of all ages face the same hardships of having to negotiate with doctors and pharmacies to receive gender affirming care and access to hormone replacement therapy and wait much too long to be seen by the doctor. On the other hand, trans elders must contend with the unique experience of living as transgender in hostile and unsupportive senior nursing facilities, often without LGBTQ+ advocates available to support them.

When asked to describe their experiences seeking medical care, both Dolly-Davis and Erika have both faced unnecessary hardships pertaining to their transition. Erika's struggle with trans health care pertained primarily to accessing her estrogen, she said,

“my estrogen is not covered by insurance, so I have to get that through a Canadian pharmacy...the hospital² claims to have trans health services, but sometimes it

² Name of the hospital was deliberately left out of this publication on behalf of the interviewee's request for privacy.

takes six months to be seen...They just saying that they're transforming health care but they don't put the money and resources into it."

The discourse surrounding the work that the hospital does to provide gender affirming care is that they are "transforming" health care for transgender patients while simultaneously underfunding and understaffing the endocrinology department. For some transgender people living in Roanoke, it can be detrimental to seek gender affirming care, but if access is severely limited by the amount of resources the hospital is willing to invest in the endocrinology department this further disadvantages one of the most vulnerable societal groups. To assert that they are in fact bettering health care in Roanoke by "transforming" it in some way, the hospital is projecting an eye-catching statement about their influence on health care that it wants the public to notice. In fact, "transforming" health care might even be perceived as a moral philosophy regarding how medical care should be produced and imply discontent with how other health care facilities operate. Indeed, to boast the largest number of medical departments and specialties in the Roanoke Valley is to appear to have the most powerful health care institution in the Roanoke Valley; however, continuing to overlook the growing necessity of gender affirming care for marginalized people is reinforcing an imbalance of power between large institutions and vulnerable trans folk. Faced with very limited options other than to wait for space to be available at the largest network of health care facilities in Roanoke, trans folk like Erika find themselves waiting unreasonable amounts of time to see their gender care physician. Few think to challenge whether or not the hospital is actually bettering the state of health care for trans people because of the assumption that they would not proclaim to be "transforming" health care if it were not a true statement. The authority that the hospital holds over health care in the Roanoke Valley also

makes it more difficult to challenge, because if the gender affirming care facility were to close due to disruption it would be devastating to medically transitioning trans folk.

While this issue of accessing gender affirming care is a universal experience for medically transitioning trans folk in Roanoke, some trans elders must navigate living as a trans person in unsupportive senior assisted living facilities. According to Dolly-Davis, the primary concerns of trans elders faced with living in nursing homes are abuse, disrespect, and being forced to detransition while in the nurses' care. According to Dolly-Davis, to mitigate the risk of being outed, some trans women will attempt to undergo a surgery known as a, "zero depth vaginoplasty..." but unfortunately, "...many can't access the surgery so they don't use nursing homes." The backlash that pre-op trans elders receive from medical care providers inside hospitals and nursing home facilities can be demoralizing and othering on a personal level. Erika is also aware of what she calls, "substandard treatment," in nursing home facilities. Erika remarked that she,

"...[has] heard horror stories about how trans people have been discriminated against, misnamed, [referred to by] wrong pronouns, [nurses] purposely ignoring their gender identity... People in assisted living deal with substandard treatment and aren't able necessarily to do a lot about it because they're physically challenged."

To help advocate for those who are vulnerable to this mistreatment, Dolly-Davis has accompanied other trans elders to gender affirming care visits to assert that the patient is not suffering from mental illness, delusions, or senility typically attributed to elderly people via negative stereotyping. Some nurses can be particularly hostile toward transgender individuals, Dolly-Davis recounts interacting with such a nurse while accompanying another trans elder to

the doctor's office, she recounts the nurse saying, "...I don't care what [the patient] wants or that they want to be referred to as a woman, that's tough damn luck, you're in southwest Virginia."

The disenfranchisement of trans elders by unsupportive medical staff that hold more power than they do in deciding which gender affirming care they can access is made a more painful experience when those in power use blatantly discriminatory discourse. The nurses' decision to distinguish that the patient is living in southwest Virginia reveals that they view the area inherently embodying traditional values about gender. Differentiating the patient as a trans person from the values of southwest Virginia purposefully implies that the patient does not belong there. Coupling this hostile implication with the fact that the nurse has power to gatekeep or negatively influence the gender affirming care of the patient, this power imbalance illustrates a situation that is too confrontational to continue in as the patient. The unfortunate reality is that due to the power of the health care institutions trans folks are beholden to when accessing gender affirming care, discriminatory experiences with health care professionals have become particularly visible in recent years.

To combat these challenges, Dolly-Davis and Erika proposed several solutions. They suggest a trickle-up approach to Federal funding wherein community-based organizations receive funding first to hold nonprofit organizations answerable to smaller organizations. In addition, the Federal government should crack down on fraud, theft, and embezzlement of Federal funding for nonprofits and organizations found in violation should be harshly punished, losing its tax-exempt status and eligibility for further funding. Community-based organizations should also be allowed to advertise themselves as co-contributors at events hosted by larger nonprofits so they can attract new members and be recognized for what is often volunteer labor.

In spite of these institutional and societal setbacks, trans elders are capable of exemplifying power from below against more powerful forces. One way the Ladies and Gents of the Blue Ridge enacts power from below is by maintaining a Facebook page where members can connect and ask for help. According to Erika, this Facebook page is how members exchange mutual aid in the form of raw goods and services. If one member needs a car ride to the hospital for an endocrinologist appointment but has no money to pay for an Uber they might offer to exchange lunch for a ride to the doctor. On the other hand, by creating a shared space for Queer people of all ages the Roanoke Diversity Center and Ladies and Gents of the Blue Ridge leverage their constitutional freedom to peaceful assembly. These meetings provide a secure place for Queer people to network with others to acquire information about social services and available resources. Raising awareness of how institutions perpetuate systemic discrimination against transgender people and older age demographics is another major way the community-based organizations can utilize their power from below.

Chapter 4

Nonprofit Organizations vs. Community-Based Organizations

Roanoke, Virginia boasts a thriving LGBTQ+ community with a long history of establishing Queer-friendly businesses and organizations. The current most active community-based LGBTQ+ organizations are the Roanoke Diversity Center and the Ladies and Gents of the Blue Ridge Transgender Alliance. As previously mentioned, community-based organizations offer essential services to combat harmful discourse in order to promote a positive self-perception of transgender identity, including for trans elders. Curious about how each organization does this, I accessed the official website for both types of organizations and examined their goals and mission statements.

The mission of the Roanoke Diversity Center is to,

“...support, educate, empower, and advocate for LGBT individuals and groups in the Roanoke region, and to encourage collaborative efforts with the greater community to improve the quality of life for all.”

Roanoke Diversity Center lists several goals, but to accomplish its mission while providing for the unique social and medical needs of trans elders it is most vital of them to, “provide a welcoming, interesting, and safe gathering place for individuals and groups,” as well as, “reduce isolation among marginalized and underserved individuals and groups,” and finally to, “support health and wellness by hosting HIV-testing, substance abuse prevention, and other programs,” such as workshops on gender affirming care. The discourse surrounding the assistance Roanoke Diversity Center is willing to provide its members is optimistic and uplifting. It is reasonable to assume that the Roanoke Diversity Center staff is primarily concerned with reaching out to

LGBTQ+ community members to empower them through rapport building and educational training on health related topics. It feels as though the Roanoke Diversity Center is attempting to collectivize education and socialization in a way that dismantles the idea that a person's identity is their own personal responsibility to "fix" or "figure out." As opposed to what Dolly-Davis was told by her doctor about trans identity being too "complex" to provide her with treatment, this approach by the Roanoke Diversity Center seems to assure trans folk that their needs are not a burden. Building up the unity between trans folk and the greater LGBTQ+ community empowers every member by building the connections necessary to provide for one another.

The Ladies and Gents of the Blue Ridge Transgender Alliance focuses more specifically on the needs of transgender people. Their mission of the Ladies and Gents of the Blue Ridge is to,

“...[organize]...conferences...that focus on transgender education, health care, transgender families, resources, and education...[and holding] social events...to come together in a safe space and enjoy each other's company...”

To ensure that the greater Roanoke community understands the social and medical needs of trans folk, Ladies and Gents of the Blue Ridge coordinates public speaking initiatives in crucial institutions like, “...higher education, health care, social services, religious institutions, employment agencies, community events and LGBT events.” The purpose of Ladies and Gents of the Blue Ridge seems to be largely the same as the Roanoke Diversity Center: ensure that LGBTQ+ people understand they are part of a tight-knit community in Roanoke; but with one key difference, the Ladies and Gents of the Blue Ridge's website focuses more heavily on the importance of community outreach and educating the public on trans inclusion. This more than

likely alludes to how much social progress and visibility was still to be achieved for trans folk, as opposed to gays, lesbians, and bisexuals, when the organization began in 2005.

Community-based organizations in Roanoke are not the only organizations vying for attention and membership. Various nonprofit organizations have solicited collaboration with members of the Roanoke Diversity Center and Ladies and Gents of the Blue Ridge; however, on special request the names of these entities have been removed from this document to remove cause for defamation claims, and this request shall be honored. Instead of naming individual organizations, I will refer once again to the interviews conducted with Dolly-Davis and Erika in an attempt to answer my final research question, are the services provided by community-based organizations more or less empowering to trans folk than nonprofit organizations? Interestingly, Dolly-Davis and Erika have similar opinions on the ability of nonprofits to empower trans folk the way community-based organizations do, but through two different outlooks on the current power struggle between them...

Regional and nationwide nonprofit organizations that are not rooted in the community they claim to serve. When asked if she believes nonprofits possess the ability to be as empowering to trans elders as community-based organizations, Dolly-Davis explained to me that large nonprofit organizations are problematic in several ways. Large nonprofit organizations take a majority of federal grant money because they are better resourced. Smaller community-based organizations, according to Dolly-Davis, cannot keep up with the requirements placed on receiving federal grant money even if their services target the same population as nonprofits that do receive grant money claim to target. For instance, community-based organizations might not be able to access grant writers that can appeal properly for desperately needed grant money. When one kind organization is able to disproportionately benefit from larger access to

government funding, is able to grow and advertise themselves more easily, and takes money away from smaller community efforts that are just as necessary to the well-being of the target population there is an obvious power hierarchy between community-based organizations and nonprofit organizations. Dolly-Davis identifies this power dynamic as creating an environment for community-based organizations and their organizers that is, "...rigged beyond belief and [it] is absolutely maddening."

Additionally, Dolly-Davis identified the issue of recognition. According to Dolly-Davis, in her experience as a community-based organizer and trans activist she has seen how nonprofits that have collaborated with local LGBTQ+ organizations in the past have deliberately prohibited community-based organizers from advertising their organizations and maliciously stifled in-put on operations from trans people, including trans elders like Dolly-Davis herself. Dolly-Davis explained to me that part of the issue with advertising community-based organizations is that it can be prohibited in the agreement to accept a federal grant.

"It's not balanced when there's a \$50,000 [Federa] grant and they tell you that you can spend \$3,000 on a conference, but you can't fundraise in that conference."

Dolly-Davis recounted a personal experience with me about how exactly this prohibitive language goes about making community-based organizations and their work essentially non-recognizable,

"...we had t-shirts made one year to sell at the Drop-In Center [a large nonprofit based in Roanoke that focuses on HIV and HEP C testing] but we couldn't fundraise. We couldn't sell t-shirts at the conferences and they took the

[organization] name off our shirts and put Survey Monkey and Eventbrite and all that other stuff on them.”

The ability to advertise is an essential part of visibility for any organization seeking members and engagement. By taking agency away from community-based organizations and their organizers it perpetuates an inequitable power dynamic wherein nonprofits gain recognition and notoriety but community-based organizations remain little known outside of their immediate community. A lack of resources, recognition, and notoriety keep community-based organizations from being able to network with other institutions and harness any voice at conferences put on by nonprofits but volunteered at by community-based organizers. Dolly-Davis said she believed this power dynamic is cultivated on purpose when she expressed to me:

“The system is one hundred percent designed that way. The system is designed to help institutions gain notoriety. [Then] what happens? The bottom doesn’t have a voice at the table, we have no bargaining chip.”

Nonprofits undoubtedly understand that the ability of community-based organizations to fairly access the same federal grant money that they do would inevitably decrease the shares they could possess. By limiting the potential for community-based organizations to advertise, expand, network, and develop into larger institutions the more money nonprofit organizations can skim off the top before handing down whatever is left to community-based organizations.

Lastly, Dolly-Davis enlightened me on the issue of whether some nonprofit organization leaders care about the in-pup of their target population, including trans folk? Apparently the answer varies, but some nonprofit leaders (whose names and organizations will not be named here, again, at the request of participants of this research) are blatant about their distaste for

additional feedback from target population members. Dolly-Davis recalls creating and editing a video project for a nonprofit organization that was supposed to pay for the project after its completion. However, when Dolly-Davis and her team were finished with the project, they were told by leadership at the nonprofit they were launching their own video project and would no longer be paying for the time and money Dolly-Davis and her team invested into the project. Dolly-Davis recounts pushing back against this tyrannical display of power by the nonprofit and being told by its leader, "...we're giving you a voice, now shut up." This was interpreted by Dolly-Davis to have multiple meanings. The most obvious is an attempt at disarming Dolly-Davis and intimidating her into submission over the video project. But the second is more insidious over all: a nonprofit led by cisgender people is in charge of bringing a voice to institutionally disadvantaged trans folk, and they could do whatever they wanted with their power and money, including telling a trans woman to shut up and submit. This display of power left Dolly-Davis rightfully angry, and she describes it best as an instance of "...total disenfranchisement and disempowerment."

Notably, though, Dolly-Davis does not make any assertion that nonprofits should be abolished, only that the power relationships between community-based organizations and nonprofits should be equalized. To do this, Dolly-Davis believes the current system that allows nonprofits to have the first cut of federal grant money and pass the rest along should be converted into a "trickle up" distribution system. This would work the opposite way with community-based organizations and smaller, more disenfranchised cities to take money from the pool of federal funds first and pass it upward. This would create a more balanced system, in Dolly-Davis' opinion, because nonprofit organizations have a history of profiting off of marginalized communities and embezzling money before the target population can benefit from

it. In Dolly-Davis' ideal situation, community-based organizations are the boss of nonprofit organizations that are answerable to them and the actual communities of marginalized people nonprofits today claim to empower.

Erika believes that comparing community-based organizations to nonprofits based on their ability to empower trans elders and other trans folk is difficult. For one thing, according to Erika, "...[it's] not exactly apples to apples." As previously mentioned, community-based organizations are generally poorer and less notable than nonprofit organizations. Because of this, Erika believes that community-based organizations and the mutual aid they inspire are helpful on a personal level; whereas nonprofits are "...really helpful for programmatic efforts." For instance, the local social and medical support offered by community-based organizations has been helpful to Erika's transition and social well-being. But on a different note, the collaboration opportunities nonprofits provide to community-based organizations "...helps further the mission of the Ladies and Gents of the Blue Ridge, which means a lot to [Erika] personally." From Erika's perspective, what this amounts to is a need for both types of organizations to coexist for different reasons. Community-based organizations must exist because of the inherent value they hold for trans folk in the immediate community seeking the types of social and medical support explored in previous chapters. Nonprofits must exist because they have the resources and notoriety needed to put on conferences and disseminate information about their targeted population's needs to a large audience.

The answer to whether or not nonprofits should exist and are fundamental to community-based organization functioning is nuanced, in my personal opinion. While it must be recognized that nonprofit organizations create opportunities for collaboration with community-based organizations, I agree with Dolly-Davis' critiques regarding the inability to

advertise smaller scale organizations. By disallowing community-based organizations the right to advertise themselves it not only fails to recognize volunteer efforts, it also symbolizes the erasure of small scale organizations and prevents them from building a recognizable brand. The way Dolly-Davis herself has been treated by nonprofit administration is also completely unacceptable yet probably more common than is expected. Naturally, members of marginalized communities deserve to have a prominent voice within organizations that claim to assist them. If a nonprofit organization is unwilling to accept this responsibility it becomes apparent that the power imbalance is too great to be justified.

In my opinion, I believe based on this research that the responsibility to provide for the well-being of all Americans falls on the hands of the Federal government. Since nonprofit organizations facilitate the movement of Federal funding between the government and marginalized communities, there is no justification as to why the government could not provide the same resources directly to citizens via social programs and services. These social programs and services would be funded with citizens' tax dollars and cover the needs that community-based organizations work to address when larger institutions fail. However, there are drawbacks to this approach like having to contend with many American's staunch tax resistance. In order for the Federal government to fill the current role of most nonprofit organizations they will need more tax money than they currently receive or divert funding from other large budget costs like the military (which would be wishful thinking). Another drawback is that nonprofit organizations would be resistant to relinquish power and resources to the Federal government and dissolve. Unfortunately, with many nonprofit organizations targeting the same issue or population many of them are redundant and split Federal funding many different ways. The nonprofit organizations with the most funding and influence survive and those with less may not.

This capitalistic approach to providing better material conditions to marginalized people is ironic given that it mirrors the system that in many ways has created and maintained their need for assistance.

Conclusion

Members of the LGBTQ+ community, and other marginalized populations, have been contending with unbalanced power dynamics within society and discriminatory institutions since the inception of the United States, but with a strong sense of resilience continue to progress forward and refuse to become invisible. Unfortunately, the experiences of trans elders have been overlooked and underappreciated by media, research, and even our own Queer community so much so that they often find ways to survive alone. In an attempt to end this isolating experience, community-based organizations in Roanoke, Virginia provide a vital source of social support and mutual aid for trans elders and other Queer folk. Through interviews conducted with the co-founders of the Roanoke Diversity Center and Ladies and Gents of the Blue Ridge Transgender Alliance, this research seeks to document the unbalanced power dynamics trans elders face in society as well as the reasons why community-based organizations may be disempowered by the presence of large nonprofit organizations.

Given the short nature of this undergraduate research I could not have been more pleased with the product. One of the most impactful aspects of conducting this research has been listening to the lived experiences of Dolly-Davis and Erika Joyner who both shared details of their lives with brutal honesty and a genuine desire to raise our collective consciousness regarding oppressive power dynamics inside of familiar institutions across Roanoke, Virginia and less familiar national nonprofits. I believe the lived experiences of Dolly-Davis and Erika have been invaluable in answering the research questions I designed to guide this research. Originally, I thought it would be a difficult task to connect with trans elders who would be willing to share details of their personal social and medical needs for various reasons. I was surprised to learn of the on-going community activism spearheaded and still led by people like

Dolly-Davis and Erika, and I was overjoyed at the thought of hearing their perspective on how empowering community-based organizations in Roanoke, Virginia are given that they have the vantage point of both members and organization administration. One of the pleasant advantages to interviewing Dolly-Davis and Erika is in addition to being trans elders themselves, they also co-founded two well-known community-based organizations in Roanoke: the Roanoke Diversity Center and the Ladies and Gents of the Blue Ridge Transgender Alliance. Indeed, Dolly-Davis and Erika are not only generous for dedicating time to conduct interviews with me, they were also ideal candidates to speak on behalf of community-level empowerment since they have been empowering community members for decades. I find it interesting that each interviewee came to a different conclusion about the necessity of nonprofit organizations. While these diverging opinions complicate the notion of coming to a clear-cut conclusion, I enjoy these responses to a certain extent because they demonstrate that the question of how empowering nonprofit organizations contains an uncertain answer. I will humbly step back from this research and encourage readers to continue pondering the validity of nonprofit organizations and how marginalized people might be best assisted within the confines of our current institutions on their own.

Though this small-scale research has been enlightening to conduct in Roanoke, Virginia, I do not think it represents a comprehensive look at the social and medical needs and power imbalances trans elders face across the United States. As previously mentioned, Roanoke boasts a long history of Queer liberation movements and is socially progressive compared to the outlying area of southwest Virginia. In places like my hometown of Bryan, Texas, the political and social climate are starkly different though Bryan and Roanoke have similar population sizes and social issues as a whole. What I propose is further research to consider how differing

political and social situations across the United States may make community-based organizations more imperative in some regions than in others where material and social conditions are particularly poor. This may impact the level of empowerment community-members feel when engaging with the organization.

In the future, the limitations of this study design should ideally be redressed. To do this, researchers should focus on gathering a more diverse population of trans elders to interview. This would include a larger sample size than the one presented here with a more diverse set of intersectional identities such as race, class, and gender identity. This would be beneficial to recognizing the needs of transmen and other gender non-conforming individuals who identify with transness while demonstrating the vastness of the transgender identity umbrella. It is also important to situate future research in the context of United States history during trans elders' coming of age since so much of their lives has been impacted by unprecedented events like the HIV/AIDS epidemic in such a way that younger Queer people may not be able to wholly identify with. Though I do give a brief historical overview of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, I do wish it were much more detailed, so I hope future research will grant this research topic further justice.

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