

## **“YES, THEY WERE SUFFERING, BUT WE BROUGHT THE MUSIC”: SOCIAL TOXICITY AND POSSIBILITY DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ONSET FOR UNDOCUMENTED AND UNHOUSED PEOPLE**

S. Sylvane Vaccarino-Ruiz<sup>\*</sup>, Katherine Quinteros<sup>\*</sup>, Valeria Alonso Blanco<sup>\*</sup>,  
Daniel Rodriguez Ramirez<sup>\*</sup>, Regina Day Langhout<sup>\*</sup>, Daniel Copulsky<sup>\*</sup>  
and Miguel A. Lopezzi<sup>\*</sup>

*Under a neoliberal regime and a pandemic crisis, social toxicity is expected (Klein, 2007). Yet, social possibility and opportunities for cohesion and collectivism can occur. We discuss how social toxicity and possibility sit side by side during the COVID-19 pandemic, with an emphasis on the glimmerings of mutual aid for those who are undocumented and unhoused in Santa Cruz county. Given the stay-at-home orders, we, a graduate community psychology class, enacted photovoice online to analyze our context. We discerned a spectrum of possibilities as they coincided with toxicity. We present two examples of how social possibility and toxicity are mixed, and two examples of social possibility that include some aspects of mutual aid. These discernments can expand understanding of mutual aid and help the community psychologist know where to apply pressure and how to move forward to work toward social justice.*

**Keywords:** COVID-19, neoliberalism, social toxicity, social possibilities

### **1. Introduction**

During a pandemic, especially when people are told to stay at home, community psychologists are not alone in predicting that there will be challenges. To better grasp expected challenges, we must consider context. In the U.S., the COVID-19 pandemic is happening under a neoliberal regime. Neoliberalism is a value system that maintains that individual responsibility is key to a well-functioning society and supports should be individualized and privatized rather than universally available and public (Harvey, 2005), which community psychology has recognized as toxic for decades, partly because it leads to inequality (Nelson, 2013; Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2010; Ryan, 1972). Furthermore, due to a half century of neoliberalism, public infrastructure is failing, and this fact will be especially visible in places with extreme inequality. One place with such inequality is Santa Cruz county, California, where the authors of this paper live. The county has a Gini index of 0.5, which indicates great inequality, even higher than the national average (0.43); in fact, the US is the most unequal country in the G7 (DataUSA, 2018; Schaeffer, 2020). Furthermore, the median household income in Santa Cruz county is \$78,041 (US Census, 2018),

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<sup>\*</sup> Psychology Department, University of California Santa Cruz

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but the median home is \$956,402 (Zillow, 2020), making the county the fourth least affordable place to live in the world (Erwert, 2017). In this context, certain populations will be made even more vulnerable, such as those who are undocumented and those who are unhoused.

In this paper, we take up ideas of social toxicity and social possibility under neoliberalism and at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. Our goal was to document examples of social toxicity and possibility, especially in Santa Cruz county, given the vast inequality in this county. We used photovoice for documentation, posing the question, “How does social toxicity (inequities), especially under neoliberalism, and social possibility, with glimmers of mutual aid, sit side by side during COVID-19?” We first outline social toxicity and social possibility under neoliberalism, highlighting mutual aid as a form of possibility. We then discuss Santa Cruz county briefly by laying out the context for those who are undocumented and unhoused. We go into greater detail about these two communities because they came up in our photos often. We describe our photovoice method and then the results of our inquiry, which was done from a distance given public health restrictions. We discuss fragments of mutual aid, which coincide with toxicity as demonstrated in the photovoice analysis. We end with some implications for community psychology.

## **2. Social toxicity under neoliberalism**

Social toxicity, the structural and cultural conditions that result in trauma and inequity, erodes hope and possibility (Ginwright, 2016) and threatens the well-being and liberation of oppressed people. Moreover, socially toxic environments are violent, impoverished, and economically oppressive (Garbarino, 1998). Furthermore, toxicity during a disaster can erode psychological well-being (Cline et al., 2014).

Toxicity can be predictable during a crisis under neoliberalism. For example, the history of disaster capitalism (Klein, 2007) shows that when crisis ensues, the public will be disoriented, and thus the people’s vulnerability will be exploited by efforts to “liberate world markets” and excise collectivism. The shock from a crisis leaves populations vulnerable to implementation of policies to benefit the wealthy and privileged, which worsens already unjust conditions. For example, during this COVID-19 crisis, the CARES act, a relief package meant to support the public, systematically left out undocumented communities, those who live with an undocumented family member (Padgett, 2020), Americans losing their jobs, and those who are houseless (National Coalition for the Homeless, 2020).

Already vulnerable populations are further pushed out and disregarded in these initiatives. Thus, economic inequalities are amplified. Without a secured, fair, and regulated democratic process during a crisis, corporate benefits are created. For example, the airline industry received \$60 billion, bailouts went to hospitals serving wealthier patients, and larger businesses received aid, which effectively starved out smaller business owners (Abramson, 2020). Support for the wealthy is an example of neoliberal ideologies in action. Neoliberal practices are based on a belief that economic markets should be free and that “trickle-down” economics will benefit the common person. This ideology, however, widens wealth gaps and systematically ignores vulnerable populations (Harvey, 2005). In the U.S., neoliberalism is a widely accepted cultural ideal and one that perpetuates harmful narratives with common psychological explanations.

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## 2.1 *Neoliberal culture and psychology*

The toxicity of neoliberalism can be traced through cultural narratives and psychological features. Culturally there is a narrative about supporting the “makers,” wealthy business owners and corporate executives that “create” job opportunities, over the “takers,” people utilizing government support without “contributing” to society (Bullock & Reppond, 2018). This dominant narrative pushes a sentiment of deservingness and is built on individualism and neoliberalism, which legitimizes economic inequality (Bullock & Reppond, 2018). In addition to this stigma, prioritization of the self and freedom to pursue aspirations without obligations to collective norms contribute to a neoliberal psychology (Adams, et al. 2019). This neoliberal trope is present in the media, where some communities protest the public health norms of wearing a mask and sheltering in place, claiming it violates personal freedoms. Ultimately, neoliberal toxicity puts people at risk and undermines a collective effort to protect the health and well-being of vulnerable communities.

The psychology of neoliberalism removes responsibility from supporting people structurally and collectively, thereby promoting individual responsibility, which leaves out people who are vulnerable because it assumes we are working on a level playing field. An example is the narrative that COVID-19 is the great equalizer (Marmot & Allen, 2020). Yet, oppressed people do not experience this crisis similarly as those who have access to adequate healthcare, can work from home, have food and housing security, and are documented. “Considering the amplification of inequalities, it is the societal response—lockdown and social distancing—that will both increase inequalities in exposure to the virus and inequalities in the social determinants of health” (Marmot & Allen, 2020, p. 682). Indeed, the health and well-being of vulnerable populations is even more at-risk, not just because of a pandemic, but because of cultural, psychological, and systemic negligence.

## 3. Social possibilities under a neoliberal context

Although there are clear examples of toxicity during crises, there are still possibilities that maintain hope. A social possibility is an opportunity for cohesion, collectivism, and positive outcomes (Ginwright, 2016). For example, although we can expect toxicities during crises, it can also spur disaster collectivism where support, organization, and solidarity are present and practiced at the community level (Klein, 2007). Throughout history, during and after crises, there are examples of renewal movements and communal recovery where people “see themselves as repair people, taking what’s there and fixing it, reinforcing it, making it better and more equal” (Klein, 2007, p. 466). In this way, social possibilities are like radical imaginings in action (Ginwright, 2008; Kelley, 2002). Possibilities can also create a context for radical healing, or activism that lessens trauma and addresses injustices (Ginwright, 2016). Sometimes crises provide a glimpse into what the future could be when systems are in place for communal well-being and liberation. By resisting hyper-individualism, social possibilities, like mutual aid projects/efforts, exemplify collective hope and communal recovery. Next, we describe how mutual aid has been conceptualized in community psychology, followed by how mutual aid can be practiced as an organizing project for solidarity.

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### 3.1 *Community psychology and mutual aid*

Historically, community psychologists have used “self-help,” “mutual-help,” and “mutual aid” inconsistently and interchangeably to describe a variety of groups where people come together to support each other around an issue. Due to the fact that these groups function as communal and egalitarian, the name “mutual-help” has been preferred in contrast to “self-help” which might suggest an ethos of rugged individualism (Humphreys & Rappaport, 1994). In addition, “mutual aid” has been used as a more inclusive term for the continuum of groups between peer-led “self-help groups” and professional-led “support groups” (Shepherd et al., 1999).

In these mostly self-organized groups, individuals with similar needs come together, sometimes with facilitation by a rotating non-professional “leader,” to support each other (Paine et. al, 1992; Riessman, 1990). These groups might focus on substance abuse, terminal illness, and other issues to share emotional support and resources. Occasionally, mutual-help groups might include political consideration looking at the systems/institutions that affect people (Humphreys & Rappaport, 1994).

Community psychology’s conceptualization of mutual aid, as of now, serves as a launching point for broader understanding and practice of mutual aid. Mutual aid projects in other contexts can be understood more broadly, not just as groups that have meetings about an issue, but as community organizing projects.

### 3.2 *Mutual aid as an organizing project*

Mutual aid can focus on systemic issues, such as neoliberalism. In fact, according to scholar activists in other fields and grassroots activists, mutual aid should be conceptualized as an organizing project that enacts ameliorative and transformative interventions simultaneously (Colón et al., 2020; Spade, 2020). Mutual aid moves into an organizing project when it works to fundamentally restructure society while meeting people’s immediate needs. It is an organizing project because it focuses on building power collectively and considers inadequate resources as a sign of oppression (Spade, 2020). Furthermore, mutual aid centers are in direct opposition to capitalism, which centers profits (Springer, 2020). In short, building solidarity and directly providing to oppressed people through alternative structures are some of the key elements of transformative mutual aid (Spade, 2020), and also provide examples of how society could be structured differently, around care.

### 3.3 *Mutual aid during COVID-19*

The COVID-19 crisis highlights the need for and potential of mutual aid (Springer, 2020). Although the pandemic has disrupted many aspects of life, it has also provided an opportunity to rethink how we organize communities (Bayram et al., 2020; Acuto, 2020). Mutual aid work has flourished in the wake of the COVID-19 outbreak, with projects starting or expanding (Nelson, 2020; Reicher & Stott, 2020). Mutual aid has even attracted broader attention in media outlets, including popular mainstream outlets like *Teen Vogue* (Matthewman & Huppatz, 2020).

Like other crises, the COVID-19 pandemic highlights existing inequalities and exacerbates them, disproportionately affecting people of color, those with lower-wage jobs, and those who are unhoused (Domínguez et al., 2020; Perri et al., 2020). Migrant workers and undocumented individuals may particularly rely on community support when access to government programs is

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not available (Gonzalez et al., 2020). Furthermore, those who are unhoused have more challenges in following public health directives given their lack of material resources (Perri et al., 2020). Mutual aid groups can play an important role in mutual care, such as addressing health inequalities (Ostrach et al., 2020; Domínguez et al., 2020), especially as already inadequate public health resources are stretched thin and access is reduced (Wong et al., 2020).

Although they are set up as an alternative to hierarchical and government-run programs, mutual aid groups may make tactical choices to collaborate with institutional efforts (Jun & Lance, 2020). Mutual aid projects often aim to meet the needs left by the gaps in government responses (Domínguez et al., 2020). At the same time, the increased interest in mutual aid could demonstrate the political possibilities of broader changes like strengthening social welfare systems or implementing universal basic income (Matthewman & Huppertz, 2020). Yet, the success of mutual aid work may also suggest a deeper need to disrupt the violence of capitalism and move toward systems that are more local, autonomous, and centered on care (Nelson, 2020).

## 4. Methods

### 4.1 *Context/Setting*

Although the research question and photovoice prompt for this data collection was broad, two distinct topics that participants took many photos about included issues related to immigration and being unhoused. For this reason, we focus this paper on these two issues, and provide context for both in this section.

Neoliberal policies have influenced migration flows worldwide, including from Latin America to the U.S. For instance, in relation to the signing of the North American Free Trade Agreement in 1994 (i.e., NAFTA; Bacon, 2014), Mexico's farmers saw the price of corn fall and lost government subsidies to corn and coffee. Farm jobs lost due to enforcing NAFTA and its impact on rising poverty rates and food insecurity acted as 'push factors' to migrate to the US to survive (UN World Food Programme, 2017). This broader political context has outcomes for California and Santa Cruz county, where 10% of the entire workforce is undocumented, respectively (Hayes & Hill, 2017). Once in the U.S., migrant farmworkers are likely to be paid low wages, experience workplace abuse and hazardous conditions (e.g., pesticide exposure), and have difficulties accessing jobs in the winter season, which relates to experiencing extreme poverty (CAB, 2018; Bada & Gleeson, 2015). These facts are likely one reason why the Gini index is so high in Santa Cruz county.

Although there is a dominant narrative that the U.S. is a 'country of immigrants,' contemporary immigrant people are made vulnerable by systemic barriers, discriminatory laws and policies, and a political climate of hatred against them. Immigrant people have limited access to healthcare, psychological services, and affordable housing (Hacker et al., 2015; McConnell & Akresh, 2010; Saechao et al., 2012); they often experience these barriers without bilingual access to navigate complex and often biased bureaucratic systems. This is the case in Santa Cruz county too. Moreover, one in five children under the age of six in the U.S. has immigrant parents, as does one in two in California, and they are at a higher risk of experiencing food insecurity (Chilton et al., 2009; KidsData, 2017). The negative impact of food insecurity in immigrant families might be amplified by the barriers they experience in accessing financial resources, such as opening bank

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accounts or building credit (Paulson et al., 2006). These barriers have been further magnified by the current political climate.

President Trump's administration has been vocal in his opposition to migration, especially from countries from the Global South. For instance, he encouraged migration from countries of Northern Europe, and discouraged migration from countries he labeled as "shithole" (Watkins & Phillip, 2018). He rallied anti-immigrant sentiment for his 2016 presidential campaign, by labeling Mexicans as "rapists and criminals" (Lamont et al., 2017). The Trump administration escalated its discourse of hatred of immigrants by declaring a national emergency on immigration (Trump, 2017). Relatedly, the federal government attempted to shut down programs that offer legal protections for immigrants escaping natural disasters and wars in their countries of origin often backed by US money and policy (i.e., Temporary Protected Status program, TPP), and the program that deferred deportation for immigrants who were brought to the US as children (i.e., Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals).

Another group heavily impacted by neoliberalism is people who are unhoused, which makes up 1.9% of Santa Cruz's population (No Place Like Home, 2018). The number of unhoused people in the county is in stark contrast to the percentage of people across the US who are unhoused, at 0.01% (National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2020). The Santa Cruz County figure is pre-pandemic and pre-CZU Lightning complex fire. The CZU fire, one of the wildfires that ignited in August 2020 due to dry lightning, led to the largest mandatory evacuation in the history of Santa Cruz County, and to the destruction of 925 homes.

There are several reasons for the high rate of houselessness in Santa Cruz County. Specifically, there is no rent control, so the average rent is \$2591, which buys the renter an average space of 716 square feet (Rent Cafe, 2020). Some high-rent cities in the region have rent control, whereas others do not. Second, there have been vast changes in demand, which include a growing college undergraduate population, an increase in AirBnB rentals, and many people who commute to work in Silicon Valley, which has higher tech wages compared to the tourist service industry jobs located in Santa Cruz (No Place Like Home, 2018). Third, federal U.S. policies do not prioritize affordable housing, and local policies tend to privilege the "character of the neighborhood" (i.e., single family homes) over affordable and higher-density housing (No Place Like Home, 2018), which is classist and racist.

This complex context shapes lived experiences and realities for our photovoice study of how social toxicity and possibility sit side by side in Santa Cruz County during the COVID-19 pandemic. We emphasize the effects on immigrant and unhoused communities because these groups are already vulnerable under the violence of capitalism.

## **4.2 Participants**

Our graduate-level community psychology class participated in a Photovoice (PV) project. This included the instructor (a 49 year old white woman who grew up working class and is now upper middle class) and six students in the early phases of their doctoral training program in social psychology. Students identified ethnically as Chicano, Latinx, Mexican, Peruvian, and White. They reported their social class as middle-class poor, mixed class (i.e., experiencing poverty and access to social capital to ameliorate its impact; Owens, 2019), and middle class, and the age range was 23 to 35. The instructor and graduate student participants collected their data amid the COVID-19 pandemic, during a stay-at-home order that required them to participate in the course remotely via the Zoom application. Graduate students were also in the midst of a wildcat strike,

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which is a strike called by workers but without the endorsement of their union. Graduate students were striking because their pay put them in rent burden, paying anywhere from 50-80% of their monthly take-home pay in rent, which subjected them to housing and food insecurity. All participant-researchers were treated in accord with APA ethical guidelines, and this study was deemed exempt by the UC Santa Cruz Institutional Review Board. The IRB deemed this study exempt because we agreed to take no photos of other people or of risky situations. If there was a person in a background, we agreed to photoshop the picture so the person was not identifiable. Also, participants did not interact with others where they were taking photos.

### **4.3     *Design***

To conduct this research, we needed to abide by the county stay-at-home order, and finish data collection and analysis during our 10-week quarter. To do so, we engaged in rapid research, which is participatory and based in democratizing knowledge (Matles & Sandwick, 2014). Rapid research can be conducted within approximately 90 minutes via techniques such as mini surveys, short interviews conducted on the sidewalks or in parks, or developing crowdsourced maps (Bushwick Action Research Collective, nd). Rapid research is similar to rapid participatory appraisal (RPA; Pepall et al., 2006). RPA enables researchers to collaborate with impacted community members within an abbreviated time period. Given our constraints, we chose to use photovoice (PV) via online modalities (Lichty et al., 2019). In this case, individuals can connect from various locations, so being in groups is not required to have a deep conversation.

We collaboratively decided on a PV prompt, which we designed to address our personal interests and a community issue. After deliberation, we chose the following prompt: How does social toxicity (inequities), especially under neoliberalism, and social possibility, with glimmers of mutual aid, sit side by side during COVID-19? This prompt was inspired by Shawn Ginwright's work in radical healing (2016), in that it moves away from dichotomies and enables people to hold challenges and hopes simultaneously.

### **4.4     *Data collection procedure***

To engage in the PV process, we made decisions collaboratively. For example, we first read articles about the process of photovoice (Langhout, 2014; Lichty et al. 2019), as well as examples online (photovoice.org and photovoice.ca). We discussed the articles and made a set of ethical decisions together. For example, we avoided taking pictures in which people could be identified, to protect their anonymity, and agreed to take no pictures of risky activities. We also agreed to interact with no one when taking photos. All of our discussions were done online and synchronously using the Zoom application. After learning about the PV process and collaboratively making ethical decisions, we began the photo and discussion process using the SHOWED method (Shaffer, 1983). First, we all took or culled several photos and wrote short narratives for each photo. Some of us took photos in the region where we were living, but others were not comfortable leaving their homes and selected photos from the media or from social media. Next, we each selected and submitted three to four photos and narratives via an online document sharing application before each session. Third, during sessions, each photographer explained their photos to the group, based on the following prompts: Why did you take this picture? and Why did you want to share this photo? Fourth, we voted on the photos we would discuss using the SHOWED discussion portion, and discussed the two photos with the most votes. We followed the

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typical SHOWED questions (e.g., “What do you see here? How does this relate to our lives?”; Shaffer, 1983, p.26) and added one more: “What perspective do wildcats bring to this situation?” We added this question as a way to make space for the experiences of wildcat striking graduate students. As a group, and after each SHOWED session, we decided if more data collection would be necessary to reach saturation. After the third session, we concluded we had reached saturation. This decision was also driven, in part, by the length of the quarter (10 weeks). For the first two sessions, we took detailed notes of the SHOWED rounds and conducted member checks, with everyone filling in any missing information. We recorded and transcribed the third session. In total, we had 37 single-spaced pages of notes to code, which included our photo-narratives and SHOWED discussions, but not the photos themselves.

#### **4.5 *Data analytic procedure***

We utilized inductive (i.e., data-driven coding; Saldaña, 2013) and deductive (predetermined coding; Saldaña, 2013) approaches to analyze the qualitative data, with an emphasis on social toxicity and possibility. We divided graduate student participant-researchers into two teams. One analyzed the PV photos and photo-narratives and the other team coded the SHOWED conversations. First, each team analyzed the data of the first and second PV narratives and sessions using color highlights and commentaries/memos labeling data units (i.e., sentences, paragraphs; Rubin & Rubin, 2011) into preliminary themes. After reaching saturation and assessing the relevancy of each memo label to the research question (i.e., the PV prompt), each participant-researcher compiled their list of codes into broader categories. We then met with our groups to decide which broader categories would group each team’s inductive-open codes most effectively. These categories and codes were combined into a codebook draft with feedback from an auditor (i.e., the course instructor) and member-checks from all participant-researchers.

Each team of graduate students then analyzed the third PV session data with the codebook (i.e., deductive coding; Saldaña, 2013; see Table 1). We engaged in consensus coding (Saldaña, 2013) by collectively agreeing on every code assigned to the dataset, line-by-line, unless there was no agreement after five minutes of discussion, in which case we dropped the code. Both coding groups were able to resolve all disagreements within the five-minute timeframe.

## **5. Results and discussion**

We describe four exemplars of social toxicity and possibility. First, we discuss an example of social possibility via charitable aid, but not mutual aid, through a picture of a specific food distribution. We include this photo because it demonstrates how charitable aid in and of itself does not address social toxicity. Then we present an example of aid mixed with social toxicity and possibility through a photo of a major news outlet’s symbolic gesture of bringing a mariachi band to farmworkers. Lastly, we show two photos of local efforts to provide aid in creative ways through an appreciation caravan and little free libraries, both showing glimmers for mutual aid. We discuss the spectrum of possibilities as they coincide with toxicity in Santa Cruz contexts through examples that impact immigrant farmworkers and individuals who experience food-insecurity, such as those who are unhoused. We compare these examples of aid to some key elements of Spade’s (2020) model of mutual aid to highlight shortcomings and potential growth.



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**Table 1. Photovoice Codebook for Data Analysis**

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Theme & Definition	Code Name	Code Definition
Systemic barriers limit access to material resources (SB): Discussion of photos exposes barriers to who can access necessary resources during this COVID context. Some people can access benefits while others are left out completely. These resources include food, water, relief funds, and healthcare. Also includes the discussion about transformative changes.	Systemic barriers in accessing resources (SB1)  Intervention suggestions (SB2, A/T)	Systemic barriers to access resources (including basic needs) for people from marginalized backgrounds, often related to social class /gender/citizenship/racial oppression. “Scarcity” of resources is discussed in terms of the systems that are preventing access.  Solutions or interventions that would bring ameliorative (first order; A) change or transformative (second order; T) change, thus addressing root causes of social problems when the intervention is transformative.
Social support is offered on the community level (CLS): Observations of communities being creative in repurposing spaces and adapting in order to offer support for each other. Might include gratitude, passing out food, sharing information about resources, and coming together to share virtual space for a sense of connection.	Social life, support, community support (CLS1)  Repurposing of space and materials for creative means (CLS2)	Instances of grassroots social support to essential workers, or to community overall. This broadly includes forms of mutual aid and pro-social interactions.  Communities demonstrate mutual aid or support in new ways or are adapting spaces for a different purpose than originally utilized due to restrictions of shelter in place. This can include domains like social media, physical shared spaces, Social media/virtual community + connection, presence, and shared space
Inequality amplification (IA): The COVID-19 circumstances amplifies differences in treatment, protections, social action, and surviving depending on people’s social positions. Two sub-themes distinguish between 1) how people with privilege can violate social distancing and 2) how worker conditions are increasingly dangerous.	“Freedom” and white privilege/toxicity (IA1)  Conditions for workers (IA2)	Rules implemented to decrease the spread of COVID-19 are violated and disregarded based on the will of people with privilege. Social distancing is seen as a barrier to their definitions of freedom, which offer instances where white people protest what they view as their right not to socially distance, nor use masks, effectively putting people’s lives at risk with little legal consequences.  Workers, who are considered essential, are facing new and/or continued dangers that are ramped up. There is a lack of policies to ensure workers’ rights, which continue the exploitation of workers.

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## 5.1 *Aid without mutuality*

During a crisis, inequalities are made more visible and are amplified (Klein, 2007). Although there are opportunities to move toward collectivism and solidarity in a crisis, these intentions must be made explicit within a neoliberal context, yet this does not always happen. This de-linking of inequality from community organizing to transform systems is especially the case in the U.S., where the non-profit industrial complex has been set up to ameliorate the effects in inequality rather than address them (INCITE!, 2017). One place this organizing could have happened was at food banks, which saw a major increase in usage (Kulish, 2020). The need for food was also felt in Santa Cruz county. Consider the following photo (Figure 1) and conversation.



**Figure 1. Five lanes at Second Harvest**

ML: We can see 5 lanes of cars, but DRR has shared that there are 7 lanes of cars.

RDL: The picture shows the inequalities in our state. California is the 6<sup>th</sup> largest economy in the world. It's an irony and injustice that food is grown here and so many people can't afford to buy it.

ML: Only those with cars can access food. So, there is inequality within the system designed to address inequality. I was debating registering my license plate for my car, which was \$600, plus over \$100 a month in insurance. So I have no car because it was too much. So, I can't access this. What would I do?

KQ: So many people are in need. Yet farmers are throwing out milk and breaking eggs because their food was supposed to go to restaurants and the distribution is not set up for individual people or families. Why not just donate it or give it away? So many people are in need. In the news reports, they didn't talk at all about giving that food away. I think about what companies are doing, and how they could operate differently.

SVR: I was kicked off of food stamps when I became a grad student, but that was a major source of how I was getting access to food. So, I had to know the systems and know how to

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access food. I had to do some shady things to get food, like [lists a few things]. I feel for the people in this line.

ML: Food needs to be accessible for those who don't have cars. - Session 1

The Second Harvest food distribution was a form of communal recovery where volunteers came together to help distribute food so their neighbors could eat. Second Harvest, like many other charities, filled a gap left by inadequate government support and a neoliberal focus on individual responsibility rather than collective responsibility for community needs, which often leaves the most vulnerable to find individual solutions to systemic barriers (e.g., lack of resources; Domínguez et al., 2020; Ryan, 1972).

These efforts are to be applauded for the ability to provide aid to many, yet certain groups were excluded from being able to access food, namely those without access to a vehicle. In this case, Second Harvest tried to provide aid through a system that followed COVID-19 regulations, but this also made aid unavailable to some of the most vulnerable members in the community (e.g., the unhoused, those in extreme poverty). As was the case here, often in times of crisis, policies and procedures are implemented in ways that disadvantage those in positions of precarity (Klein, 2007).

In order to practice disaster collectivism and solidarity, aid should be viewed as an organizing project that combines ameliorative and transformative interventions (Spade, 2020). Yet, there was no effort to organize in order to transform the food distribution system so that it might better serve those in need. This is especially tragic in a state where food is grown and therefore abundant but remains inaccessible to a significant portion of the population (Matthewman & Huppertz, 2020). Perhaps the reason for this lack of imagination was due to the sheer magnitude of the need, or because under neoliberalism, charitable organizations are designed to ameliorate social ills rather than transform the structures that create those ills (Spade, 2020).

Although the social toxicity of food insecurity was obvious at the Second Harvest food distribution, the ability to imagine aid in this form (i.e., transforming a parking lot into a food drive) and the overall success of the program provided a form of radical imagining into what could be if there were systems in place during times of crisis that are adequately resourced and community led (Ginwright, 2016). Second Harvest provides a social possibility of having the potential to move from ameliorative aid that occurs only in dire circumstances, into transformative assistance that is secured in the community and run on the continuous efforts of members who participate in similar cultural codes and ways of life (Colón et al., 2017; Spade, 2020). In this way, community members would have a voice in how resources are redistributed, what changes are needed to structures already in place, and how to move from communal recovery to communal well-being.

## **5.2 *Mixing aid and social possibility with social toxicity***

Some forms of aid are designed to be in solidarity and to organize for further support, but good intentions are not enough. Indeed, social toxicity and possibility can co-occur, as is the case here, where a news media outlet brought a mariachi band to the fields while they were conducting interviews with some farmworkers. This discussion also enabled graduate student wildcat strikers to see connections between their attempts at media coverage and what happened with corporate media coverage for farmworkers (Figure 2).



**Figure 2. Farmworkers on lunch with major news outlet<sup>1</sup>**

SVR: I'm thinking about news coverage. Who's covering our work, and bringing attention to our wildcat strike struggle? Univision is coming to interview people on our picket line, but they talk about famous artists coming out to the line. They are thinking it's lighthearted, and hoping it brings attention.

DC: In the reading from the week about the emphasis on the economic value of immigrants, I'm wondering if strike messages about our value as labor actually downplays our value as people and as students.

KQ: When and why are we highlighting this now? We are not getting the benefit of their labor. There is a similarity to not making enough as a grad student when people at the top are making so much. We and the farmworkers are overworked, underpaid, and undervalued.

VAB: Why does something get covered by the media? This gives the image that they are appreciated, but it doesn't address that they aren't given the appropriate tools or financial help. It doesn't really help them. "Yes, they were suffering, but we brought the music." What's the purpose of the coverage and what happens after the media leaves? What actions can be or were taken?

SVR: In thinking about news outlets and ratings, I'm wondering who benefits from this news coverage? Has anything changed? - Session 1

At the start of the pandemic, farm workers were labeled essential workers so continued to work by picking fruit and vegetables. Although their work was viewed as essential for production, because a large majority of workers are undocumented, many did not have access to needed resources (e.g., government relief packages, masks; Jordan, 2020). Thus, there had been public

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<sup>1</sup> From Coronavirus crisis: Mariachi band offers support to farmworkers with performance in Oxnard by ABC7, 2020, <https://abc7.com/society/mariachi-band-performs-for-farmworkers-in-oxnard/6126942/>. Copyright 2020 by KABC-TV

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concern and increased visibility for farmworkers. Media outlets took advantage of the growing support for farmworkers. Specifically, the media came to their workspace with a mariachi band but offered no material resources, which is exploitative given the media gained exposure and generated corporate income for their story. Media corporations can do more considering their wealth and access to resources.

What appears as support is actually a complicated mixture of social possibility and toxicity. Hiring a mariachi band and interviewing farmworkers demonstrates some social possibility because it may increase farmworker morale and show collective support (Klein, 2007). Yet, the gesture is mostly symbolic and likely increased ratings, which ultimately serves the news outlet's image, generating income for them in this neoliberal context. Indeed, the news coverage was a trending topic and enabled further marketing of their brand as a pro-farmworker company. The reason for news media to engage in this type of work is therefore part of social toxicity because their actions are neoliberal in that they are for ratings and corporate gain of an already well-funded media company rather than collective, which is part of performative allyship (Kalina, 2020; Klein, 2007).

Wildcat strikers also drew parallels for what it meant for a group of underpaid workers to be conceptualized primarily as workers rather than human beings with a right to having their basic needs met in the richest country in the history of the world. Arguing that basic needs should be met because people work hard maintains the logic of neoliberalism (Beltrán, 2009). With this understanding, arguing to have needs met due to hard work is a form of social toxicity because it continues to separate people into the “deserving” and “undeserving” poor, exacerbating and excusing inequities. A human rights paradigm, on the other hand, argues that all people should have safe housing, nutritious food, and adequate clothing. Next, we discuss two examples that show glimmers of mutual aid.

### **5.3 *The seeds of local social possibilities***

Photos and conversations also captured instances of local aid efforts that are fertile possibilities for mutual aid. Indeed, amidst a new crisis context, grassroots aid efforts were developing, but were not yet fully realized as mutual aid efforts, in that these efforts should be mutual, and should organize for transformative change (Spade, 2020). Photos and conversations that captured early responses to a drastic amplification of inequalities due to COVID-19 show early glimpses that move toward mutual aid. Grassroots community efforts have potential to be transformative, sustainable, and mutually beneficial. To illustrate this point, we provide examples from a community organization that supported farmworkers (Figure 3) and local “little free” libraries (Figure 4).

The people who are cheering are following healthy guideless by staying in their cars and maintaining their distance from farmworkers. The signs are also in Spanish and are signs of gratitude for these essential workers. Additionally, in the picture on the right bottom corner, two workers are raising their hands, acknowledging the people passing by. I think this picture is an excellent depiction of how community members come together. - Photo narrative



**Figure 3. Farmworker appreciation caravan<sup>2</sup>**

In contrast to the image where recognition for farmworkers came from a news media corporation, the caravan was organized by unpaid community members to show their gratitude and build solidarity for farmworkers who continued to work during the pandemic. This organizing effort serves as an alternative to the news media gesture of hiring a mariachi band because their actions are not self-serving, which moves away from social toxicity. Community members did not receive monetary compensation for their efforts whereas news outlets share stories that can increase their ratings and in turn, their income, which is indicative of an “economically exploitative arrangement” (Spade, 2020, p.140). The photo and narrative also hinted at solidarity in that people whose lives and experiences differ from farmworkers are gathering to support. This signaled a possibility of Spade’s (2020) examples of mutual aid. Additionally, those participating in the caravan did not show their faces, and when they did, they had masks, which showed their regard for and awareness of the well-being of those around them. Yet, this effort does not address significant structures of inequality. Farmworkers still continue to work in unsafe conditions, receive low wages and have limited access to healthcare. Furthermore, the action is not mutual. Still, organizing car caravans is the beginning of community members showing visible social support during social distancing orders. This next example illustrates another aspect of mutual aid (Figure 4).

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<sup>2</sup> From Watsonville Campesino Appreciation Caravan Facebook, by Action Council of Monterey County, 2020, [https://www.facebook.com/pg/Watsonville-Campesino-Appreciation-Caravan-104499241242168/photos/?ref=page\\_internal](https://www.facebook.com/pg/Watsonville-Campesino-Appreciation-Caravan-104499241242168/photos/?ref=page_internal). Copyright 2020 by Watsonville Campesino Appreciation Caravan.

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DC: I love little [free] libraries...I love that these libraries are a form of [...] aid that people across the political spectrum can find joy and value in (it's an easier pitch than Food Not Bombs or bail funds, though those projects are also great). I usually stop by every one of these libraries that I see. - Session 1, Picture 3

DC: It is hard to tell, but my guess is that someone made too much fresh bread and is sharing this extra loaf. I like that these libraries feel like something safe, easy, and fun, but also hold radical potential for changing the ways we relate to and take care of each other. I like that they change this mode of relation with a simple, direct intervention, by installing a box where things are exchanged for free. - Session 2, Picture 1.



**Figure 4. Little free library**

The little free library movement began in 2009. Anyone can build a small and enclosed shelving unit so that passersby can take and/or leave a book. By 2019, there were over 100,000 registered little free libraries (Little Free Library, nd). Most of the time, the libraries hold books only and follow a “take a book, share a book” culture. In other words, there is no one who regulates lending or borrowing behaviors. During the stay-at-home order, the little free libraries were utilized in creative ways to mutually benefit and aid the community. Participants took multiple photos of the imaginative use of the space to leave food and many cookbooks.

Local use of the little free libraries shows how those in Santa Cruz spontaneously used them as an alternative structure to support mutual aid. One of the key elements of transformative mutual aid demonstrated in the little free libraries is the alternative structure to directly provide for oppressed peoples. Although a start, this use does not completely fulfill Spade’s (2020) definition



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of mutual aid because the efforts were not organized, nor were they used to transform structures for equity. Yet, the little free libraries ensured that some food was accessible for those who did not have the means to receive food in a car, in accord with Santa Cruz County pandemic guidelines. It is likely that people who were unhoused used this form of support to alleviate some of their food insecurity. Indeed, at least one member of our team witnessed people on bikes who appeared to be unhoused taking food from and leaving a book in the little free library or engaging in a mutually reciprocal relationship.

## 6. Conclusion and implications

In this paper, it has been our goal to demonstrate how social toxicity and possibility sit side by side, including during the COVID-19 pandemic and in a neoliberal context. Like Ginwright (2016), we do not wish to bifurcate interventions into the categories of “bad” (toxic) and “good” (social possibility) because most interventions include aspects of both, just as many interventions may have both ameliorative and transformative aspects (Rappaport, 1981). Identifying both toxicity and possibility, especially as they operate under neoliberalism and in a crisis, can be a framework that helps the community psychologist know where to apply pressure and how to move forward to work toward social justice, or minimally, where to put energy to open a space for more social possibilities to flourish. We therefore see this research as being aligned with Rappaport’s call for the community psychologist to pay attention to and work in the dialectic, moving in directions that are receiving little attention (Rappaport, 1981).

Many community psychologists work with nonprofit organizations. Nonprofits serve an extremely important function in a neoliberal society because they often fill in where public infrastructure has been largely starved of resources. Yet, these organizations are often working on fulfilling immediate needs and not focusing on how to transform systems that create these inequities. Perhaps this is not surprising given there are few funding opportunities for community organizing, but many for providing services (INCITE!, 2017). Because these nonprofits are visible in many communities, they are a first place many go to who wish to volunteer and practice “disaster collectivism” during a crisis (Klein, 2007). A community psychologist could work with nonprofits to help ensure they offer more than one way for people to volunteer or be civically engaged, could encourage them to restructure their organization to promote mutually reciprocal relationships, or could work with these organizations to see if they have a desire to shift their focus so that they might also support community transformation (Bess et al., 2009). This shift in perspective requires the community psychologist to work with the non-profit in ways that enable the non-profit to study itself and its practices rather than its clientele (Bess et al., 2009; Harper & Salina, 2000). This type of work would increase capacity and reflection during a crisis so that radical social possibilities could also be imagined (Ginwright, 2016).

There is a history of community psychologists researching self-help groups as a form of mutual aid (Paine et al. 1992; Riessman, 1990). Community psychologists could also expand our understanding of mutual aid such that we view it as an organizing project that builds power and transforms socially toxic structures (Colón et al., 2017; Spade, 2020). Grassroots groups are ahead of community psychologists in this respect, so there is much to learn (see, for example, the Pandemic of Love, which is a network of over 100 mutual aid groups in the US that have organized since the COVID-19 pandemic began; <https://www.pandemicoflove.com>). To understand and



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research mutual aid in this way would build out and test theories in community psychology related to liberation and civic engagement. Specifically, community psychologists have researched community organizing projects with paid staff and infrastructure, such as PICO, or the Pacific Institute for Community Organizations (Speer et al., 2011), but less attention has been paid to groups with no paid staff and with little organizational infrastructure. This research agenda might open up additional ways to understand community care, civic engagement, and sustainability, and might also provide examples of how to disrupt and organize against the neoliberal project, as these groups may be less tied to the restrictions of non-profit funding.

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