The Politics of Radical LGBTQ+ Organisations in the UK: Aspirations, Pluralities, Realities

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Abstract:

This study aims to engage in the question of how social movements and activist organisations, particularly those formed by queer people, relate to the systems of power that they seek both to survive within and to deconstruct. Through semi-structured interviews with organisers of a small scale radical queer organisation in the UK, I found that while the relationships between social movements and power systems are often divided into either being assimilationist or liberatory/ revolutionary, this is an over-simplification, which rests on the assumption that the acts of surviving within structures of power and challenging them are mutually exclusive, or not deeply entangled. Instead, I argue that because of the multilayered and complex nature of the operation of a range power structures in the daily lives of these queer organisers, their work necessarily combines a plurality of approaches and ideals that contend not only with ideological aspirations but also with material reality. This allows for the possibility for a movement type that both combines survival and challenge to the system, which I argue could be viewed through the lens of harm reduction – a strategic compromise between ideologies and material realities.

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Key words

Queer theory, social movements, social movement theory, capitalism, power, assimilation, revolution

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Ethics

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Introduction

“A commitment to weirdness”; “fuckability”; the aim of “total gender chaos”. The small-scale radical LGBTQ+ organisation whose members I interviewed over the summer of 2025 identified these as some of the characteristics that differentiated them from mainstream LGBTQ+ organisations and movements, including from charities and mainstream pride movements. This organisation, explicitly political and alternative, had lived in my mind as a haven of revolutionary thought, offering something beyond the corporate prides and liberal rhetoric of charities. However, what also became clear throughout my research was that the reality of the aims of the organisation, and how members viewed its place within wider society and networks of power, were not exactly the revolutionary ideals I had expected, and perhaps even desired, to find. Instead, I discovered strategies that were more complex – and perhaps also more fitting – to create meaningful change in the lives of queer people they touched.

The aim of this project is to examine the ways in which radical social movements, in particular those with LGBTQ+ people as their primary membership and constituents, experience relationships to the networks of power they both operate within and seek to challenge, exploring the labels often applied to social movements, including ‘assimilationist’, ‘revolutionary’, and ‘liberatory’. These are lenses often applied by social scientists seeking to understand the nature and aims of social movements. Through interviews with one organisation, I have attempted to understand the ways in which these labels open and constrain our understandings of the aims and nature of contemporary social movements.

I will begin this report by introducing the context and findings of my research, before describing my methodology, findings, which are broken down into the subsections of ‘Aspirations’, ‘Pluralities’, and ‘Realities’, and finally my analysis and interpretation of my findings. My report concludes that the binarism of labels such as ‘liberatory’, ‘revolutionary’, or ‘assimilationist’ distorts the priorities and complex and multifaceted systems of power with which organisations regularly have to contend, barring them from being purely assimilatory or revolutionary if they want to effect real and meaningful change. Therefore, I propose the lens of ‘harm reduction’, a model stemming from abolition feminism and the context of harm reduction for drug users, as a way for researchers to reveal the nature of contemporary radical LGBTQ+ social movements as both operating within systems of power and deconstructing them simultaneously. This proposed alternative lens is one of the major contributions of my research, and offers the potential for researchers to more accurately describe social movements that do not sacrifice the real humans living now in favour of an idealised future struggle, instead combining both dreams of the future and action in the present as a methodology of change.

The project of defining the role and nature of social movements and organisations in our contemporary world is a complex and often challenging one, in which the multi-layered and entangled networks of power that both organisations and researchers

themselves must operate within are rapidly felt. However, the process of analysing the nature, form, and aspirations of social movements is a task that offers us the potential to engage in the critical self-reflection, both as movement participants, researchers, and all of us moving through a world of power networks, necessary to create change. As such, this project seeks to examine one specific queer organisation as an example of a social movement that sits at the intersection of capitalism and marginalisation, alternately (and sometimes simultaneously) rejecting and taking advantage of the unequal power networks that shape the lives and experiences of LGBTQ+ people in the contemporary world. The particular organisation I am focusing on, of which I interviewed two active organisers, requested not to be identified for the safeguarding of its members and beneficiaries, but is based within a mid-sized city in the south of the UK which has significant wealth, but also high levels of inequality, with discrepancies of life expectancy between neighbourhoods with the most and least poverty at around 10 years. The organisation is radical, anti-assimilationist, and community-run, offering any local resident the opportunity to run events they feel would benefit trans and queer people.

Methodology

This project consists of two semi-structured interviews with active organisers of the organisation I was researching. Though this small sample size means my results cannot be taken to be clearly indicative of wider trends, they remain notable as a specific case study that allows insight into a specific position at the intersection of queerness and capital. I selected this organisation as an example of a 'fringe organisation' that embodied what Rimmerman describes as a 'liberationist' organisation, his counterpart to an 'assimilationist' organisation. Rimmerman states that "the liberationist perspective favours more radical cultural change, change that is transformational in nature and often arises outside formal structures"[1]. My expectation of interviews was that participants would critique more assimilationist social movements strongly. I expected that they may suggest that the work of assimilationist social movements hindered meaningful change for queer people, by placating them with liberal ideals of success such as equal marriage rights and improved employment opportunities, while applying these benefits hugely unequally and abandoning them when they became inconvenient. While these ideas were certainly reflected in parts of the interviews, something more also became apparent; this framing of liberationist/ assimilationist as diametrically opposed and incompatible seemed to be an over-simplification of organiser attitudes towards social movements and fellow organisations, even those with those whose methods and ideologies were fundamentally different.

I contacted interviewees through a personal relationship with the organisation, and felt aware of the tensions of being both a researcher and movement participant. Throughout interviews I felt the pressures of what Collins describes as the demands

[1] Rimmerman, 2018, p. 6

of academic institutions for a distancing of researchers from participants, a "decontextualization" of researchers, becoming "detached observers", and an absence of emotion from the research process, as well as an absence of ethics and values[2]. Yet the nature of my topic of study, as well as my personal relationship to it, as a queer person interested in pursuing activism, meant that such a detachment was neither feasible, nor, perhaps, desirable. Throughout the interviews I felt alternately moved, inspired, worried, hopeful. The uncomfortable commodification of human connection, even though no monetary transaction was taking place, placed me as a researcher in an interesting position of simultaneous observer and constituent of an organisation.

The consideration of my own positionality also felt significant in considerations of the ethics of my project. Particularly during the interview process itself, where one interviewee unexpectedly requested that I anonymise the organisation they are a part of, I was forced to reckon somewhat uncomfortably with the extractive nature of the research process in its traditional format. This speaks to some of the broader themes that arose within interviews; the need to prioritise the good of the community above some idealised wider good was one finding of my research I had not fully expected, and it was interesting to watch this play out even within my own research process. As Rooke writes in 'Queer Methods and Methodologies', as researchers we expect that our research may pull apart or challenge informants' subjectivities, and thus we should be prepared to have the same done to us.[3] These questions of power within relationships form the core of my findings within interviews, reflecting a relationship with power characterised by complexity – but positionality allows researchers to explore "what is productive in contradictions"[4], and I found the opportunity to do just that deeply rewarding. co

Findings

I will explore the findings of my research thematically, with three themes (aspirations, plurality, and reality) having been selected following the conduction of my research. I believe these themes reflect the complex and multifaceted nature of the queer experiences I encountered – though there is certainly far more within and beyond these themes that could be, and I hope will continue to be, explored.

Aspirations

The aspirations of the organisation formed a significant portion of the discussions I had with the activists. Their organisation was formed in the last few years in response to local TERF (Trans Exclusionary Radical Feminist) organising. From the outset, the

[2] Collins, 2000, p. 255

[3] Rooke, 2016.

[4] Davis, 2016, p. 40

organisation was formed on the basis of permissive anarchist principles, as a "horizontally organised" group, meaning there is no stated leader or hierarchy, but rather that anyone who wants to put on an event or organise and can find the resources and support to do so, is allowed to run that event. Activists can do as much work as they want to and are able to. This organisational structure reflects a commitment to anti-assimilationism which is central to the aspirations of the organisation. Organisers describe not only opposition to TERF organising, but also reactions to 'homogenising' EDI (Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion) structures as informing their anti-assimilationism. They have a clearly stated politics of not insisting on respectability, and a commitment to genuine intersectionality – disability and accessibility is a large part of this, as well as organising with other local groups focused on food insecurity, supporting Palestine, and others. This contrasts with EDI initiatives often found in larger charity or corporate organisations, in which they described feeling that queer people are sanitised, treated as single-issue, and made respectable rather than fully represented and supported.

Instead, in this organisation they aim to create a space for queer and trans people "just to be" with no need to censor themselves or assimilate. Indeed, one organiser recounted memories of being told how to 'successfully pass' – how to avoid being detected as transgender in the gender they were transitioning to – as an example of the ways in which queer people are strongly encouraged to assimilate to mainstream ideas of gender and personhood (other ways in which this pressure is felt include through the regulation of NHS gender affirming care in the UK to those deemed as fitting an acceptable paradigm of gender[5]). They stated that, however, they are "not interested in behaving" – with all the radical politics and rejection of oppressive and restricting structures this entails. Indeed, another organiser stated that as well as building trans power and community in the local area, a central facet of the organisation's aspirations was "a commitment to weirdness". It is clear from both organisational structure and stated aims that the organisation displays a drive towards alternative organising outside of the mainstream, both outside of party politics and mainstream diversity initiatives, instead centring the complex and messy nature of the lived queer experience.

Pluralities

From the context of the emergence of the organisation, as well as the nature of aspirations as at least somewhat responsive to mainstream organisations failure to represent and advocate for the intersectional and multidimensional experience of queer people, it is strongly suggested that the relationships of the organisation with other groups and forms of organising are complex. Indeed, as I mentioned in the introduction, my expectation of relationships with other organisations, based perhaps on the kinds of ways I had seen these themes discussed in similar circles online and

[5] See Gender dysphoria - Treatment - NHS and The Transgender Issue by Shon Faye

in certain academic texts, was that the organisation would be a strong critic of those organisations which did not live up to their principles of anti-assimilationism and intersectionality. This was true to an extent; the organisers discussed histories of not feeling welcome in mainstream social movements, with the motives of charities being seen as unclear, and the fact that they have money from formal sources perceived as complicating in terms of their aims and intent. In fact, one organiser criticised the 'charity industrial complex' which "puts distance between the benevolent helper and the people being helped," enabling the maintaining of "certain hierarchies". Mainstream organisations were critiqued as being too single-issue – one example given was the focus of certain trans rights groups based in the UK on the disproportionate rate of death of trans people in the UK due to medical failures and high suicide rates linked to institutional neglect, while ignoring or failing to speak out on genocides in Palestine. This single-issue organising was argued to be ineffective, because it fails to disperse power, but instead builds power for those who already have access to certain kinds of institutions and spaces. The nature of their organisation, as an affiliation group of which anyone can be a part and a variety of kinds of event targeted at different experiences of the queer and trans community, including proposed events targeted at fat liberation, access and disability justice work, and strong links to local groups supporting financially insecure people, as well as collaboration with organisations campaigning for international issues, is certainly counter to this single-issue organising, illustrating that these kinds of critiques of mainstream organisations and groups are extended into the nature of action within the organisation.

However, the relationship to other organisations was more complex than clear-cut or concrete dismissal and critique. One organiser spoke of the fact that within the organisation itself, there existed "a plurality of approaches and aims", suggesting that the radical nature of the project was also something to be negotiated and is not seen as existing as one singular or straightforward view of how to effect change, or what kind of change they should be aspiring to. This organiser went on to discuss how in some ways, they see the relationship between events such as the local pride and the alternative pride that the organisation runs as operating in a kind of duality. While they certainly critique aspects of the mainstream pride, and indeed, it was from this critique that the alternative pride was founded, there is a reality that the mainstream pride "can reach greater numbers", while the alternative pride is "a useful platform for people alienated by that kind of event". Although this certainly remains a clear critique of the assimilationist and corporate sponsored mainstream pride, it does not suggest that the mainstream pride should not exist, nor that it is entirely or unchangeably harmful. This is embodied in relationships with the local mainstream pride – in recent editions of the mainstream pride, the organisation, along with others, ran boycotts against the pride due to sponsors linked to the arms and fossil fuels industry. However, when the mainstream pride dropped these sponsors, in response to the boycott, the boycott was ended. This suggests some degree of relationship between the pride events – the role of the alternative pride seems to be to act as a pressure group to encourage change

within the mainstream pride, as well as to provide space for those which the mainstream pride does not include or centre. Rather than a purely dismissive relationship, there is a more complex and shifting relationship between organisations, with the suggestion that rather than being pure competitors, they also are symbiotic in that they exist in relationship to one another and to meet different needs that the other fails to fulfil.

Realities

This relationship to other organisations, consisting both of critique and of what may even be called inter-reliance, suggests the nature of the reality the organisation has adapted to contend with. An organisation that was simply or purely revolutionary, severing all engagement with non-radical organisations and prescribing a strong organisational line as opposed to the plurality of approaches and views discussed above, would not be able to have the same effect. Indeed, the organisation seems committed to not placing a purity of ideology or radicalness above the needs of those they aim to support. One of the organisers, when asked about the biggest challenges facing the group, discussed the idea that “visibility is vulnerability” in aspects of their work. This is in direct contrast to the often-stated maxim ‘visibility is power’ cited in pride month and other LGBTQ+ celebrations, which argues that representation and becoming seen and accepted in the mainstream is central tenet of queer progressive activism. The organiser stated that within their organisation, the aim was not necessarily to grow as large and influential as possible, but rather to protect the queer people working with them and attending their events – a bigger audience risked reaching more people who might do them harm, which is not, in their view, ethically justified. They discussed the experience of working in other EDI contexts within institutions where there were concerted efforts to constantly expand coming from institutional leadership, even where this wasn’t necessarily what organisers and communities wanted. This suggests that activism within institutions is occurring to meet the needs of the institution rather than the needs of the community, and it is because of this that widespread visibility has been cemented as a central priority of LGBTQ+ activists. The organisational de-prioritisation of visibility for its own sake can be understood as an example of the refusal to place ideological goals above the material protection of the queer people they are formed of, a notable contrast to many contemporary LGBTQ+ organisations, and indeed to the stereotype of a revolutionary organisation that prizes the revolution above all else.

The same organiser, when asked about what they see as the main goal for their organisation and for the future of queer people, answered that their vision of a trans future world is a world in which there is no entry cost or barriers to hormones and surgeries – a world in which these things are available on demand at any time. They stated that all others were secondary concerns, because access to medical care is what is currently under attack, and thus this is what they believe activism and priorities should centre around. Again, this reflects a notable trend in priorities towards meeting the material needs of the queer constituents and members of their organisation.

Rather than a focus on the abstract or the purely revolutionary – they discussed the potential for a world without any gendered boundaries as the goal, but stated that this was purely a fantasy until the material needs of trans people are met – their priority for the organisation was its ability to meet the needs of queer people as they present, and are being attacked, now. This suggests the idea that they are approaching LGBTQ+ social movements not purely through the lens of being liberatory, revolutionary, or assimilatory – indeed, some may argue that having to reshape our bodies in order to be understood as we wish to be is, in certain ways, assimilating to the transmisogynistic social structures in which we find ourselves – but rather with a set of priorities that centres around the material and lived needs and experiences of queer people now. They are attempting to contend not purely with ideology, but with reality – in their framework, queer people of the present will not be sacrificed for queer ideology of the future. This is reflected in the relationship with other organisations discussed above – a purely ideologically driven organisation may well reject those that do not align with its values, and view them purely as collaborators with capital and the state. However, to best contend with the reality facing queer and especially trans people, there is a continuous negotiation of the relationship with other, more mainstream, organisations, and an acknowledgement that through access to resources and scale, which allows them impact across the country in comparison to alternative organisations' relatively small area of engagement, mainstream organisations are afforded the possibility of a different kind of impact, albeit one still very worthy of critique and critical engagement. This suggests that the kind of boundaries or lenses often imposed on social movements and organisations, such as being classed as being assimilationist, liberatory, or revolutionary, fail to fully capture the structure and nature of the work these activists are carrying out, and even hide some of what is at the core of this social movement.

Analysis

These findings contribute to the field of study around social movements, and queer social movements in particular, in several ways, including in understandings of how growing commitments to anti-assimilationist forms of organising can be interpreted to aid understandings of how systems of power shift over time, in analysis of how to productively categorise the relationships of social movements to systems of power, and in imagining the potential that exists for alternative forms of categorisation, including through the lens of harm reduction.

The co-optation of LGBTQ+ symbols and discourses by the mainstream

The results of the interviews are notable in that the organisers did not see the liberation of queer people from structures of oppression as possible to achieve through assimilationist forms of organising. This is significant in that it reflects the fact that there has been a shift in the status of LGBTQ+ issues such that queer organisers are not always organising from outside of the mainstream. the fact that organisers felt a need to form alternative queer organisations underscores the prevalence of LGBTQ+

organisations in the mainstream, and the extent to which these mainstream organisations are seen as shaping the field of debate and activism for queer people today. This has been discussed by queer theorists such as Puar, who proposes the idea of a 'homonationalism' in which queer identities are co-opted in support of nationalist state formations, widely complicit and even instrumental in the logic and process of neocolonial oppression,[6] and Rao, who argues that 'homocapitalism' draws "on the hegemonic logic of neoliberal reason"[7] to make the case for inclusion "through a refiguration of the queer as model capitalist subject"[8], with all the continued inequalities and suppression of intersectional identities that this refiguration entails. Both theorists make strong arguments that queerness is not inherently a radical position in a modern neocolonial capitalist world interested in maximising profit and control, epitomising the critiques of those I interviewed of the kind of assimilationist attitudes seen in mainstream LGBTQ+ organisations that can perpetuate many other kinds of inequalities. Similarly, the mass of literature theorising the role of advertising towards queer people, both in terms of queer perceptions of advertising, and studies into how corporations can maximise profits from advertising towards queer people[9] provides strong evidence that to be queer in the contemporary world is not necessarily to be outside of the mainstream, which seems directly linked to the kinds of rhetoric the organisers I spoke with were using.

Theorists such as Vaid have made strong arguments for the potential ineffectiveness of this kind of organising that fails to challenge the inequalities of the mainstream in favour of accepting the potential rewards it can offer to the more privileged of the LGBTQ+ community. Vaid argues in the book 'Virtual Equality' that "The system has adapted to our existence, but it has still not changed in fundamental ways."[10] Vaid makes the argument that queer organisers must push beyond a civil rights framework of achieving rights such as legal recognition and marriage equality – while this work can be impactful, the rights and privileges won within this framework are "incomplete, conditional, and ultimately revocable"[11]. The example of pride marches as both a method and outcome of organising for further rights and privileges, which was a significant theme within the interviews that I conducted, is pointed at by Egner as something that "started as a subversive tactic" but "has become a homonormative rite of passage for gays and lesbians in which hegemonic discourses are often employed,"[12] suggesting the idea that the co-optation of queer spaces and organising practices into the mainstream serves both to weaken their radical nature and hinder their ability to create change beyond 'hegemonic discourses'. This was reflected in the attitudes of the organisers I interviewed – the focus on "a commitment to weirdness",

[6] Puar, 2007, p. 2
[7] Rao, 2020, p. 10
[8] Rao, 2020, p. 25
[9] See Schopper et al., 2024, Goodman, 2025, Maks-Solomon at al., 2020
[10] Vaid, 1995, p. 2
[11] Ibid
[12] Egner, 2018, p. 148

a right “just to be” and a resistance to discourses asking them to “successfully pass” were all rejected as mainstreaming and hegemonizing, flattening the multifaceted queer experience of organisers and participants in favour of a more palatable and marketable LGBTQ+ community. The commitment of the organisers I interviewed to resisting these corporate and mainstream efforts can be interpreted as evidence of the strength and prevalence of these forces within contemporary LGBTQ+ organising – the existence of reactionary resistance groups can be interpreted, as Abu-Lughod argues, as a “diagnostic of power,”[13] which seems to have shifted towards certain subsections of LGBTQ+ organising, but, in the perception of those I interviewed, decidedly not away from those who already had some power to begin with. This shift in power such that queer people are not inherently outside of the mainstream is apparent from interviews to have prompted a renewed significance of resisting homonormativity, and the networks of oppression and capitalism that employ the symbols and discourses of LGBTQ+ communities.

False binaries

Although an anti-assimilationist perspective certainly emerged as a theme within interviews, it was also notable that this perspective did not seem to be felt as mutually exclusive to other attitudes to organising, or as a universal condemnation to those operating closer to the mainstream. This is significant in that theorists have often presumed that anti-assimilationist movements, and especially queer anti-assimilationist movements, are inherently revolutionary, or that queerness is inherently tied to anti-assimilationism. Schultermandl, for example, in discussing queer world making, cites Muñoz’s argument that “Queerness is essentially about the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality for another world.”[14] This focus on anti-assimilationism through a rejection of the ‘here and now’, consisting of the social structures and powers that confront organisers and LGBTQ+ people more generally as they move through the world, in favour of imagining and prefiguratively living a different future, free from such oppressions, is cast as a revolutionary and liberatory practice, and is presented as inherent to queerness. However, the focus of organisers on the real and current lives of their fellow organisers and members suggests that this is not a universal truth. The organisers’ simultaneous commitment to anti-assimilationism and to protecting the ‘here and now’ lives of those they organise for and with suggests that the dichotomy between current survival (and perhaps, to a certain extent, the assimilation that allows this survival) and revolutionary deconstruction of social structures is a falsely imposed one. The reality of organising for queer people requires a far more delicate balance of challenging the system while also surviving within it, resisting what some theorists suggest is a revolutionary impulse to abandon the present in favour of the future and instead organising in ways that both challenge and allow survival within systems of oppression. The aim of achieving widespread access to gender affirming surgeries, for example, rather than

[13] Abu-Lughod, 1990, p. 42
[14] Schultermandl, 2022, p. 21

a complete dissolution of all gender binaries and relationships between gender and the body, suggests the imperative to contend not just with ideology and revolutionary discourses, but also with real queer needs and questions of daily life. This does not negate the possibility for radical change, but rather is deeply entangled with it, suggesting that an approach to organising which both exists within systems of oppression and challenges them simultaneously is not only possible, but perhaps even necessary for those wishing to effectively create change.

This is reflected in the work of theorists like Rimmerman, who proposes definitions of assimilationist organisational strategy ("typically embraces a rights-based perspective, works within the broader framework of pluralist democracy—one situated within classical liberalism—and fights for a seat at the table"[15]) and liberationist organisational strategy ("favours more radical cultural change, change that is transformational in nature and often arises outside the formal structures of the US political system"[16]) that are not inherently mutually exclusive within movements. This is a step in the right direction in terms of understanding how we can productively categorise the relationships of organisations and social movements towards the systems of power they contend with – yet the complexly interwoven nature of these approaches, albeit to varying scales, in the attitudes of the organisers I interviewed challenges the effectiveness of such a division at all. As Weber argues in the advocacy for queer marriage as potentially radical[17], and Rao suggests in the question of "How can we do justice to queer desires for normativity as a means toward a liveable life without always and everywhere levelling the charge of homonormativity?,"[18] even the attempt to neatly divide social movement strategies and queer action into assimilationist and liberationist/ revolutionary, risks negating the complex relationship with power that organisers must grapple with, and the conjoined imperatives to effect change and support survival that organisers and LGBTQ+ people face.

Potentials beyond the binary

The question of how researchers can best understand the nature of queer alternative organising, if we decide to put aside the binary of assimilationist and liberatory/ revolutionary, remains an open one, without a singular or conclusive answer having emerged in my findings. The reality of complex and overlapping power networks which organisers must seek to both alter and survive within dictates that a variety of approaches and lenses are necessary, both for organisers to effect meaningful change and researchers to fully understand the process and impact of organising. One lens that Fraser offers as an alternative to the assimilation/ liberation binary is the possibility of 'affirmation' and 'transformation' approaches – she emphasises the fact that the difference between these is not "gradual versus apocalyptic change,"[19] as assimilation

[15] Rimmerman, 2018, p. 6
[16] Rimmerman, 2018, p. 6-7
[17] Weber, 2015
[18] Rao, 2020, p. 30
[19] Fraser, 2020, p. 194

and liberation/ revolution are sometimes framed, but rather that "the crux of the contrast is end-state outcomes versus the processes that produce them," with affirmative remedies meaning "remedies aimed at correcting inequitable outcomes of social arrangements without disturbing the underlying framework that generates them" and transformative remedies meaning "remedies aimed at correcting inequitable outcomes precisely by restructuring the underlying generative framework."[20] While this potentially risks being a reiteration of similar ideas to those contained within the assimilation/ liberation binary, Fraser emphasises within her construction of the transformative that the destabilisation such an approach seeks is not an absence of solid identity or structures, but rather the sustaining of a multiplicity of debinarised and fluid structures. This difference is significant in that in speaks to the multiplicity of approaches and aims organisers discussed as being represented within their organisation – however, the potential weaknesses of this lens are that it perpetuates a level of separation between affirmation and transformation, which does not seem to fully capture the ways in which organisers balanced these as simultaneous goals.

I propose that an alternative framework through which we can understand the kind of balancing of operating within structures of power and challenging them simultaneously is a harm reduction framework. Harm reduction has a rich and significant history and context within abolitionist feminism, black feminism, and in particular approaches to drug use – this source should be actively acknowledged and considered in the application of this framework, which potentially offers a method of understanding how activists balance needs for survival and for more radical change. adrienne maree brown discusses the significance of harm reduction as a social justice movement with Monique Tula in her book 'Pleasure Activism', stating that "Harm reduction is a social justice movement built on the belief in, and respect for, the rights of people who use drugs… Our bottom line is that everyone has the right to health and wellbeing."[21] They go on to discuss the metaphor that harm reductionists, as well as racial, social, and environmental justice warriors, are both "mycelium and tree – interdependent and deeply rooted, paving the way for those who come". Mycelium is a kind of fungi that grows underground among tree roots, which can kill trees and forests – but does so as part of a longer process, surviving simultaneously amidst the roots and through killing the trees, building deeper and richer layers of soil that allow new things to grow. This metaphor for harm reduction captures something significant that emerged within my interviews with organisers – that they must adapt to both survive within oppressive structures and create and employ the tools to radically dismantle them. These efforts cannot, and seemingly are not, in the minds of the organisers I interviewed, separate, but rather exist as part of an ongoing cycle, visible both in their own actions and their relationships with other, more mainstream organisations. Organisers seemed to view their primary purpose as benefitting the lives of diverse sets of queer people around them now, and where mainstream organisations had the capability to support this, their

[20] Fraser, 2020, p 194
[21] brown, 2019, p. 245

existence as a metaphorical tree – as organisations that benefit from structural power or corporate support – was ideologically secondary to the real and tangible potential benefit they could offer queer people. Thus, the relationship between assimilationist and liberatory social movements was not one defined by opposition, but rather a mutual entanglement in structures of power that different organisations, at alternate turns, could employ different tools to face.

Mackenzie, in an essay exploring the use of harm reduction principles in a classroom context, based on their experience in harm reduction spaces focused on drug use and later as a teacher, states that "If we cannot escape capital—and I don't believe we can—how do we find ways to resist the force it applies to our bodies and the definitions it gives our lives? As I began my doctoral program, leaving street exchange for the university classroom, I began to translate harm reduction beyond public health. By subverting the recovery model and its capitalist logics, harm reduction is not only efficacious health policy, but a whole way of thinking rooted in care, temporality, and process."[22] While the structural forces of power that organisers I interviewed encounter, including capital and others, can be challenged, they cannot be simply willed out of existence – and to suggest that an acknowledgment of this, of the 'here and now', is assimilationist, is a misreading of how these activists understand the purpose and role of their work. Instead, the organisers seemed to embody this approach, while not explicitly naming it as such, of a practice of harm reduction in their method of activism – of recognising that "all of human experience hums within the mess of now, that we may or may not arrive at scripted destinations."[23] Harm reduction centres around process and practice as opposed to a teleological focus on outcome, just as the organisers I spoke to focused on the necessities of the kind of work that needed to be done now, rather than in an idealised future. This is not to suggest that the organisers did not have visions of the future, nor that the kind of work they were doing did not embody this – rather, that these visions and work were innately linked to the realities faced by themselves and their fellow organisers, rather than detached and purely ideological. Mackenzie discusses what liberation means in the context of harm reduction, stating that "As with harm reduction, I do not believe our classrooms are sites of liberation but instead scenes of ongoing care and attention. Which is not to say they do not have the possibility to liberate, only that American higher education is underwritten by imperialism, historically and as an ongoing matter of fact."[24] The necessary fact that organisers both operate within and attempt to deconstruct and challenge, negates neither the possibility for radical change nor the everyday lived realities of those they organise with and for, but rather opens a possibility perhaps even for something beyond – neither a full rejection of the societies they live in, nor acceptance, but rather an interwoven, complex, and multifaceted response to the kinds of ways in which power operates and flows.

[22] Mackenzie, 2022, p. 3
[23] Ibid.
[24] Mackenzie, 2022, p. 13

Conclusions

The question of how any findings I might have could be used by organisers and social researchers was central in my mind as I was conducting and writing up this project. As social movement researchers, we should necessarily aspire to conduct self-reflexive research with potential impact and utility to organisers, as well as other researchers in the field. My expectation for the project was in some ways that I would be able to understand the relationships between the organisation I was focusing on and the networks of power within which it operates using existing terms, in order to interrogate how movements can best engage with systems of power. However, part what of what I discovered was that the terms of researchers should not be used to constrain the actions of movements, but rather that we should adapt our language and open our academic ideas to the rich and complex ways in which negotiations with power play out in the real world. While the scope of my project was relatively limited, my case study organisation offers one set of insights into how a certain type of organisation is approaching the perhaps perennial challenge of how to challenge structures of power while surviving with them, suggesting that a combination of various perspectives and kinds of actions is required. These insights are valuable as an aid to researcher understandings of the wide range of approaches that activist organisations take. They also reveals something about the nature of power systems – as Abu-Lughod argues, resistance can be used “as a diagnostic of power”, and in this case the complex and multifaceted nature of resistance is indicative of the multilayered ways in which webs of power move through the lives of organisations and individuals, but can also be changed by the actions of organisations and individuals. Researchers should continue to view not only the relationships between social movements but also between researcher and researched as circular, symbiotic, and inevitably shifting, changing and being renegotiated – and it is in this acceptance of the impossibility of solid or unchanging definitions that I hope truly productive knowledge can be encountered.

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