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Editorial for Queer STS Forum #7 2022: Towards Academic Kindness – A queer-feminist string figure on kinder working cultures in academia

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This 7th issue of Queer STS Forum is dedicated to reflecting and advancing queer-feminist working cultures in academia. We particularly interrogate the concept of academic kindness, which is an emerging theme and practice across disciplines yet not often systematically discussed and defined clearly. While the esteemed contributors of this issue might not intend to provide a theory of academic kindness, they offer a framework of theoretical perspectives, empirical examples, and practical illustrations of this very concept. This Forum, including this editorial, might remind queer-feminist readers of Haraway's "string figures", actually "string figuring", which she defines as "passing on and receiving, making and unmaking, picking up threads and dropping them" (Haraway, 2016, p. 3). This editorial then is quite intentionally not a perfectly woven garment/argument but a set of open threads we offer you for further play.

Anita first stumbled upon #academickindness as a Twitter hashtag several years ago. She began to discuss the topic with colleagues – although not using the term itself back then – when she researched gendered care politics and practices of RRI (responsible research and innovation; Thaler, 2017). One of her first colleagues was Ester Conesa, a visiting scholar in the IAS STS (hosted by IFZ, Anita's workplace since 2004) in 2017/2018, who was working on her PhD emphasising an "ethics of care perspective in academia". Like Anita, Ester was taking up the threads of Maria Puig de La Bellacasa's (2011) work on "Matters of Care", which provided common ground for discussion. Together with her colleague Ana Gonzales Ester analysed (2018) psychosocial

risks of academia due to acceleration processes of new management regimes that not only "… generate long working hours, relegating private lives and self-care linked to personal well-being" (Conesa & Gonzales, 2018, p. 10) but also lead to an "erosion of collegiality, unfriendly environments, poor academic quality and burn out" (ibid. p. 10).

While working on the fifth Queer STS Forum in 2020, the theoretical discussions around academic kindness were enhanced by experiences from our working group. With the theme "Queer-feminist issues in pandemic times", Queer STS Forum #5 was the largest volume with the most contributors, despite the COVID-19 pandemic and care crises unfolding on every level. The editorial team (Jauk et al., 2020) of the working group Queer STS recognised that their working culture had helped to receive great resonance. When the collective published their call for contributions for the annual open access journal in June 2020, they emphasised their sensitivity to the multiply stretched live situations of queer-feminist STS researchers/practitioners and offered low threshold and creative opportunities to participate, as well as peer reviews by "critical friends" who were instructed to help build, rather than tear down one's work. The workgroup came to label its work culture as "academic kindness", incorporating self-care and responsibility as well as care for others (see also Conesa, 2017). This experience sets the tone and substantiates the need for academic kindness. In this issue #7 of our Forum, we invited colleagues to shed further light on the need for a cultural shift in academia (and beyond) and to play string figures with us as we seek to better understand the tasks and implications of cultivating academic kindness.

We start string figuring with Claudia Gertraud Schwarz-Plaschg and her anonymous colleague sharing about their negative experiences in STS, as a specific academic setting. You may already be aware of the online movement Schwarz-Plaschg started with her public testimonial on abuses of power and sexualised violence within a prestigious Harvard STS postdoc program. You may already be fighting alongside her around the hashtags #MeTooSTS and #WeDoSTS that currently gather momentum and provide a space for many survivors of academic bullying to speak out and resist abusive academic cultures. We are honoured to host an extended reflection on queer-feminist resistance in STS spaces by finding 'your kind' in a hostile environment. The authors describe their experiences in the Feminist STS Repair Team, a virtual collective that serves as a container that allows for vulnerability, trauma recovery, and empowerment that is undergirded by feminist theories of care ethics. The authors also expose how power abuse and narcissism are not a "by-product" of academia but its very foundation. They suggest we ditch the hero and embrace queer heroine's journeys as cyborgs and goddesses.

Andrea Ploder (in this Forum #7) offers a manifest for academic kindness as a precondition and fertile environment for empirically robust research. She frames academic kindness as a powerful methodological and epistemological tool, demonstrating that "some kinds of knowledge just cannot be produced without it". (Ploder, 2022, p. 1).

Building on prior work on "strong reflexivity", which centres the researcher's positionality as a decisive epistemic source, she argues that strong reflexivity requires vulnerability. The researcher's vulnerability can only meaningfully evolve and exist in environments of academic kindness. Andrea Ploder is carefully discerning that researchers in strongly reflexive research traditions such as autoethnography or ethnopsychoanalysis are typically more vulnerable in the academic mainstream, which often seeks to wash them to the margins. However, academic kindness also requires not assuming universal vulnerability and marginalisation. She unpacks concrete strategies to co-create more academic kindness when she suggests that everyone of us needs to tap into vulnerability as research partners, as reviewers, and as readers to enable and support research under conditions of increased researcher vulnerability.

We are tying Andrea Ploder's thread into the string figure complemented by Ulrike Felt's work on "Of timescapes and knowledge scapes: Re-timing research and higher education" (2016), where she criticises the "ideal of efficiency" in research (p. 9). Felt (2016) addresses the lack of appreciation of academic care work in the context of the very essence of academia: knowledge production. She argues that the acceleration in academia leads to "temporal care work" (ibid. p.14) and criticises not only that academic institutions fail to acknowledge this work but "appreciate the amount of work that must be done and to understand how it impacts on knowledge generation." (ibid., p.14). Against this background, we strongly support and lift up Conesa and Gonzales' (2018) call for "an ethics of care feminist perspective that … counteracts a culture only based on (scientific) productivity and undervalues care work (such as 'academic housework')" (p.11). This means scientific excellence and research must be valued and evaluated more wisely, as the Declaration on Research Assessment suggested in 2012. It calls for a broader representation of researchers in the design of research assessment practices, for more transparency across all levels of knowledge production, and a move away from harmful and skewed publication metrics to meaningful publication content.

However, to think about a kinder academia also means to think about a kinder environment for knowledge production and new ways of conducting research with other beings. Latimer and López Gómez (2019) have already woven an innovative string into the discourse in a special issue on intimate entanglements in techno-scientific worldmaking. They uncover how affect and intimacy in science and technology studies are relegated to the interpersonal, corporal, and private yet are constitutive of truthfulness and relevance in research. Donna Haraway embraces positive affect as research method and ties in Vinciane Despret's "virtue of politeness" in her chapter "A Curious Practise" (Haraway, 2016, pp.126 f.). She connects it to Hannah Arendt's "to go visiting," described as "… the ability to find others actively interesting … and to do all this politely!" (Haraway, 2016, p. 127). Moreover, she contends that "Hannah Arendt and Virginia Woolf both understood the high stakes of training the mind and imagination to go visiting, to venture off the beaten path to meet unexpected, non-natal kin, and to

strike up conversations, to pose and respond to interesting questions, to propose together something unanticipated, to take up the unasked-for obligations of having met. This is what I have called cultivating response-ability" (Haraway, 2016, p. 130).

Along these lines, Clara Rosa Schwarz "goes visiting" with her research participants as she reflects on how an ethic of friendship and kindness played a role for her and her research participants when examining queer friendships during pandemic times. Her research is a fascinating attempt to highlight friendship as a method and to expand on 'intimate insider research relationships' as suggested by Taylor (2011). For Clara Rosa Schwarz, reciprocal kindness evolved during the research process as an unintentional process. In her reflection on one dyad interview of friend-research participants from a larger sample, she conceptualises kindness as an unarticulated premise for intimate research. It expands beyond ethical norms in her research and "signifies a more personal level of investment, a more egalitarian and more caring approach to the relationship between researcher and participants." (Schwarz, 2022, in this forum). Her approach seeks to honour her friend-participants' interests and vulnerabilities exacerbated by the pandemic. Her online research setting simultaneously provided a space to cultivate friendships but also for conversations that would not have unfolded in "mere" friendship chats. The dyad under consideration utilised this space to air their grievances, apologise, and share their stories, illustrating the benefits of this research for their friendship with each other and the friendship between the dyad and the researchers.

We find another thread for our string figure in education research, based on positive psychology, which could add to Haraway's curious practice and Clara Rosa Schwarz's practices of kindness: The 'flourishing perspective' of Sabre Cherkowski (2018) combines aspects of feeling good with meaning, purpose, connection, and engagement. Cherkowski (2018) concretely suggests positive teacher leadership to improve schools, e.g., by developing respective mindsets through questions – first asking oneself and then reflecting outwards to / with others (Cherkowski, 2018, p.70):

- "Am I seen? Do I see others? (being known)
- Am I contributing my strengths? Do I help others to contribute their strengths? (difference-making)
- Am I learning and growing? Do I help others to learn and grow? (professional learning)
- Am I seeking feedback? Do I give feedback (appreciation and acknowledgement)"?

In picking up these strings, we find that these questions could easily be transferred from schools to higher education and research organisations. Furthermore, others before us have played with similar string figures. We read Maja Korica's "A Hopeful Manifesto for a More Humane Academia" (2022) as a call for a cultural shift in academic,

educational and research organisations to strive towards more kindness: “Our interactions can either sustain or challenge institutions; make good ones better, or bad ones worse.” (Korica, 2022, p. 1524). Korica (2022) lists five concrete practices, which could be filled with detail and lived experience, and so make a big difference (p.1524 f.):

1. Value teaching, student support and collegiality.
2. Respect administrative and support colleagues.
3. Review and edit generously.
4. Don’t be inappropriate.
5. Call out bad behaviour.

This sounds so good, we want to do it, and it also sounds rather simple, right? Yet, it might not be that easy for everyone in academia. Lisa Scheer reflects on her process with academic kindness by drawing cartoons for this issue. Her out-of-the-box contribution emphasises the question of who can afford to be kind. In her artist statement, we learn that as she started thinking about kind practices in academia, she identified those that everyone in academia could implement without much effort. Sending thank-you emails to authors whose articles we discuss with students, providing positive spaces (also for non-human animals), being an ally, celebrating colleagues, crafting as care work, and many other ideas. She skilfully packs them into accessible and beautiful comics that many of us will want to hang in our work-, life-, and breathing spaces and share with colleagues and students! You may be as excited as we are about how Lisa Scheer translated diversity and inclusivity into compelling and loving imagery down to the fine print and her language. She also addresses in several places how kindness implies very material aspects and means more than sharing thoughts and words. We might even see it as an anti-capitalist practice of sharing time, resources, and money through her visual invitation.

We add a final thread to our string figure of academic kindness (for now) by returning to Lisa Scheer’s powerful question, “Who are the ones being able to act kind in academia?”. Are we adding even more work to the academic care work, to be done by administrative staff, researchers with no permanent positions, women with migrant backgrounds and other marginalised knowledge workers in and around the university (Puig de La Bellacasa, 2011)? And how can academia as a system change? Kris de Welde contributes these provocative and critical thoughts to this issue and explains why it is essential to implement an academic kindness that is informed by and guided by academic justice. De Welde (2022) is “minding and mending the gap between academic kindness and academic justice” when she interrogates academic kindness as a “sweaty concept” (Ahmed, 2014) that may be necessary and effective on an individual level but may not have the transformative possibilities for system-level change we would want to see. Based on her research on feminist academic changemakers, she emphasises the necessity and effectiveness of academic kindness. She also explores the concept's gaps and traps when it leaves historical and cultural hierarchies inscribed onto bureaucratic structures unchanged or re-affirmed. De Welde (2022) challenges

us to be awake and reflective if academic kindness is employed as a tool and control mechanism of the neoliberal university that reifies power structures. She proposes to mend the gap by (re)envisioning academic kindness as collective practice in queer-feminist solidarity against oppression and injustice.

This string figure of the 7th Queer STS Forum on academic kindness, including this loose and tentacular introduction and overview, can only be a beginning. We are curious and want to connect to all other thinkers and practitioners in academia and beyond, who are already practising, breathing and working with and around academic kindness. We strive to incorporate academic kindness even better in our Queer STS working group and in our Forum. Please take a string or two, and hand us back another thread; we want to flourish and continue to play string figures – with a vision of social justice, collectively.

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Claudia Gertraud Schwarz-Plaschg, and other kinds

On a heroine's journey of living academia kindly: Alternative myth-making from a feminist STS collective

Claudia Gertraud Schwarz-Plaschg is a social scientist, writer, activist, and science communicator currently based in Vienna, Austria. She has recently started the #MeTooSTS #WeDoSTS movement and is a digital visiting scholar in the Social Dimensions of Biomedicine Lab at the University of Edinburgh. In her research and praxis, she dives into the sociopolitical dynamics of (re-)emerging scientific fields and technologies, ethical and legal issues, the role of psychedelics and healing modalities in society, gender studies and feminism, social movements and community building, and the entanglements of science, spirituality, and art.

> My silences had not protected me. Your silences will not protect you. But for every real word spoken, for every attempt I had ever made to speak those truths for which I am still seeking, I had made contact with other women while we examined the words to fit a world in which we all believed, bridging our differences. And it was the concern and caring of all those women which gave me strength and enabled me to scrutinize the essentials of my living. … They gave me a strength and concern without which I could not have survived intact. … I am not only a casualty, I am also a warrior.
>
> Audre Lorde: The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action

The start of our journey…

In March 2020, when the coronavirus had reached the United States, my dear friend and I found ourselves no longer able to physically enter our respective respected academic institutions. Harvard and MIT had literally closed their doors on us. Metaphorically, we had felt it long before the literal meaning manifested. Unconsciously, we probably thought that this could turn out to be an opportune time to also close some of those doors that we rather would not have passed through if we had known what would await us. The experience of one door opening, only to find out that there exists a whole host of closed doors, in different shapes and sizes, appearing once you enter this Wonderland. Often just a few nanometers apart. An academic institution is made up (it is, of course, also made up) of so many invisible doors. And you only find this out when you run into them, suddenly feel an impact, finding yourself at an impasse, especially if you criticize what is going on at the institution itself, as experience teaches us constantly and Sara Ahmed analyzes so lucidly and eloquently in her recent book *Complaint!* (Ahmed 2021). That curious moment when we could no longer physically enter the university buildings also taught us that every door that appears to be an exit is

likewise an entry and may even contain the opportunity to lift us up to a new level (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: A door leading out of Stefan Sargmeister's exhibition "The Happy Show" at the Museum für angewandte Kunst in Vienna, 2015 (picture by the author)

I had met my dear friend a year earlier at Harvard, where we immediately recognized that we were of the same kind, despite our differences. Independently, we had experienced, and had been trying to make sense of, how contemporary neoliberal academia demands conformity, compromises, and forms of complicity that often undermine the very values that underpin feminist STS work and the ideals that brought us to academia in the first place. The message we have repeatedly received is that we would have to adapt and split off parts of ourselves in order to survive: in other words, to dissociate from our felt sense experience, to robotically conform to performance criteria of "success" and "excellence," to change our values and betray our ideals in order to keep up with the demands placed on us. Building on the work of W.E.B. Du Bois (1903), Dorothy Smith (1987) has elaborated on this phenomenon with her concept of "bifurcation of consciousness" to describe the split between how female scholars as members of

the subordinate group actually experience the world and at the same time have to adapt to the dominant, patriarchal point of view in order to survive in their professional environment. A similar process of splitting interestingly can be observed among people in captivity, who become experts in suppressing aspects of reality and holding contradictory beliefs simultaneously in mind—think Orwell's "doublethink"—to survive in an unbearable, traumatizing environment (Herman 2015/1992).

We experienced that the university as an institution aims to replace our intuition about what should constitute a healthy educational and research culture with a set of outside criteria we did not agree with at all. The cost of refusing this replacement for job security can be extreme: if you do not submit to hierarchical logics and existing (dis)incentive structures at best, and harassment and abuses at worst; if you start to whisper to a friend-colleague in private, raise your voice now and then to a superior in meetings, or even dare to complain to the institution, doors keep multiplying, each one asking you with a veneer of insincere politeness to reconsider whether academia is the right place for you, as I harshly experienced when I was kicked out of the Harvard STS program for speaking up about sexual harassment and abuses of power (Schwarz-Plaschg 2022). *But what if we are not ready to exit academia (yet)? How can we continue our research without losing ourselves, to act from and live as our whole selves, and find ways of healing from the trauma that toxic academic settings inflict on us? How could we live academia kindly with, and create safe spaces of refuge for, each other?*

Precipitated by the pandemic, two strong currents of need and desire guided us to start creating our own safe space. One was a longing for collectivity, for mingling with more of our kind to overcome the isolation suddenly imposed on us by the pandemic. The second was an intellectual desire for feminist and postcolonial STS literature that had not been met at all by the STS environments we were embedded in or had passed through. One of the last in-person public events we attended before the pandemic was a feminist STS panel at MIT. This event closed out academic life as we knew it and opened a door that was previously invisible to us but which we were eager to enter. The virtual existence that we were hurtled into suddenly made it seem quite logical to connect with friends and colleagues across the world who were also looking to the kind of feminist thinking that challenged the existing patriarchal world structures underpinning the global crisis. It took the closing of the physical doors to kindle the craving for at least virtual companionship despite imposed physical isolation. A few weeks after the slamming of the physical doors, we started merging independently created virtual reading groups of feminist scholarship to form the nucleus of what would grow into a larger collective pursuing of this (not coincidentally) shared desire. This core group then started to grow continuously by inviting trusted colleagues into the collective.

From individual survival support to collective transformative empowerment

What this original group shared was not just an intersectional feminist interest but also the shared trauma of having undergone the toxic research culture at the Harvard STS

program (see also Vinsel 2022). Although not all of us were there at the same time, all of us who had lived through it experienced it as highly abusive. We were in the process of healing from the costs associated with this former affiliation, which included making sense of what was happening and why. It turned out that, rather than convening the originally planned reading groups, our first meetings resembled more the trauma discussion groups I had been attending at the Cambridge Women's Center to cope while being a fellow at the Harvard STS program (for more on the importance of commonality and groups in healing from trauma see Chapter 11 in Herman 2015/1992). After all, what would be the point of reading these intellectual pieces if we were not yet feeling whole enough to embody their content? We felt the need to collectively process our experiences from this and other toxic academic settings: the traumas of harassment, discrimination, and marginalization; of idea theft and abuses of power; and the general lack and loss of anti-patriarchal, safe, and trustworthy role models and colleagues. The spirit of open and vulnerable sharing of our academic struggles and traumas continues to animate our meetings, and we draw strength and empowerment from this collective container of support to continue to survive in, or simply understand, confusing, toxic, and triggering academic environments. Some of us were even able to reconstruct and reclaim our own narratives about disturbing experiences that had until then been dominated and eclipsed by others.

One of our meetings focused exclusively on discussing literature on trauma in academia (Markowitz 2021, Pearce 2020, Thomas 2018) to reflect our own experiences against a broader systemic level and get inspiration from other scholars who openly discuss this tabooed topic. We also delved deeply into feminist care literature (de la Bellacasa 2017, Mol 2008, Tronto 1993) to strengthen our theoretical grasp of care relations as well as think about what it would mean to integrate caring practices into our collective and individual research projects. My dear friend and I often talk in awe about how the deep empathy and care we feel emanating from the collective helps us to transform ourselves in ways we had never imagined. Through collective processing, we are slowly outgrowing old versions of ourselves that had previously internalized fault instead of recognizing the external, and systemic, source of our traumas. We are learning to non-judgmentally and self-compassionately step into responsibility for the role we did play—and do not want to play anymore—within the system. We are starting to understand how our respective individual traumas had until then kept us in the cycle of tolerating, but ultimately rejecting, abusive behaviors and environments in academia. In an interdependent web, the care and empowerment embodied by the group's relationships are in their very nature a radical departure from contemporary individualistic templates into which we are expected to merge to survive in academia. The support the collective offers is quite the opposite from the type of support we often receive to help us conform to the structures which are not supporting us in the first place.

Apart and as part of the collective, my dear friend and I mutually reflected on the parallels in our experiences of various institutional settings in recent and distant past. Together, we connected the dots on how structural issues in academia reflect neoliberal logics, which in turn tend to select for people who value competitiveness above care. It was not until we began the collective trauma processing that we better understood how narcissistic traits, abusive behavior, and wielding power over those who are vulnerable were not just unfortunate byproducts of academia but indeed tend to foster success in academia and other competitive social arenas, where the individualistic values of the upper echelons of exclusive patriarchal knowledge circles still largely determine your fate. We use 'patriarchal' here in bell hooks' (2004) sense as psychological patriarchy that is upheld not just by those with male identities but by anyone who participates in and stabilizes institutions that rest on forms of domination along racialized, gendered, and/or otherwise minoritized identities. The term 'patriarchy' here stands for a general framework of domination that is based on subordinating other human and non-human kinds.

This is not to say that every scholar ending up in an academic position of power had to elbow others out to get there, but rather that, unfortunately, those who end up being in a position of being able to extend kindness to those lower in the hierarchical structure may be able to do so in large part because of preexisting privileges. Discourses of meritocracy and chance (Davies & Pham 2022) serve to hide that successful scholars often either come from privileged backgrounds or have sufficiently assimilated to dominant practices to "make it" as a representative from a marginalized group. In the case of myself and my dear friend, we were the first members in our respective families to study and earn degrees at universities, and we both have experienced the toll of trying to live academia kindly rather than competitively in terms of career progress. It is difficult to prioritize collectivist and compassionate values and simultaneously thrive in an academia that is still largely built on exploitation, bullying, and the weaponization of fear, guilt, and shame for control over others to come out on top (Täuber & Mahmoudi 2022, Thompson 2022, Ball 2021). Those who try to resist engaging with and actively reproducing an abusive culture often either simply suffer, assimilate to some extent, in the end conform out of desperation, or are eventually pushed out if they choose to set boundaries to preserve dignity and self-respect. We strongly believe that any university that truly wants to be seen as excellent in the future will have to broaden its concept of excellence to interpersonal conduct, which means to count harassment, bullying, and any form of discrimination as a form of scientific misconduct (Pickersgill et al. 2019, Marín-Spiotta 2018).

We are (doing) the FeminiSTS Repair Team

Without having planned it, we co-created our collective from its inception as a space in which kindness emerged through a mutual recognition of being of the same (human)kind while honoring—and caring for—our differences in lived experience and intersectional identities. The virtual feminist STS collective serves as a space in which

we transform the struggles and hurts we experience in our regular, institutional academic settings through empathy and appreciation in a safe container that can hold and potentially mold anything that wants to make itself known—be it anger, sadness, frustration, shame, love, or joy. We usually start our meetings by checking in with our present affective state, meeting first in our embodied, aware humankindness rather than our mind-crafted, academic personas (see also Korica 2022), and only then do we move on to the professional matters of the moment that call our attention.

From our first meeting onwards, our collective continuously grew, as already in our first meeting one of the original four members brought in another friend who shared our feminist interest but was a never part of the Harvard STS program, which the rest of us were still metabolizing. She and other new members who did not share that experience were important sister-outsiders whose role often was to assure us that indeed the problem is in the setting and not in us. If you have been told that the toxicity you experience is normal, it often takes an outsider to point out that your gut feeling of unease was always an adequate visceral response to an abusive situation.

The first few months of our collective also saw its naming as the FeminiSTS Repair Team. The name resonated with the other members based on the de facto shape the group had taken in terms of purpose and practices, so it stuck. But what we are is continually reshaped by what we are doing and by the different members that come and go. What is stable so far is that we have no director, no center, no telos. Over the course of two and a half years, the membership of our collective has morphed and shape-shifted. Currently, the FeminiSTS Repair Team consists of fourteen members: some are dormant, some are very present and active. Most of our members identify as women, some as queer, but all of us identify as feminists who believe in the fundamental equality of all humans regardless of their gender/sex (non)identification. We are driven by a feeling-knowing that the systems and worlds we live in, and study, call for urgent repair activities to restore balance between the masculine and feminine energies, or even redefine our understanding the world outside of this binary altogether, no matter whether we identify as male or female or neither. We share the insight that *the repair we want to see happen and generate in this world needs to start within each of us and between us first*.

The FeminiSTS Repair Team works like a laboratory in which we test out tools and practices to enable this holistic understanding of repair, which we then may extrapolate into our relationships and communities beyond the collective. This can take the form of repairing interpersonal relationship ruptures, or repairing ourselves sufficiently to the point of being able to recognize which of our relationships are beyond repair—usually the ones that depend on unrepaired, unhealed versions of ourselves (and others) and therefore do not allow us to unfold our full potential. Above all, our repair efforts are fueled by a *desire to stop reproducing an academic culture in which the production of our public academic discourse is decoupled from our actions in our immediate, often private social sphere*.

While many of my reflections in this article emerge from my growth in the collective container of the FeminiSTS Repair Team, I want to clarify that, despite my fluid use of plural and singular pronouns in this text, my intention is to relate my own experience of the collective as one part of a whole, as I cannot speak for the individual realities of other human and non-human kinds in it. Not all members of the FeminiSTS Repair Team necessarily share the same understanding of the interplay of the masculine and feminine or of the form and purpose of repair processes. Some among us view the group as a safe space of trusted friends to process and repair personal harm in order to become viable participants in the neoliberal academy. I, among others in the collective, like to think of us as a team whose mission is not just oriented towards repairing the individual psychological harm we experienced in academia, but to harness the power of the collective to turn us into agents of change. The very fact that I was able to take the courageous step of speaking out about the injustice I suffered at/by the Harvard STS program bears testimony to the activating and protective potential that our collective container is able to generate.

From the hero's to the heroine's journey

From the start, the FeminiSTS Repair Team served a very important healing function for me because the harm I experienced at/by the Harvard STS program seemed to be the most severe. As I detail in my recent Medium post (Schwarz-Plaschg 2022), I was abruptly and cruelly excluded from the program by its director, professor Sheila Jasanoff, when I suffered a mental breakdown and tried to take back my agency through a feminist snap (Ahmed 2017), after being sexually harassed for several months by two cis-male, white colleagues. My distress became so unbearable that I had to break the veil of silence and call out the unethical conduct of the two colleagues as well as the professor's much-too-close involvement with them. This unveiling was not tolerated and the professor silenced, excluded, and tried to gaslight me into thinking that I was the problem and a "threat to the men" in the program rather than protecting me as the victim.

It was very difficult for me to process these unfathomable experiences. Narrating what had happened time and time again was part and parcel of my healing journey. Each time a new member joined our growing collective, we told our individual stories and that gave me the chance to reclaim my reality each time a little bit more. At one point, when I was telling my story again at one of our meetings, I was pulled back into questioning the validity of my experience—a detrimental effect of the gaslighting—and immediately one of our members exclaimed: "But you are our hero!" These moments in the team, combined with intensive coaching, psychotherapy, plant medicine work, research, and activist training, were effective to reorient my story of self over the course of three and a half years into one in which I had regained trust, self-efficacy, and purpose. I was able to reimagine myself as a survivor with the capacity to step into a leadership role by crafting a public narrative that integrated a story of self, a story of us, and a story of now into a coherent narrative that could spark a movement (Ganz et

al. 2022). I feel very fortunate to have been able to do all this hard inner work, and I want to acknowledge the elements of privilege in my life—mostly related to my white European identity, the support and resources provided by the European Commission, my home country, and the social networks afforded to me through my educational endeavors—that have allowed me to make it as far as I have.

As part of my scholarly exploration, I became increasingly intrigued by the mythopoetic potential of the hero figure. As C. G. Jung (2014/1959) highlights, archetypes such as the hero function as important devices in our psychological development as humankinds. Feminist STS has long had a strong affinity with the trickster as an archetypal subversive figure that likes to exaggerate and invert hegemonic meanings to induce social change (Haraway 1991). Specific periods and life stages call for specific archetypes and I felt that the postmodern trickster was no longer serving me and perhaps our culture more broadly at this juncture. So, I turned my embodied awareness to the hero archetype in order to better understand and tune into its energy, hoping it would empower me to move through and ideally reshape a neoliberal and still largely phallogocentric academia into something more resembling the kinder, feminist utopia we are dreaming of.

I started where most stories about heroes begin: the monomyth of the hero's journey that Joseph Campbell (2008/1949) traced across different cultures by building on Jung's work (see left image in Figure 2). I engage with the hero's journey as a narrative template for personal transformation catalyzed through confronting and integrating the shadow, i.e. all the disowned parts of the self in the psyche. Since the individual shadow is also part of a larger collective shadow, the hero's journey is ultimately about bringing something of value back to one's community. Narrated as a more outward journey, Campbell's hero—not unlike a scientific explorer—sets out on a journey when hearing a call to adventure. Adventure here means moving from the sphere of the known to the unknown—a movement into the unconscious in psychoanalytic terms—with the (supernatural) aid of guardians, helpers, and mentors. On this journey, the hero goes through a series of trials and tribulations that transform them in a process of death and rebirth. As part of this atonement, the hero receives a reward that they can bring back to society as a changed human being.

Campbell's hero's journey is the story arc that many Hollywood movies follow, most notably the Star Wars movies. It has a male bias and lends itself primarily for those coming of age waiting to go on their first adventure. Yet for those struggling to make meaning out of life (aren't we all at times?), it can certainly be worthwhile revisiting it in later life stages. But again, such ancient myths might no longer fit so well with our postmodern world. Changed cultural contexts necessitate new myths—a recognition that feminist scholars such as Donna Haraway have long turned into action by engaging in alternative myth-making.

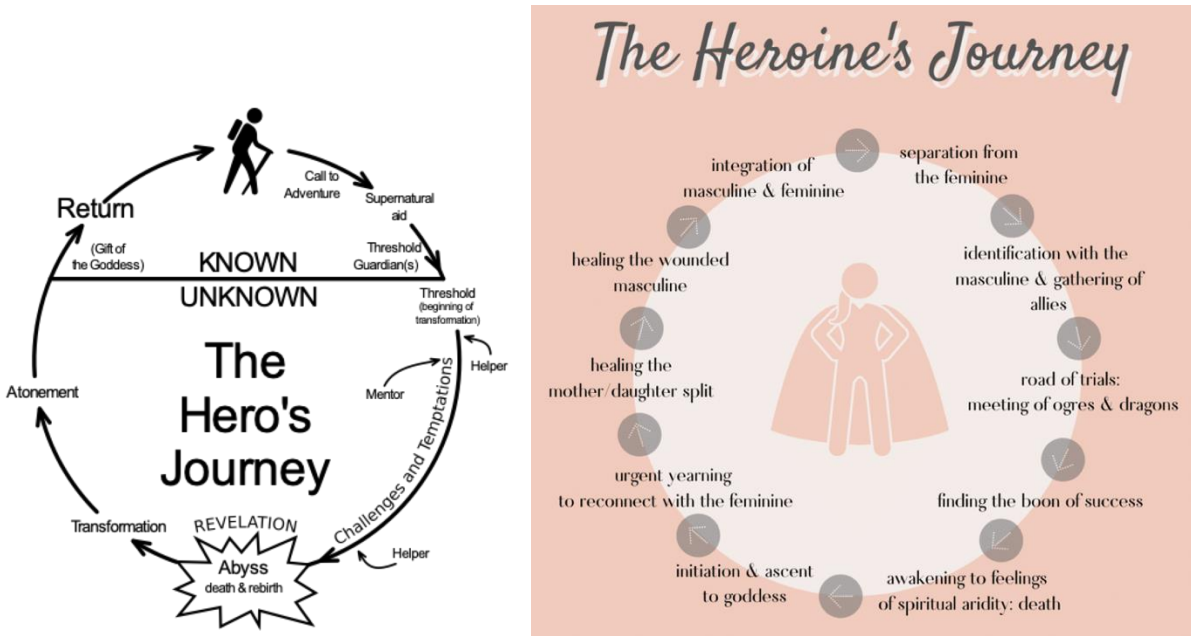

Figure 2: The Hero's Journey (left, source: Wikipedia) and the Heroine's Journey (right, source: Story Grid)

The psychoanalyst Maureen Murdock (1990) embarked on her journey of re-writing the hero's journey by identifying a heroine's journey (see right image in Figure 2). She developed this template to align the idea with the female psycho-spiritual individuation process she encountered in her therapy sessions with women (for a more recent exploration of heroine stories in myths and literature see Tatar 2021). In Murdock's version of the transformational inner journey, the modern heroine has to reconnect with her lost femininity, heal the wounded masculine, and integrate both in herself to move beyond binary identity concepts. The heroine's journey thus turns out to be a queer story. Some members of the FeminiSTS Repair Team struggle with the gender binary of masculine-feminine and with attempts to ascribe certain qualities (e.g. active-passive) and ways of behavior to one or the other. Nevertheless, I have found working with this duality of fundamental creative forces and the qualities that are associated with them productive on my journey. I tend to be drawn more to the Chinese philosophical concepts of yin and yang and their powerful symbolic representation.

On my path, I discovered that Murdock's heroine's journey is an apt story arc for women in academia who are urged to embrace the masculine in themselves in order to find their place in this harsh competitive environment rather than nurturing their softer feminine side. The heroine's journey importantly emphasizes that repressing the feminine in us, and that includes those identifying themselves as men, leads to spiritual aridity. Donna Haraway (1991) famously proclaimed in the last sentence of her influential *Cyborg Manifesto* that she would rather be a cyborg than a goddess. The cyborg, not explicitly gendered, signified an acceptance of hybridity with cultural influences, that from goddess feminist perspectives would have been thought of as polluting. Now,

decades later, it is a given that we live cyborg existences, and it has become the more radical move to affirm the goddess-goodness (i.e. kindness) in us again.

We'd rather be a growing heart emoji than a bunch of lonesome heroes

A core issue that emerged for me in my engagement with both the hero's journey and the heroine's journey was that they are about individual journeys. This makes sense if we consider the epistemic ground from which they emerge: Jungian psychology. Traditionally, the psy sciences focus on the psychological development and well-being of the individual, but living as a feminist in STS, and academia more broadly, in the 2020s necessitates to understand and live inner development as relationality. *We are psycho-spiritually evolving in and as collectives*. Therefore, we need alternative guiding myths that more strongly acknowledge our interrelatedness and counter the myth of the sole intellectual warrior figure. To continue to exist in and positively impact academia from wholeness, we cannot stop at individual role models or archetypes. We need to turn equally to the stories of brave collectives that dare to show up with fierce kindness and compassion (for more on the entanglement of kindness and power see Neff 2021). We are convinced that by *fostering an academic community in which we practice caring relationality based on kindness and mutual support rather than critique and competitiveness we are doing something heroic*.

In this multi-media essay, I sought to offer my story of self and my story of us as an invitation and inspiration to think with and enact what an individual and collective heroine's journey of living academia kindly could be and feel like. Moving from individual archetypes to collective archetypes seems an essential step if we want to engender social change on a wider scale. Twenty-first century feminist STS polymyths—a term I use to emphasize the existence and necessity of more than one guiding myth in a culture—need to tackle existential questions pertaining to our place in STS, the academy, broader society, the universe at large, and how we can make this space more just, livable, and welcoming to reach our highest potential together. At one point in our collective journey, we struggled to write a manifesto that all of our members would subscribe to. It remains a fragmented Google document with more comments than main text until this day. It turned out to be more helpful to work out our differences than reaching any consensus. Another, perhaps more feasible, approach could be to continuously reshape the archetypal stories we imagine, tell, and enact through our individual and collective actions.

I found one such archetypal actualization in the story of a feminist complaint collective at Goldsmiths that has contributed their "Collective Conclusions" to Sara Ahmed's (2021) book *Complaint!* We started to read *Complaint!* in the FeminiSTS Repair Team but could not finish it together due to its challenging, triggering content, nor were we able to become a complaint collective. I managed to finish reading *Complaint!* while participating in a rehabilitation program at a health center for two months this year, where I went to overcome the depression I had developed due to the demoralization and continuing struggles for survival I experienced after complaining at Harvard. The

main healing effect the health center enabled for me was that I could complain about several men who sexually harassed me there. To my surprise, I was believed, encouraged to report, and sanctions were imposed on the perpetrators. One of them was even banished, not for the harassment, but because he got drunk and encouraged others to join him in consumption in an alcohol-free setting. I would not have needed him to be expelled to feel safe again, simply experiencing institutional courage and support rather than institutional betrayal (Freyd 2018, Platt et al. 2009) provided me and others who also complained with the assurance that we, and our feelings, mattered. Instead of imposing a betrayal trauma on us, simple human kindness was extended to us. I have neither experienced such healthy reactions within my family system nor within the academic system so far.

I think it mattered that I was not the only one complaining at the health center. Complaints often need to become collective in order to be heard. One of the authors of "Collective Conclusions," Alice Corble, talked about the formation and work of their collective at the *hug*ely important "Silence will not protect us" symposium in 2022. At the symposium, brave women shared and reflected on sexual violence and abuses of power in higher education. Alice used a number of terms to represent their expansive collective journey. The individual experience of harassment was the catalyst. Then they became a chorus as they realized that many women had similar experiences. Next came the formulation of complaint, which led to consciousness-raising activities. All of these steps were embedded in collectivity and care. As Alice said during her presentation: "Everything I experienced through my journey of complaint—although I felt isolated and lost at times—was ultimately enacted through the necessary and sustaining conditions of collectivity and care."

My dear friend and I often reiterate to each other our shared belief in the indispensable power of collectivity and care to engender social change and to work towards justice that we now understand must go beyond the individual resolution of complaints. I most likely would not have been brave enough to come out with my story about sexual harassment and abuses of power at the Harvard STS program, if it were not for the FeminiSTS Repair Team, the three brave public complaint-forerunners at Harvard—Lilia Kilburn, Amulya Mandava, and Margaret Czerwienski—, and other sustaining collectives I became a part of and helped to assemble. The success of Alice's collective has motivated me to walk in their footsteps and participate in creating a new kind of Wonderland, a land where wonder is alive and kicking, and where women's and nonbinary people's voices matter as much as those of cis-gender men.

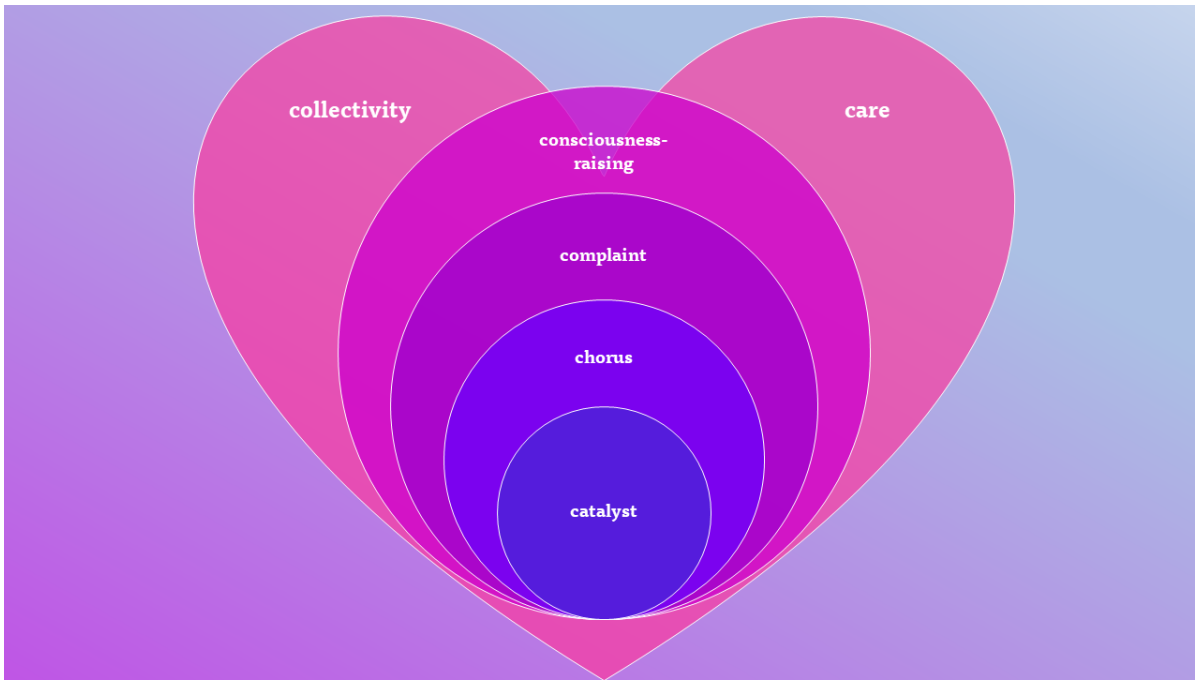

Figure 3: Transforming silence (source: Alice Corble)

Alice used the image in Figure 3 to visualize their collective journey. It conjures up the image of the growing heart emoji and speaks directly to our frequent use of 💗 or similar heart emojis in our team's Slack channel that serves as our main communication hub. The image is neither a linear storyline—nothing is ever truly linear—nor a circular loop—we need to break the cycles of suffering to get out of the loop—as is common in illustrations of the hero's and heroine's journey (see Figure 2), but it symbolizes an affectionate, expansive process that evokes emotional, pulsating humankindness, despite and likewise thanks to our shared cyber existence. Many in our collective have never seen each other in non-virtual life, as we are currently spread out over three continents and six countries, but we are deeply connected through our nurturing virtual practices and presence. What makes and keeps us human is no longer bound to our immediate physical environments. The lesson I painfully learned at the Harvard STS program was that a group of human bodies physically assembled by a tyrant under a shiny banner with truth written on it can be deeply inhumane when it is lacking the love without which we are less than human. The real truth I discovered then is that all the knowledge and prestige in this world means nothing when the environment in which they are cultivated is a cold, heartless place. We'd rather be a growing heart emoji than a bunch of lonesome heroes.

💗 Acknowledgements 💗

Thank you, my dear friend, for witnessing and sharing this journey with me during these complicated years, and for contributing your words, wisdom, and wealth of compassion to this text and my being. I am deeply indebted to all the amazing members of the FeminiSTS Repair Team, without whom this essay would not exist. My heartfelt appreciation also goes out to the many mentors, helpers, and aids that were and are still

there for me along the way. Thank you for your continuing kindness and support on our collective journey. This text also benefitted very much from the encouraging feedback of two reviewers, Anita Thaler and Birgit Hofstätter, as well as and Mallory James' insightful comments.

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Andrea Ploder

Strong reflexivity and vulnerable researchers. On the epistemological requirement of academic kindness

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1. Introduction[1]

In the last decades, academic institutions have undergone severe changes. While efforts towards diversity and targeted support programs have increased the chances for members of (some) underrepresented groups to pursue an academic career, the working conditions for individual researchers have not improved – on the contrary. Many academic researchers suffer from the accelerated pace, precarious working conditions, job insecurity, and increased competition that come with new managerialism (see e.g., Conesa Carpintero & González Ramos, 2018). Often enough, the daily struggle in academia is so consuming that researchers forget why they wanted to pursue this path in the first place. Under these conditions, fostering an atmosphere of kindness among academic peers is a significant ethical and political goal in and of itself. But this is not the end of the story.

In this paper, I will argue that academic kindness also has a decisive *epistemological* dimension. Some kinds of knowledge just *cannot* be produced without it. This applies to many areas of social research, but it becomes most obvious when we look at the case of strong reflexivity. Strongly reflexive research can only thrive in kind environments, therefore creating these environments is not only an ethical and political, but also an epistemological necessity.

The main argument of this paper is quite simple:

1 This paper has evolved side by side with an ongoing conversation with Angela Kühner and Phil C. Langer. While section 2 is based on a paper we wrote together six years ago, all the other sections have benefitted tremendously from our joint discussions of our academic projects and lives. I am beyond grateful for the emotional and intellectual space we share. Special thanks go to everyone who provided valuable feedback on earlier versions of this text: Dani Jauk, Susanne Kink-Hampersberger, Phil C. Langer, Stefan Laube, Anita Thaler, Nicole Weydmann, as well as the participants of the panel on academic kindness at the STS conference in May 2022. All remaining shortcomings are – of course – my own. Most importantly, I want to thank Dani Jauk for the invitation to contribute to this panel. Apart from being a brilliant researcher, she is also one of the kindest, most enthusiastic, and inspiring academic colleagues I know.

Strong reflexivity requires vulnerable researchers. And vulnerability requires spaces of support and kindness.

I will support this argument in the following steps: After an introduction of the concept of strong reflexivity (2) I will explore the relationship between strong reflexivity and researcher vulnerability (3). Then, I will discuss the relationship between strong reflexivity, vulnerability, and academic kindness (4). Along the way, I will try to sharpen the notions of vulnerability and kindness for the topic at hand. While not exhaustively exploring these two complex concepts, I will point out how I use them in this paper. At the end, I will highlight a few consequences of my argument for the debate about research ethics (5).

2. What is strong reflexivity?

Reflexivity is one of the fundamental principles of qualitative research. In its most basic form, it calls for a reflection on the researchers own involvement in data production and analysis. Ever since the writing culture debate in anthropology in the 1980s and 90s (Clifford & Marcus, 1986; Behar & Gordon, 1995), the methodological impact of reflexivity has grown and spread to more and more disciplines. Today, the term is used in a variety of meanings in different areas of qualitative research. Most researchers agree on its relevance, but their understandings of the term are quite diverse. Some use it as a means of controlling subjectivity on (post-)positivist grounds, implying an understanding of subjectivity as 'bias'. Others understand reflexivity as a strategy of using subjectivity to examine social and psychosocial phenomena.[2]

In 2016, Angela Kühner, Phil Langer, and I examined the epistemological role of reflexivity in qualitative research (Kühner, Ploder & Langer, 2016). Our main argument was that the role of the researcher's subjectivity in the process of knowledge production is tagged by two contrasting positions:

Epistemically weak reflexivity conceives the positionality of the researcher as a disruptive factor, problematic but inescapable. It aims at controlling the influence of researchers on the research process by making it explicit. These approaches can be highly reflexive, but in an epistemically weak sense.

Strongly reflexive researchers acknowledge and appreciate their own positionality. They use their entanglements with the field as a decisive source of data and interpretation.

Epistemically strong reflexivity conceives the positionality of the researcher as a valuable epistemic resource. Strongly reflexive researchers embrace their entanglements with the field and use their own sympathies, prejudices, fears, as well as emotional, mental, and physical experiences as a source of data. They know that whenever they

2 In ethnomethodology, reflexivity has an entirely different meaning. For an inventory of different meanings of the term and a concise account of ethnomethodological reflexivity see Lynch, 2000.

produce knowledge about the world around them, they also produce knowledge about themselves – and vice versa.

Several approaches in qualitative research use the power of strong reflexivity. They have different methodological foundations but converge in the idea that the researcher's biography and lived experience are highly relevant sources of data. Examples are autoethnography (Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Anderson, 2006), ethnopsychoanalysis (Kühner, 2016), and reflexive grounded theory (Breuer et al., 2019), to name just a few. Many ethnographic studies are strongly reflexive as well (see e.g., Laube 2021), depending on the researcher's level of participation and on the way they analyze their experiences in the field.

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, the interest in strongly reflexive research has expanded and gained a new momentum among social researchers of all generations (see Ploder, 2021).[3]

As part of this boom, more and more scholars combine strongly reflexive approaches with each other. One example is Alina Brehm, who successfully combines autoethnography and ethnopsychoanalysis (see e.g., Brehm, 2021). Moreover, it becomes increasingly obvious that other established qualitative research approaches can be practiced in a strongly reflexive way. That includes all variants of ethnography (see above) but also biography research (e.g., Ruokonen-Engler & Siouti, 2016), and hermeneutic approaches (like depth-hermeneutics, see Bereswill et al., 2010).

Strong reflexivity is situated.

Strong reflexivity is closely related to feminist epistemologies. It encourages a focus on our unique individual standpoint as knowledge makers, and calls for radical subjectivity as the stronger form of objectivity. This establishes a very close relationship to epistemological concepts like strong objectivity, standpoint epistemology (Harding, 1993) and situated knowledge (Haraway, 1988).

Strong reflexivity is queer.

Because of their provoking and irritating role in academic discourse, strongly reflexive approaches have also been characterized as queer (Holman Jones & Adams, 2016). Like queer theory and practice, strongly reflexive research blurs categories and genres, embraces art as a valuable theoretical and practical tool, resists orthodox methodologies, is inventive, creative, messy, and personal. These features, combined with the central role of the researchers own experience, make it a valuable choice for queer social research (see Browne & Nash, 2016; for an example, see Preciado, 2013 [2008]).

3 As academic practice, strong reflexivity has a much longer tradition. An early example are the autoethnographic diaries by Michel Leiris (1934).

Why does strong reflexivity matter? Strongly reflexive research is appealing for a number of reasons. Some epistemological and political reasons have been discussed elsewhere and do not need to be repeated here (see e.g., Kühner, Ploder & Langer, 2016). But one reason must be mentioned, as it might convince scholars across all epistemological and political camps:

Strong reflexivity is empirically powerful.

Strong reflexivity allows us to study life worlds and dimensions of social life that are very hard to access otherwise. That includes phenomena centered around physical experiences and emotions (see Stadlbauer & Ploder, 2016) that are hard to observe or address in interviews. Their most important dimensions are deeply rooted in the individual experience of the people involved and strong reflexivity enables researchers to approach these phenomena from a first-person perspective. Other phenomena can be approached from a third-person perspective, but are emotionally very challenging for researchers, highly anxiety provoking, and therefore understudied. In these cases, strong reflexivity allows researchers to work through their emotional involvement, use it as a source of knowledge production, and share it with their audience. Examples are Carolyn Ellis' evocative autoethnography about the chronic illness of her partner (Ellis, 2018 [1995]) or a recent study about child soldiers in Iraq (Langer & Ahmad, 2019).

3. Strong reflexivity and vulnerability

The empirical power of strongly reflexive research comes at a cost. It requires a lot of commitment and is strongly connected to researcher vulnerability. Why is this so?

Strong reflexivity requires vulnerable researchers.

First of all, strong reflexivity requires vulnerable researchers. It depends on researchers who are prepared to work with their own emotional or physical experiences, even if these experiences are anxiety provoking and they would rather look away from them. This includes the whole spectrum of sensations between happiness and sadness, excitement and anxiety, empowerment and exhaustion, enthusiasm and boredom, fascination and disgust. Experiences like these are the foundation of strongly reflexive research and they depend on researchers who are willing to embrace unsettling experiences as a source of data and share them with an anonymous audience. While working through and with our emotions is key for all strongly reflexive approaches (for autoethnography see e.g., Adams et al., 2015)[4], it has been most extensively discussed in ethnopsychoanalysis.[5] One of the key arguments in ethnopsychoanalysis is that social research always provokes anxiety in the researcher. No matter which topic we are

4 One of the central qualities of autoethnography is "[t]o embrace vulnerability as a way to understand emotions and improve social life" (Adams et al, 2015, p. 36; see also Brehm, 2021, p. 39).

5 The writings of Georges Devereux, a key figure in ethnopsychoanalysis, are also an important reference for many autoethnographers. An example is one of the classics in autoethnographic literature, Ruth Behars book The Vulnerable Observer. Anthropology that Breaks Your Heart (1997). In the introduction, she relates the concept of vulnerability to Devereux (Behar, 1997, p. 5ff.).

dealing with, it always confronts us with ourselves and thereby raises emotional responses. Intense emotions in the research process often raise anxiety and most traditional research methodologies are designed to create distance to them. Ethnopsychoanalysts argue that analyzing these emotions and the anxiety they provoke gives access to the most relevant insights about the phenomenon itself (Devereux, 2018 [1967]; Kühner, 2018, p. 103f.).

Strong reflexivity creates vulnerable researchers.

Moreover, strong reflexivity also creates vulnerable researchers. Integrating our own experiences and biographies often enriches our research, but it can also weaken our positions in academic discourse. The details we expose about our private selves can be used against us, in the discussion of our work and in the pursuit of our academic careers (see e.g., Rambo, 2016). This is an inherent paradox of strongly reflexive research: The higher we value subjectivity as a resource for knowledge production (i.e. the more strongly reflexive our research gets), the more closely we tie the quality of research to the researcher's subjective accounts. The stronger the subjective account of the researcher gets, the more difficult it becomes to argue for the validity of her position – especially within standardized criteria for good academic research. Giving up the authoritative position of the sovereign researcher and acknowledging her positionality disavows the claim of interpretative authority regarding the subject matter of the research that goes beyond the pure self-reflection of the researcher (see e.g., Ploder & Stadlbauer, 2016, p. 756). As a result, strongly reflexive research increases the vulnerability of researchers in more than one way.[6]

In strongly reflexive research, vulnerability becomes visible in all its ambivalence. It makes researchers strong and weak at the same time. It makes research personal and political, stimulating and threatening, community-building and isolating.

What is vulnerability?

The concept of vulnerability is complex and has been discussed critically throughout the last years. It is not easy to say what constitutes vulnerability, who is the subject of vulnerability, and who chooses when an entity is vulnerable (see e.g., Mackenzie et al., 2014a).7 While this paper is not the place to discuss the concept broadly, it is important to address a few of its pitfalls and show how this paper relates to them. As Brown (2011) points out, ascribing vulnerability to certain groups or individuals can have paternalistic, oppressive, controlling, exclusive, and stigmatizing effects, even where it is meant to be ethically protecting and politically empowering. For a number of reasons, Brown criticizes the wide use of the concept and suggests to handle it "with

6 In strongly reflexive research, the requirement and the creation of vulnerability are actually two sides of the same coin. Being open to attacks is a central aspect of being vulnerable and by embracing our vulnerability as an epistemic tool, we often increase it. In her research on Shoah-Survivors, Alina Brehm makes clear how closely related the two dimensions of vulnerability are. She writes: "I need to make my thinking and feeling visible (…) in order to (…) stay vulnerable and attackable." (Brehm, 2021, p. 37, translation by the author).

7 These and other questions were subject of an interdisciplinary conference Vulnerability. Theories and Concepts in Philosophy and the Social Sciences in October 2022 at the University of Graz.

care". Problems arise whenever we use vulnerability in an essentialist sense, as an inherent quality of individuals with a certain ascribed or experienced race, gender, age, income, physical or mental health, etc. that – supposedly – makes them more vulnerable to a certain kind of harm than other individuals. This approach to vulnerability is politically powerful but it also gives rise to stigmatization, control, exclusion, and paternalism. Similar problems arise when we understand vulnerability as a weakness, resulting from a deficit, and as a feature that cannot be influenced by vulnerable individuals themselves.

In this contribution, I am interested in vulnerability as a universal, "fundamental feature" (Brown, 2011, p. 317) – a potential shared by all human individuals and many other (more than human) entities.[8] This concept of *universal vulnerability* is shared by a broad variety of authors whose concerns with and ideas about vulnerability are otherwise quite diverse (like Judith Butler, Martha Nussbaum, and Alasdair MacIntyre; for an overview see Mackenzie et al., 2014b, p. 4f.). Their core argument connects vulnerability to embodiment, sociality, and dependence on others. In the volume *Vulnerability. New Essays in Ethics and Feminist Philosophy*, Catriona Mackenzie, Wendy Rogers, and Susan Dodds (2014b, p. 4) sum the position of universal vulnerability up as follows: "To be vulnerable is to be fragile, to be susceptible to wounding and to suffering; [… A]s embodied, social beings, we are both vulnerable to the actions of others and dependent on the care and support of other people – to varying degrees at various points in our lives." Within vulnerability studies, this approach seeks to avoid some of the abovementioned problems and create a foundation for shared ethical responsibility towards all fellow (human) beings. It also allows us to see that "we are all vulnerable […] but the degree of our lived vulnerability varies through the life course […] an according to wider relational processes of differentiated politically constituted subjectification and sociality" (Brown et al., 2017, p. 504). Depending on the degree and character of concrete lived vulnerability of an individual at a given point in time, the responsibility of others changes.

The case of strongly reflexive research suggests that the degree of our lived vulnerability can also vary according to our own choices. Strongly reflexive researches *choose* to tap into their vulnerability and use its epistemic power. In doing that, they use their own vulnerability as a strength. At the same time, they put themselves at risk: Embracing the epistemic dimension of vulnerability can provoke emotional and physical pain and it can jeopardize academic careers (see Rambo, 2016). The specific character of vulnerability in strongly reflexive research certainly needs to be examined in more detail. The *universal vulnerability approach* does not solve all the theoretical and political problems mentioned above and it certainly raises a few other philosophical questions. But it is a helpful starting point to think about vulnerability in the context of strongly reflexive research.

8 Much of the debate about vulnerability is centered around human actors, but it is easy to see why vulnerability is not an exclusive human quality.

4. Strong reflexivity, vulnerability, and academic kindness

Strongly reflexive research is empirically powerful but it increases the vulnerability of researchers. Where does that leave us? How can we use the power of lived experience and vulnerability as an epistemic resource?

Creating knowledge under conditions of increased vulnerability requires extensive support from academic peers. It requires a safe environment that is based on academic kindness. Among several other dimensions of kindness (some of them elaborated elsewhere in this issue) this includes at least three layers of support among peers:

The first layer is a reliable and stable group of research partners. One or two friendly peers (with a lot of other responsibilities) are not enough to support a strongly reflexive research project from the beginning to the end. It takes a group that is big enough to support the researcher throughout the project and small enough to build trust.

Strongly reflexive research requires kind research partners.

Similar to interpretation groups in other qualitative research traditions, strongly reflexive researchers need groups of peers who listen and work through their narrative with them.[9] They need spaces to share their anxieties, desires, and hopes, and peers who are willing to think and feel with them. They need to hear and see how their experience resonates with others, what their feelings provoke in them, what is a strong interpretation or narrative, and what has the potential to become one. Vulnerable researchers need research partners who will listen without judgement, who will not shy away from their tears, their revived trauma, and their feelings of hatred, fear, and love towards research participants.[10]

Vulnerability *alone* does not generate good strongly reflexive knowledge. It is possible to share a lot of details about our private lives without making the research based upon it strong in an epistemological sense. In short: Not every confessional tale makes good research. In order to use the epistemic power of their vulnerability and turn it into strong research, researchers can benefit a lot from reliable research partners and a kind research environment.

Strongly reflexive research requires kind reviewing cultures.

The second layer concerns the publishability of strongly reflexive research. Sharing our work in publication outlets is necessary for the academic survival of researchers, and editors as well as reviewers have a decisive role in this process. A kind reviewing

9 Within the field of qualitative research, the importance of research collectives for knowledge production is widely acknowledged. The concept of the "data session", "group interpretation" and "interpretation groups" has been elaborated in both methodological textbooks and – more recently – from a sociology of science perspective (Reichertz, 2013; Meier zu Verl/Tuma, 2021; Berli; 2021). Yet, so far, the epistemic relevance of a kind atmosphere is only rarely addressed in the methodological literature. Many existing research collectives promote and live a kind environment, but without making the "kindness factor" explicit in the methodological literature. In textbooks about strongly reflexive research approaches, this aspect is reflected more explicitly (for ethnopsychoanalysis see Bonz et al., 2017; for reflexive grounded theory see Breuer et al., 2019, p. 324ff.).

10 On the methodological relevance of affective and "intimate entanglements" in the research relationship, see Latimer & López Gómez, 2019.

culture is important for all researchers[11], and it is particularly vital for researchers who work under conditions of increased vulnerability. In order to appreciate the strengths of strongly reflexive research and help to increase its quality, reviewers need to share their reactions (their thoughts, emotions, enthusiasm, doubts, etc.) in a way that allow the author and their work to grow.

Being a kind reviewer does not imply the absence of critique, on the contrary. It calls for a constructive way to share criticism, a way that acknowledges both the strengths and the limitations of the work and helps researchers to develop its full potential. One powerful strategy for the development of a kind review culture as an editor is sharing the name of the reviewers with the authors. Several journals are doing that already, some have started to share the names of reviewers in the published paper. This encourages reviewers to make an effort towards constructive critique and a respectful voice. It also increases the value of reviewing as a form of academic service and allows reviewers to take credit for their efforts.

Strongly reflexive research requires kind readers.

The third layer concerns readers. Some strongly reflexive approaches – like evocative autoethnography – explicitly address the relevance of a good writer-reader-relationship. Like all performative researchers, evocative autoethnographers are convinced that the research process does not end with the researcher but extends into the experience of readers. To support this process, writers need to make an effort to produce engaging texts, and readers need to be open to a reading experience that touches and transforms them (see e.g., Richardson & Adams St. Pierre, 2005). In order to connect to the performative levels of strongly reflexive research, readers need to tap into their own vulnerabilities and become part of an ongoing research process. This implies a kind attitude towards the researchers whose work they are engaging with.

Kind environments like these enable researchers to embrace their vulnerability and thereby create the epistemological conditions for strongly reflexive research. With a network of kind peers, researchers can use their biographies and their physical and emotional experiences, anxieties, and resistance as a source of data. It enables them to perform ‘strong analysis’ and tell ‘strong stories’ that will touch their audience and spark moments of performative knowledge-making.

What is academic kindness?

Similar to vulnerability, the concept of kindness is complex and the term has been used in a variety of meanings. In this paper, I cannot dig deep into the philosophical debate on kindness.[12] Further research will most certainly highlight a number of connections

11 This argument has been made frequently throughout the last years (see e.g., Vazire, 2022).

12 The debate about kindness can be traced back to ancient philosophy, often raised in the context of ethics. In contemporary philosophy, the term is most present in ethics of care. The editors of this Queer-Feminist-STS Forum, who pointed out several dimensions of kindness in their introduction. See also the strongly reflexive contribution by Birgit Hofstätter (2017) on the art of kindness towards chosen kin in the second issue of Queer-Feminist STS-Forum.

between academic kindness and epistemological questions and enable a more precise definition of kindness in this context.

For now, I propose to look at academic kindness in close connection to researcher vulnerability. Vulnerability as a universal condition (see above) is a powerful starting point to think about kindness in academia. It suggests that academic peers need to tap into their own vulnerability as research partners, as reviewers, and as readers, in order to enable research under conditions of increased researcher vulnerability. From an epistemological point of view, this dimension of academic kindness fosters the creation of spaces for knowledge production that are characterized by shared vulnerability. These spaces are an important part of the epistemic foundation for strongly reflexive research.

5. A note about research ethics

The epistemological dimensions of vulnerability and kindness are not identical with ethical and political demands for academic kindness, but they intersect in important ways. Therefore, I want to include a brief note about research ethics, mostly to encourage further research on this topic:

One of the most basic requirements of research ethics is to avoid harm to our research participants (see e.g., Wiles, 2013, p. 55ff.; von Unger et al., 2014). This includes researchers, which becomes particularly obvious in strongly reflexive research. Strongly reflexive research is often painful and emotionally demanding, and it requires looking at parts of our lives we would rather look away from. It is very tempting to stop the project when problems arise, and in order to complete a strongly reflexive research project, we need to commit to it again and again. In this process, we need peers who show us that we can pursue this path and are willing to walk it with us. And if it is no longer safe for us to pursue the project, we need them to tell us that we are allowed to stop. Without a network of kind peers, strongly reflexive researchers cannot protect the emotional integrity of all their research participants – including themselves.

Debates about research ethics are often linked to the question of vulnerability.13 In order to live up to our ethical responsibility as researchers, we need to make an effort to find out about the specific vulnerabilities of our research participants and protect them as well as we can (von Unger, 2021). At the same time, questions of ethics and vulnerability are closely linked to methodological considerations, including epistemology (see e.g., Kühner & Langer, 2010). As von Unger (2017) put it in a talk at the *Berliner Methodentreffen qualitative Forschung* – ethical and methodological questions are “two sides of the same coin”: Methodological decisions can solve or cause ethical problems, and every ethical challenge tells us something important about the field we do research in.

13 See, e.g., von Unger, 2021 and the introduction and contributions to the special issue of *Forum: Qualitative Social Research* by Roth & von Unger, 2018.

The case of strong reflexivity shows that our ethical responsibility as researchers includes ethical responsibility towards ourselves (see e.g., Tamas, 2009; Wiles, 2013).[14] Making ourselves visible in our data and analysis increases our vulnerability and thereby our exposure to potential harm. How can we deal with that from an ethical point of view? The most widespread strategies for protecting research participants from harm are a respectful and sensitive attitude during data production, and the anonymization of data before publication. While some strongly reflexive researchers do anonymize their texts (e.g., Anonymous, 2021), this is not a sustainable strategy for those whose careers require a certain degree of visibility within their academic community. But if we cannot protect vulnerable researchers with anonymity, we have to foster an academic culture that encourages respect and sensitivity among researchers and decisively sanctions personal attacks. In this light, a kind research environment is not only an epistemological, but also an ethical condition for good strongly reflexive research.

These considerations become even more important in light of the political debate about emotional capitalism (Illouz, 2007). As some critics have rightfully pointed out, approaches like autoethnography support the exploitation of our individual biographies for career purposes: Even if that is not their primary goal, autoethnographers use their individual biographies, experiences, and traumas as an investment in the academic market (Tamas, 2009). In a time when the exploitation of biographical narrative and private feelings as a commodity is encouraged in a number of everyday contexts (Illouz, 2007), this creates significant political tension and raises additional ethical questions.[15]

6. Conclusions

In recent years, scholars from different disciplines have pointed out the importance of kind research environments and called for a radical shift in academic culture. Some of the most important contributions came from scholars in feminist, queer, and postcolonial studies (see e.g., Kulpa & Silva, 2016).16 Promoting a broader implementation of academic kindness is also one of the goals of this issue, the *Queer-Feminist Science and Technology Studies Forum #7*.

In this paper, I wanted to highlight the epistemological dimensions of academic kindness. I argued that the production of strongly reflexive knowledge is closely connected to researcher vulnerability and requires kind research partners, reviewers, and read-

14 For a broader discussion of research ethics and autoethnography, mostly focusing on ethical responsibilities towards other research participants (not the author herself), see e.g., Ellis, 2007; Edwards, 2021.

15 For a more extensive discussion of this problem see Ploder & Stadlbauer, 2016, p. 758.

16 Looking at academic cultures from a queer and postcolonial perspective sheds light on scholars and research areas operating at the margins of hegemonic academia and highlights the dynamics of exclusion in academic life. Operating at the margins of an institution gives a lot of opportunities to experience the absence of kindness and, through that, a strong sense for the relevance of kind relationships for academic work.

ers. In pursuing this argument, I developed a more specific understanding of researcher vulnerability and academic kindness in relation to strongly reflexive social research.

The example of strong reflexivity shows that vulnerability and academic kindness are vital for contemporary qualitative research. It shows that qualitative research – if conducted in a strongly reflexive way – requires and creates vulnerable researchers and implies specific ethical responsibilities that need to be examined in more detail. And it shows that we can understand academic kindness as a research environment characterized by shared vulnerability.

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Clara Rosa Schwarz

Pandemic Observations on Research as Impact: Insider Research and Academic Kindness

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Introduction

Doing social research during a pandemic is difficult but doing transnational research in a phase of lockdown was a particular challenge. To approach this challenge for my doctoral research on how queer friendships developed during the Covid-19 pandemic in Germany and the United Kingdom, I conducted video-based discussions with friend groups and dyads, asking them to share their experiences of the pandemic. The discussions were conducted in 2021 via video-call, as most interaction took place digitally during phases of lockdown. My intention was to mirror this experience of video-based social interaction, and thereby to meet the friends in a space that many used increasingly in their private lives, too (Self, 2021; Watson, Lupton and Michael, 2021). I focussed on how I could gain insight into friendships as the object of my research by using friendship as a method, and whether it was feasible to conduct discussions via video-call while maintaining ethical and academic standards. I addressed data protection and informed consent with participants, but only later considered what the (group) discussions would be like for my participants. Being invited to a conversation with their friends that would be guided but also observed closely could be challenging for them. Many had gotten to know this setting rather intimately over the first nine months of the pandemic, and suddenly a researcher intruded into this space. However, when the researcher is an insider to the community or to the friendship itself, participants' experiences with the research are not entirely straight forward. Thus, in this essay, I explore the impact of my research on the participants of the study, using the individual participant experience as a point of departure. In particular, I focus on the positive impact on participants and evaluate the role of kindness in this (insider) researcher-researched relationship. In line with the theme of this issue, academic kindness, I ask how kindness translates to the research situation, in what ways I could and did offer kindness to my research participants, and what the limitations of kindness in this scenario are.

My consideration of the positive impacts of my research on the participants is inspired by a blog post by Maria Tomlinson, who researches 'menstrual activism and its impact'

(2021). Tomlinson's post explores the impact of her research on the teenagers participating in her study. She proposes that researchers 'can have a positive impact during [their] fieldwork itself', rather than through the (published) results alone (2021). Through sharing what her participants gained from participating in focus groups, for example, the space to share experiences and ask Tomlinson questions, she shifts the focus from 'what we could learn from our participants' to 'what they might gain from taking part' (Tomlinson, 2021) in the research. I apply Tomlinson's question of what the benefits for the participants are to the fields of insider and friendship research, fields that previously concerned themselves mainly with questions of their merits for the research and negative impacts on participants (Taylor, 2011). While much attention has been paid to the relationships formed during research, much less attention was given to doing research with our own friends or participants who are friends with each other (Taylor, 2011).

As a small case study, I will explore a discussion I conducted with two close friends of mine who are close friends with each other. I picked this case from a larger sample of friend dyads and groups that I conducted discussions with for my PhD research, choosing only one case to examine in detail for the purpose of this paper (Flyvbjerg, 2006: 2). This dyad was suitable because it was one of few discussions in which a conflict between the friends was discussed and resolved in the conversation that I facilitated. Based on the discussion with this dyad, I examine the benefits of my research for the pair and think through research as impact in pandemic times. Their discussion was framed by the early weeks of the pandemic, in which the two of them had differing views on personal safety, and the research setting gave them a space to thoroughly discuss their respective positions and for apologising to each other. The main benefit for them, I argue, was the facilitation of a space which explicitly presupposed a conversation about their friendship for my research, thus being somewhat public, but was also intimate because it was facilitated by me, an intimate insider in this context (cf. Taylor 2011). Ultimately, they both described the experience as beneficial. In what follows, I first give methodological context for my study, then I introduce two methodological approaches: *friendship as method* and *intimate insider research*. I then share three observations from my research and analyse them in light of Tomlinson's invitation to consider how the process might benefit participants. Lastly, I identify some of the limitations I encountered in conducting these conversations on friendship during an ongoing pandemic.

Methodological context

To provide some context for how the (group) discussions were conducted, how I sampled participants, and how I communicated my 'insider' position to participants, I now briefly give an overview over the research process. Building on the method of group discussions (a qualitative method similar to focus groups but specifically located in social research, rather than the focus groups more closely aligned with market re-

search (Bohnsack, 2014)), I conducted discussions with groups and dyads. The discussions with dyads, while bearing the possibility to turn into a couple-interview (Hirschauer, Hoffmann and Stange, 2015), were more closely aligned with the group discussion format, which is why I refer to them as discussions rather than interviews. I did not interview the participants with a set of questions but instead offered initial prompts and invited the friends to talk to each other, allowing their conversations to flow more naturally. Therefore, I use the term (group) discussions to describe the approach. To sample participants, I used my network within queer communities in Germany and the UK to share my call for participants on social media and asked queer organisations to share the call on their websites and in their newsletters. Social media turned out to be the most successful sampling strategy, which also ensured that participants had access to my social media profiles[1], thereby getting insight into who I am. My profile illustrates my queerness and provides demographic data about my person. Furthermore, because many participants were friends of mine or friends of friends, I could be certain that my identification and positionality were transparent. Participants then approached me, expressing interest in participation, which I followed up by asking them to recruit their friends to join (Jones et al., 2018). I then shared with them a written overview of how the discussions would take place and how their data would be processed and stored, thereby asking them for their informed consent, which I confirmed once more during the video-meeting. I met once with each group, conducting one to two hours long discussions, and have made plans to meet with each group one more time in the future. Initiating the discussions, I shared what my role during the meeting would be: semi-silent observer who might occasionally interject to ask clarifying questions. I offered to answer any questions before or after the discussion, and participants asked a variety of questions regarding my research motivation, my positionality, and my progress. A few of the groups invited me to share my experiences of certain issues during the discussions, often related to the regional pandemic experience or my inspiration for this research topic. I answered all questions honestly and met participants with friendship as method in mind – explained in the following section.

Friendship as method and intimate insider research

Because the pandemic has exacerbated feelings of loneliness (Peterson, Vaughan and Carver, 2021), I had concerns about asking participants to share their experiences and asking them to be vulnerable in a digital space, from which they would ultimately return to their locked-down living situations (cf. Cheded and Skandalis, 2021). However, only a few of the participants lived alone; several visited each other or lived together and joined the call together, while others lived alone and called alone. To help support the transition from the potentially difficult conversation to the post-discussion solitude, I invited participants to decide how long they wanted to stay on the call, and in some cases concluded the discussions with informal chatting after I had stopped the recording. As an intimate insider researcher, I knew some of the participants privately,

1 I shared via Twitter and Instagram.

some were acquaintances, some were close friends of mine. While this constituted part of my research design, which I approached with friendship as method in mind (Tillmann-Healy, 2003), it also raised ethical questions of intimate insider research (Taylor, 2011).[2] In the following section, I introduce both approaches and put them in conversation with academic kindness.

Friendship as method, introduced by Lisa Tillmann-Healy (2003), suggests that researchers approach their participants with care and an ethic of friendship. Tillmann-Healy developed close friendships with a group of gay men whom she was researching and discovered the merits of shared intimacy for ethnographic approaches. Importantly, Tillmann-Healy writes, 'Friendship as method is neither a program nor a guise strategically aimed at gaining further access. It is a level of investment in participants' lives that puts fieldwork relationships on par with the project' (735). The aim of friendship as method is not only to approach the participants, but the research itself, with friendship in mind. That is, the 'practices, the pace, the contexts, and the ethics of friendship' (734) should be central to research with a friendship as method approach. I find Tillmann-Healy's initiative to utilise the practices and contexts of friendship deeply applicable for my work: friendships, alongside most interpersonal interactions, shifted to digital spaces during the first lockdown. This means that conducting (group) discussions with participants who share friendship over video-call allowed me to meet many (though not all) of the participants in the digital setting they were using to spend time with their friends. The 'practices, the pace, [and] the contexts' of friendship (Tillmann-Healy, 2003) were central to how I conducted the discussions.

I shared different levels of intimacy and acquaintance with my participants. Some were close friends of mine, others were friends of friends, and some I was meeting for the very first time.[3] I wanted to approach all participants with an ethic of friendship, but of course the degrees of closeness I experienced towards them, and they towards me, varied, too. To find a level of connection with all of them, one that was inspired by the ethic of friendship, was born out of academic kindness. Academic kindness, here, expands beyond ethical research standards, to me it signifies a more personal level of investment, a more egalitarian and more caring approach to the relationship between researcher and participants. Centring kindness allowed me to approach each participant in each group with compassion and with openness, ultimately, it helped me approximate an ethic of friendship.

Researching the friendships of queer people, I was already an insider by being queer myself and sampling from communities I was part of, but this was reinforced by my friendship to several of the participants. Jodie Taylor (2011) calls this 'intimate insider research', that is, researching from not only an insider position, but an insider position

2 I have briefly discussed the ethical considerations of this study elsewhere (Schwarz, 2022).

3 In contrast to Tillmann-Healy, who was acquainted with many of her participants but developed friendships through the research, I already shared friendship with some of my participants. This is mainly owed to the snowball sampling technique I used, whereby I initiated the sampling process through my personal network in queer communities in Germany and the UK (cf. Jones et al., 2018).

in which close relationships with participants exist. Taylor points out how knowledge of another impacts the perception of them, illustrating this with an example: Taylor's friend painted her portrait as a birthday present, to which Taylor subsequently asked herself, 'why had he chosen to represent me in this way and what part of knowing me resulted in this particular two-dimensional image?' (4). Taylor suggests that the level of knowledge of another, or the level of intimacy of the (pre-existing) relationship, influences the level of detail the researcher might receive from their participant. Interestingly, Taylor's discussion of the ethics of friendship in research expands beyond the ethics of research. Taylor refers to the 'rules of engagement' in friendships, which may at times compromise the research: 'what you allow yourself to see as a researcher and what you choose to communicate with outsiders; that is, what you say and what you do not say' (13). In other words, as friend-researchers, it is paramount to recognise and acknowledge when shared information should not be included in the research (13). Furthermore, intimacy goes both ways, and the 'friend-informant' may want to 'please' their friend, which is why Taylor cautions 'against the exclusive use of friend-informants in social research' (15).

Taylor's conception of the intimate insider highlights the complexities of friendship in research, and equally points out the complexities of research on friendship. This is precisely the point of departure for this essay: not only does friendship complicate the research situation, but this ambiguity impacts the participants and their friendships, too. Because the topic of this study is so personal, and the participation so intimate, kindness is a central facet of my research relationship to the participants. The (group) discussions about experiences with the pandemic got increasingly emotional, and the participants and I often shared experiences of isolation and loneliness. My position as researcher was not as fixed as I expected it to be. I had to approach each participant with kindness and compassion, but I also had to extend this kindness to myself. When participants spoke of experiences that I shared, we began to experience the situation mutually. In (group) discussions with my friends we tackled topics that we had not discussed in private conversations before and in (group) discussions with people I had not met before, we built profound emotional connections. In one case, I subsequently developed a great friendship with a participant. Going back to Tillmann-Healy, then, she wrote that 'friendship as method demands radical reciprocity, a move from studying 'them' to studying us' (Tillmann-Healy, 2003, 735). 'Studying us' can take various forms. For my study it meant that the dynamics between the participants and myself, as well as my affective responses to the settings and discussions, will be integrated in my research. 'Studying us' also meant that participants were incorporated into the research with an ethic of friendship, that the study design honoured their interests and vulnerabilities – vulnerabilities that were often exacerbated by the pandemic, as I show in the following section.

Observations of kindness

Researching friendship and the pandemic during the pandemic demanded an immersive engagement with it, both on my part and for the participants. Not only was my research setting demarcated by the pandemic restrictions, with many participants only being able to see each other digitally, but the conflicts and difficulties and opportunities that arose from the pandemic became central parts of our conversations. The research was accompanied by the overarching theme of loneliness and isolation; an experience shared by me and many participants, as transpired in the discussions. Indeed, this shared experience initiated my thoughts about the impact of my research: the setting and format of my research provided a space for friends to be in friendship with another, to *do* friendship. This is what I propose as one aspect of academic kindness: the provision of a space for friendships to unfold in times of social distancing. While this was not the impetus for my research originally, it is the aspect I would like to now highlight.

In what follows, I discuss one specific case, one friendship pair that participated in my study, based on a transcript of the discussion conducted in May 2021. The dyad, Dafne and Joanne, have been friends with each other and with me for seven years.[4] In March 2020 they lived together in a shared house, with two other flatmates, in a large UK city. Most of our conversation for this study reflected on that time. As I will demonstrate in the next section, the research setting offered a space to discuss difficult topics, and to explore a conflict they had experienced in the run up to and during the first lockdown. I have picked out three examples of discussed topics that illustrate the beneficial prospects to their friendship and to them individually.

The first example is a reflection on Joanne's behaviour towards Dafne before the first nationwide lockdown in the UK. Joanne had confidence in the political and public health response to the pandemic and trusted that the newfound coronavirus would be handled swiftly. Dafne, conversely, was in the process of a medical assessment and unsure if she qualified as vulnerable to the virus. Dafne had carefully asked Joanne to take precautions. Joanne recalled Dafne asking, 'Are you sure it's a good idea to go to that gig?' It took Joanne some more time to realise that, as she said, 'this [Covid-19] is like an actual thing that's not going to go away'. Only later did Joanne understand Dafne's vulnerability to the virus and her concerns about infection. During the conversation Joanne explained that she now understood how she had dismissed Dafne's concerns, and that she had not taken the risk seriously. She apologised to Dafne.

The second example is of Dafne reflecting on her relationship to her community in their city, and her reactions to her friends' behaviour. Dafne made use of the setting to share her perspective and her frustration with their community. She spoke about the lack of solidarity she received from the other two people living in the house, as well as the larger community and circle of friends, who are politically left wing and for the most part queer. She explained how disappointed she was to see how quickly her friends

4 All names have been pseudonymised.

abandoned all precautions when the government lifted many restrictions. Supposedly 'anti-authoritarian' people began listening to government advice as soon as it fit their agenda, when in other situations Dafne had known them to be respectful of other's boundaries. She expressed frustration because she felt that their solidarity with disabled and chronically ill people was severely lacking.

A third example is of Joanne telling the story of a falling out that occurred between her and her close friend Anna, one of the other people living in the house. Anna had disrespected the boundaries Joanne had set in terms of reducing the risk of an infection with Covid-19, which Joanne pointed out and asked for her boundaries to be respected. Anna reacted with anger and did not offer understanding, leading them to cease all contact. This was described by Joanne as a heart-breaking 'friendship break-up'. Dafne, who had already moved out at this point, knew of the situation but had 'forgotten how bad it was'.

The first example most clearly demonstrated how they utilised the space to mend their issues, the second showed how Dafne used the space to express frustration with her wider community, and the third allowed Joanne to share her experiences after Dafne had moved out. All three examples show how the two of them utilised this space to air their grievances, to apologise, and to share their stories with me and each other, illustrating the benefits of this research for their friendship with each other, but also for the friendship between the three of us. To return to the theme of this issue, I retrospectively consider this situation one of shared kindness. I propose that creating a confidential space that is solely dedicated to the friendship between participants in a time when friendship was difficult to do is an act of academic kindness. While the purpose of the discussion was for my research, with the aim of studying their experiences with friendship during the pandemic and their engagement with the digital space, academic kindness can be understood as its by-product. Dafne expressed that the conversation gave her a chance to reflect on her friendships and on how they were impacted by the early phases of the pandemic. She later told me that this conversation was an important step in processing the pandemic experience. Moreover, for Dafne to express these frustrations felt, to me, like an offer to understand her position better, both as a researcher and as a friend. I have gained insight not only as researcher but was also privy to topics that had not been shared with me before, despite regular contact and conversations. At a later point, Joanne described the conversation as cathartic, which aligned with my impression of the conversation at the time. Having known that there were issues in the shared house, which ultimately lead to all of them moving out at different times during the first lockdown, I invited them to reflect on their experiences which was accepted by both participants.

While I primarily focus on the academic kindness brought about by the research setting, I suggest, too, that academic kindness in this instance was reciprocal. Their participation in my study was a kindness they extended to me; to vulnerably share their pandemic experiences, their conflicts, and their feelings with me was a kindness. In

other words, the participants took part in the study out of their own motivation; their motivations might include contributing to research into queer communities or, one group expressed, as a past time on a boring lock-down evening. Nonetheless they were communicating with their friends and allowed me to observe and record them, which I perceived as a kindness that my study relied on (and that much empirical research relies on). Likewise, in facilitating a conversation that ended up being valuable to them, I had tried to appreciate and reciprocate this kindness. The impact of research on the participants, then, can be understood as an act of academic kindness, just as their participation itself was an act of academic kindness.

Limitations

Of course, academic kindness is not a catch-all fix for research. There are questions around accountability and vulnerability for doing research with friends. For instance, Gesa Kirsch argues that participants might feel "misunderstood or betrayed" (Kirsch, 2005: 2163) when their friendly conversation is later analysed – these feelings might occur despite their informed consent to participation. Kindness can be a way to mitigate these feelings of betrayal and instead offer appreciation for participant's vulnerability. Moreover, Jodie Taylor points out that as intimate insider researchers we might be privy to information outsiders would not be (Taylor, 2011: 14). This applies to my research and naturally the topic of my research came up time and again in private conversations with some of my 'friend-informants' (Taylor, 2011), too. Whenever I wanted to incorporate information from such conversations, I checked with them first. Furthermore, the practice of communicative validation, that is, confirming the researcher's understanding of the research conversation with the participants (Degele and Winker, 2007; Ganz and Hausotter, 2020), must guide friendship research in order to uphold the friendship 'rules of engagement' (Taylor, 2011: 13).

The pandemic element complicated the situation further: a lack of spaces for friendships, and queer friendships in particular, to unfold during phases of lockdown (Trott, 2020; Anderson and Knee, 2021) meant that the digital spaces that offered opportunities for sociality and friendship were more valuable, but also more challenging. The digital setting acted as a constant reminder of the distance and isolation, while at the same time providing relief to some of these difficult affects. Many queer spaces were translated to digital spheres, like digital pride celebrations and queer book clubs. Mohammed Cheded and Alexandros Skandalis explored the affective and corporeal translations in those types of digital queer spaces (Cheded and Skandalis, 2021). They showed that digital queer spaces did indeed provide connection and fostered a sense of community, but 'also contributed to a sense of frustration at the end of online social interactions; when closing the laptop, this meant a return to a space that felt terribly empty' (345). This risk is there, too, with my friendship research, because the contrast of the connection experienced during the discussion to the post-discussion solitude could be challenging. As I invited friends to join me and share their experiences, I asked them to be vulnerable in front of their friends. In socially distanced times, this

often meant opening up about the experiences of loneliness, the lack of connection and the reminiscence and hope for a more connected time (offline). To then release participants back into their homes in which many of them were isolated, several in challenging living situations, was hard – for me and participants. I tried to mitigate this challenge by offering informal conversation after the discussions and inviting participants to leave or end the discussion when they felt like it. Based on what they shared in the study, I could assume that not all of my participants were returning to a 'space that felt terribly empty' (Cheded and Skandalis, 2021); some returned to shared and social living spaces. Retrospectively I would have liked to offer more specific solutions or support for subsequent feelings of loneliness or distress. My hope for all of them, though, was that the friends whom they spoke to in the group discussions were friends whom they could reach out to if they felt lonely after participation. Conducting this research with groups rather than individuals, while limiting the insights into pandemic experiences to well-connected individuals, did ensure to some extent that participants had a support network.

Conclusion

In this essay I have sought to demonstrate that research participation can have a positive impact on participants and carries the potential for kindness. In my study participants were invited to do friendship in a time where friendship, for many, was restricted and experiences of loneliness were common. I shared three examples from one conversation I facilitated with two friends. The examples illustrated how they utilised the space to have an open, honest conversation with each other, reflecting on their experiences of the pandemic. Research, I have argued, can have a positive impact on participants in addition to the significance of results. Their participation in the study was an act of kindness on their part, as my study depended on their openness. Moreover, providing this space for friendship for the participants can be considered an act of kindness, too. This is a conclusion I have only arrived at retrospectively; I did not have kindness and impact in mind when designing my research. Nonetheless, I find promise in the concept of kindness when considering the impact of my research. However, the digital setting can also function as a reminder of the traumatic social distance that characterised the first and second lockdowns. Centring the conversation around friendships, reflecting on what was missed and the conflicts that arose, became at times a painful reminder of the difficulties of navigating the pandemic. Academic kindness, it seems, can have ambivalent consequences. I suggest that kindness is an unarticulated premise for Tillman-Healy's friendship as method. The ethic of friendship described by Tillmann-Healy (2003) aims for an emotionally rich research practice. Emotional richness, then, can incorporate the ambivalence of the research impact, that is, the ambivalent affects that may arise in the research process. I understand Tillmann-Healy's approach to be open to ambivalence, which furthermore must be met with compassion. While the participants might gain something from participation, as Maria Tomlinson (2021) suggested, they do often offer vulnerability, which must be met with

kindness, too. The research setting, characterised by ambivalence, requires reciprocity and care. To me this is what academic kindness embodies.

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Lisa Scheer

What can academic kindness look like?

Lisa Scheer is a sociologist who works at the University of Graz Competence Center for University Teaching. There she is concerned with questions regarding higher education teaching and learning, supporting teaching staff and contributing to organizational development. Her teaching activities at Austrian universities concentrate on gender and family/technology/body/knowledge as well as social inequality in higher education. She enjoys outdoor activities such as hiking and paragliding. She is part of the Queer STS working group.

Comics on possibilities of academic kindness

When I received my colleagues' call for contributions for this year's Queer STS forum, I immediately knew (1) that I would submit something and (2) that this something would be comics. I find the possibility to contribute in other than the usual written forms very stimulating and positive. Although I feel very good and safe with written tasks and calls for papers, I not always feel like writing. And just recently I have started using comics to deepen student learning. Therefore, I saw the call as an opportunity for me to try out my comic skills and to check how it feels to process a topic in a visual way.

At first, my thoughts were rather critical. My sarcastic answer to the question "Who are the ones being able to act kind in academia?" was: Those who can *afford* it because they have safe jobs, because they do not have to worry about much in their lives. I saw academic kindness as some sort of queer-feminist daydream, an unrealistic wish that mainstream academia would dismiss with the blink of an eye. But when I researched academic kindness as inspiration for my comics, my perspective changed. I found so many suggestions that I took for decent human behaving, for being a good colleague or teacher, which led me to rethink my understanding of academic kindness. I now believe that everyone in academia can be kind without much effort as the range spans from appreciating one another to being a good mentor. Inspired by the website academickindness.tumblr.com hosted by Rabia Gregory (https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2014/01/09/blog-aims-normalize-kindness-academe) as well as Philipp Schulz' activities (https://blogs.fu-berlin.de/toolbox/2020/03/05/academic-kindness) I created five comics on the website canva.com which are titled

(1) Academic Kindness 1

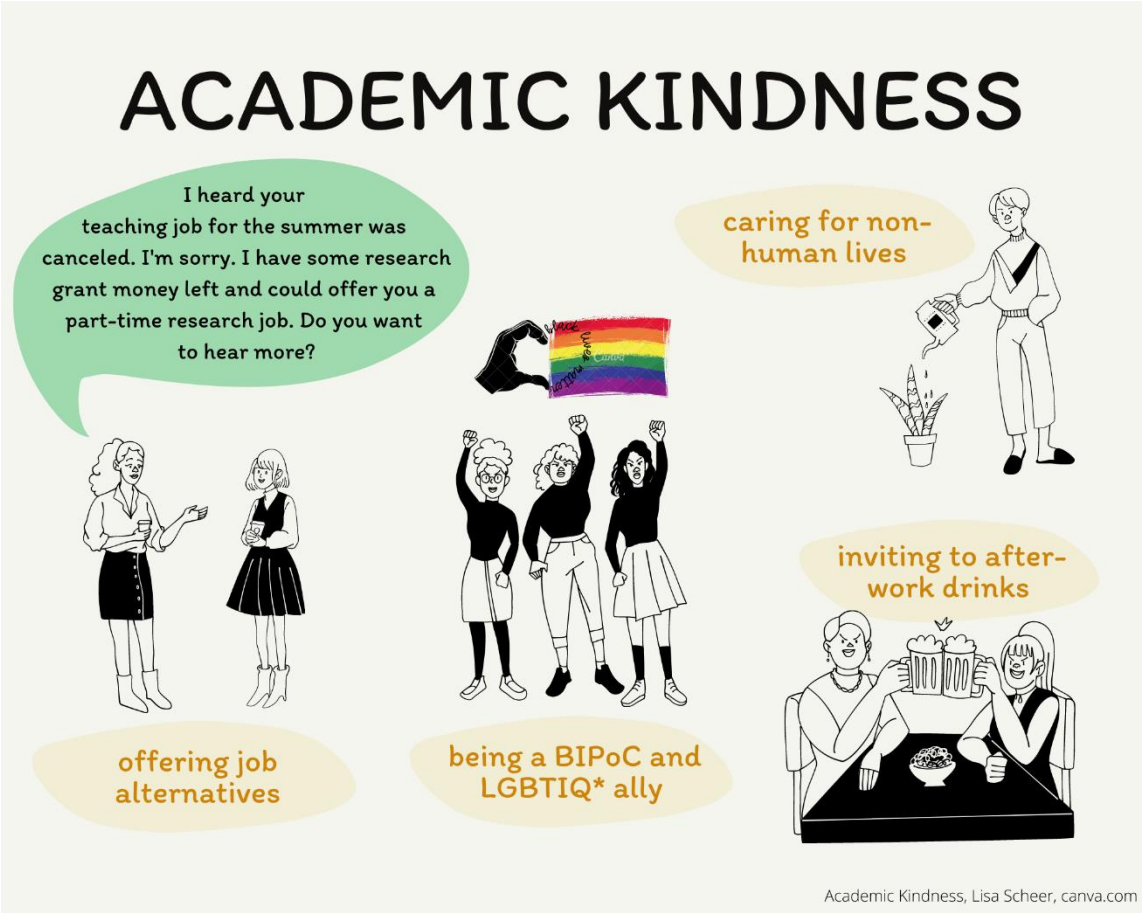
(2) Academic Kindness 2

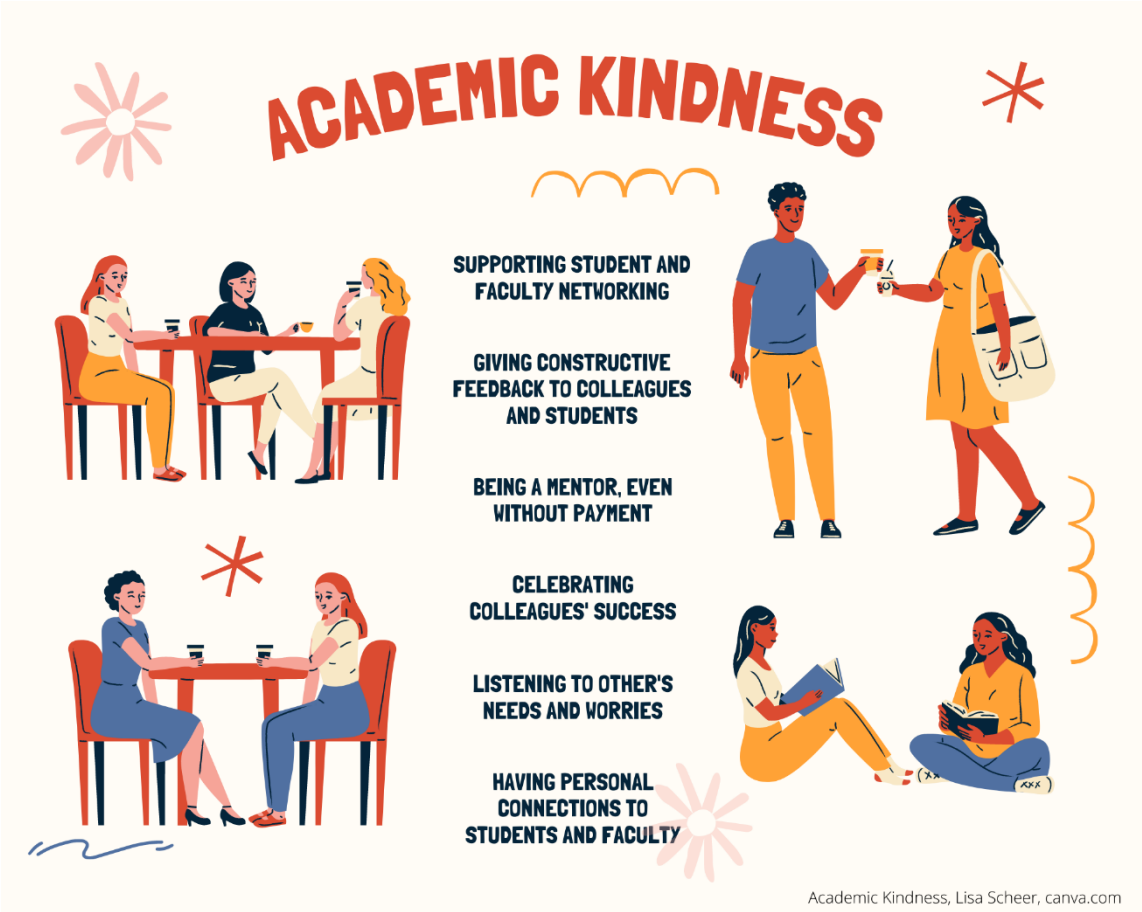
(3) Being kind and caring

(4) Caring Activity Collection

(5) Thanking and appreciating

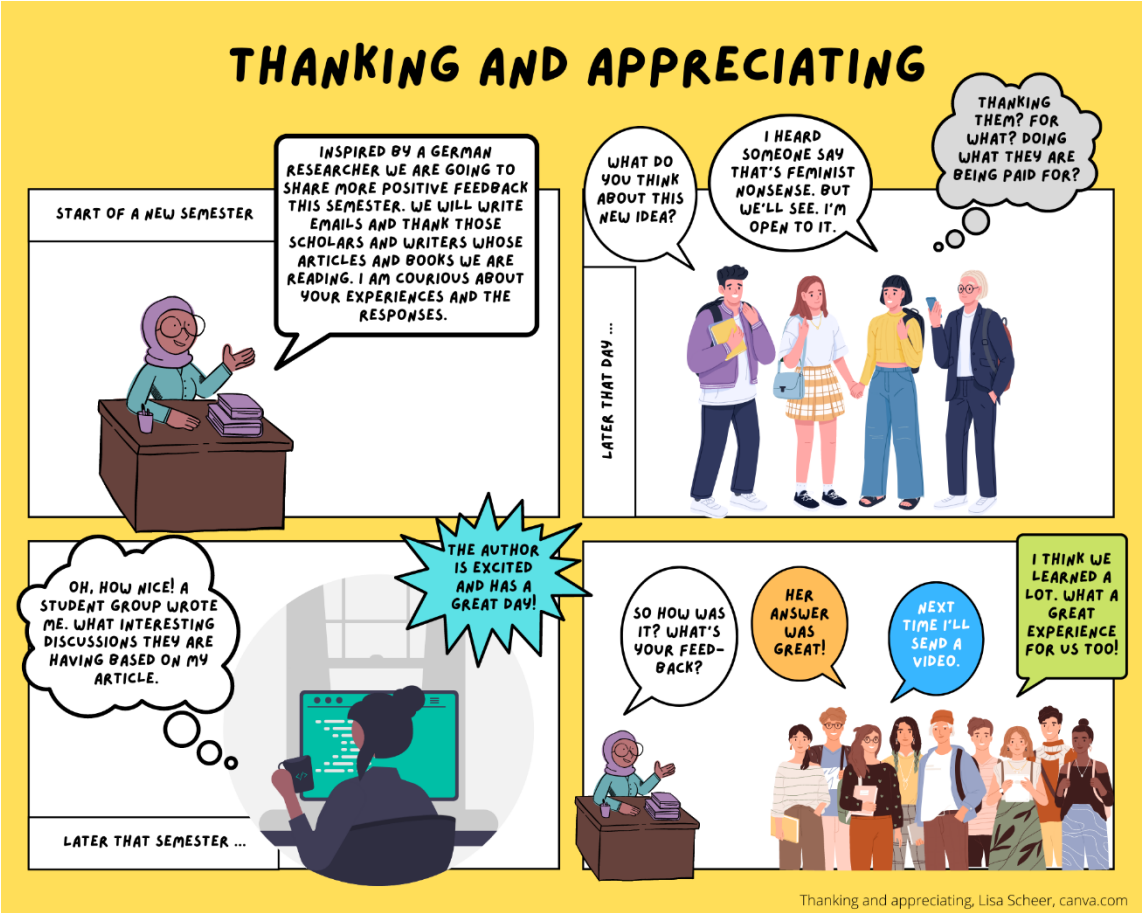
In different styles they visualise what academic kindness can be, e.g. sending thank-you emails to authors whose articles were read in class, providing spaces such as gardens or balcony's to colleagues, crafting for each other, offering help or project hours, celebrating colleagues' success, caring for others as in listening to their needs and worries, connecting to others, building relationships that are not solely based on work issues, giving constructive feedback, being an ally and being a good team leader which includes valuing the opinions and knowledge of others. Looking back now, maybe the forum call already was academic kindness – offering a wide range of formats to creatively discuss, illuminate and analyse a topic?


ACADEMIC KINDNESS
I heard your teaching job for the summer was canceled. I'm sorry. I have some research grant money left and could offer you a part-time research job. Do you want to hear more?
caring for non-human lives
inviting to after-work drinks
offering job alternatives
being a BIPoC and LGBTIQ* ally
Academic Kindness, Lisa Scheer, canva.com


ACADEMIC KINDNESS
SUPPORTING STUDENT AND FACULTY NETWORKING
GIVING CONSTRUCTIVE FEEDBACK TO COLLEAGUES AND STUDENTS
BEING A MENTOR, EVEN WITHOUT PAYMENT
CELEBRATING COLLEAGUES' SUCCESS
LISTENING TO OTHER'S NEEDS AND WORRIES
HAVING PERSONAL CONNECTIONS TO STUDENTS AND FACULTY
Academic Kindness, Lisa Scheer, canva.com


Being Kind and caring
I have decided to keep the remote work policy for our department. The feedback was very positive and the experience showed me that I can trust you all. Everyone was so responsible.
Oh, that's great news. I will send out an email.
I heard about your step mother's health issues, Alex. I could take over some of your admin tasks if you want.
Oh Paul, that would be such a help. Thank you!
Yes, unfortunately the two project proposals didn't go through. I will run out of a contract by June.
What about taking over half of my project hours? I want to support my partner and reduce my working hours. Plus half the salary is still enough for me.
John, is it correct that you have a proposal for our event policy?
Yes! To show more respect and kindness to animals as well as to our students and colleagues I am proposing a departmental vegan policy. I am already working on it.
Being kind and caring, Lisa Scheer, canva.com


CARING FOR YOURSELF AND OTHERS ACTIVITIES
Department of Queer STS Collection
We meditate, do sport or find time to do nothing which all is important for our health and creativity.
Prof. Harries, head of the department since 2016
We enjoy our pets and share pics on personal and departmental social media.
Mr. Mayer, office manager and father of two dogs
We craft for each other. Mr. Mayer makes delicious syrup. I enjoy knitting.
Dr. Karandu, senior lecturer
We stay in touch with each other digitally and make sure that everyone is taking seriously with worries and fears.
Prof. Amaris during the pandemic 2021
We enjoy the sun while reading colleague and student book recommendations. And we offer our spaces to those without balcony or garden.
Mx Pardi, doctoral candidate, on Prof. Harries' balcony
Caring Activities, Lisa Scheer, canva.com



Thanking and appreciating, Lisa Scheer, canva.com

Kris De Welde

Minding and Mending the Gap between Academic Kindness and Academic Justice

Kris is Professor and Director of Women's and Gender Studies and Professor of Sociology at the College of Charleston, SC. Her scholarship focuses on academic justice, institutional change for intersectional equity, and feminist leadership. She is also an impassioned pedagogue, hoping to dismantle harmful systems of teaching and learning one course at a time.

Abstract

As a scholar of academic justice, feminist leadership, and organizational change for intersectional equity, "queer feminist [academic] interventions" are at the center of my research and my purpose as an educator-scholar-activist. As someone steeped in the experiences of, research in, and support systems for marginalized and minoritized scholars, the possibilities afforded by "academic kindness" are as alluring as they are needed. What are ways that academic kindness can serve as queer feminist intervention, moving beyond isolated, atomized acts of individual-level interaction? Can kindness operate as a strategy alongside subversion, fugitivity, resistance and transformation? Or is kindness simply a masquerading tool of the very oppressions it aims to alleviate? Gathering insights from my research, this paper explores the tensions inherent at the intersections of academic justice and academic kindness. I question whether kindness can be situated meaningfully as a strategy in institutional justice work that is often predicated on oppositional critique, refusal, and resistance. I conclude with a tentative proposal for how kindness and justice might be compatible in academic life.

Key words

Academic kindness, academic justice, pedagogy, leadership

Overture

This paper is a gathering of insights, an incomplete collection of considerations, a snapshot in the evolution of my theorizing, and if I am successful, a contribution to the ongoing dialogue about academic kindness, "unsolicited kindness, unexpected goodwill, and excessive generosity in academia" (Gregory, 2014). In the spirit of subverting the status quo that academic kindness proposes, this is not a traditional academic paper, though it is grounded in empirical research and generative of theoretical ideas. It is "a cluster of thoughts in development" (brown, 2017, p. 3) with a sharp and critical analysis.

I question whether queer feminist interventions that happen at the interpersonal level merely offer moments of relief or respite, create space for breathing and perhaps even some healing, or do these interventions actually shift patterns of oppressive systems? Is academic kindness an "antidote" (Jauk, Thaler, & Wicher, 2021) that offers temporary respite, or can it serve as a cure? Can academic kindness be situated meaningfully as a strategy in institutional justice work if it is practised separately from oppositional critique or resistance? In grappling with these questions, I hope to generate offerings for how kindness and justice can be partners in the struggle for more equitable academic institutions, processes, policies, cultures, and interactions.

As a matter of disclosure, my "attachments" (referencing Rita Felski in Gutkin, 2020) are to institutional transformation for academic justice over the ambient, interactional, micro-level effects of kindness. The notion of academic justice emerges explicitly from a critical paradigm intended to identify and address injustice in academia (e.g., De Welde, 2010, De Welde & Stepnick, 2007, 2008, 2014, De Welde, Ferber & Stepnick, 2014). I am a feminist sociologist who studies organizational change and brings to the questions above an understanding that transformation in academia requires "multiple levers at multiple levels" (Austin, 1998; Laursen, 2019; Laursen & Austin, 2020). While I don't reject the notion of academic kindness, I am a bit sceptical of it as a change strategy, particularly where institutions with long-standing academic practices are concerned.

As a strategy for working through my own scepticism as well as possibilities of this concept, I will first explore a cluster of thoughts about the potentiality and necessity of kindness in academic life, followed by a second cluster that identifies and traverses the gap between kindness and justice, finally ending with a cluster of ideas about how to mend that gap.

Cluster One: The potentiality and necessity of Academic Kindness

Citing Bourdieu, Burton (2021) suggests that "unkindness becomes part of the 'rules of the game'…and [is] inculcated into the academic *habitus*" (p. 24), acutely so in the neoliberal academic context.[1] This necessitates interventions to both expose this collective unkind *habitus* and change the dispositions that comprise it. Queer-feminist intervention can be a generative framework for such a challenge, and academic kindness may serve as a strategy or approach in the subversion. Willis (2020) traces the inception of "academic kindness" as a concept to Amber Davis (2014) who characterized it as "academics showing a bit of appreciation and sharing small, important, moments of kindness" (par. 10). In that same year, Rabia Gregory launched a Tumblr blog, *Academic Kindness*, that serves as a repository of kind acts experienced by academics. Intentionally subversive, the site aims to "document that generosity and com-

1 Bourdieu (1990) offers the concept of habitus as capturing internalized systems of enduring structures, dispositions, and conditions that organize practices and discourses in a more or less unconscious manner. Habitus is a way of being that is neither fully determined, as in socially constructed, nor fully determining, as in by free will. It is open to change through experiences that may modify its structures.

passion are normative in academia" (Tursack, 2014). Willis (2020) encouraged "kindness" specifically in peer review and the benefits of such behaviors for early career researchers. They[2] acknowledge the toxic, harmful, and detrimental aspects of academia and offer approaches for relief through supportive, useful, clear, timely, and empathic peer review processes. In so keeping, Jauk, Thaler and Wicher took up "academic kindness" in 2020 to describe their work culture in the Queer-Feminist Science and Technology Studies Forum during the acute COVID-19 period. They described it as one that invited expansive and creative participation in the published forum, supported by "critical friends" who would "mutually mentor" in the peer-review process.

Hulme and Locke (2020) suggest that kindness can serve as intervention into toxic institutional cultures if considered as a criterion for hiring, promotion and advancement:

> "We suggest that promoting academics to the professoriate who embody the values of inclusion, collegiality, and caring, often located within those on educational and practitioner-based careers, can help to change the culture of academia, and bring kindness, instead of toxicity, to the fore. Those who achieve promotion via these routes will then be available to act as role models, and, as well as helping other aspiring professors to understand the ambiguity of promotion criteria and facilitate the progression of more minoritised groups, such as women and BAME [Black, Asian, Minority Ethnic] individuals" (par. 6).

They connote the possibility of a reverberating culture shift if entry into and success in the professoriate are guided by kindness. Their vision suggests the necessity of academic kindness for 21st century higher education, one that creates "a virtuous circle in which members who achieve professorship continue to contribute and provide support to the next generation of professors" (Hulme & Locke, 2020, par. 4). This of course would extend to structurally vulnerable institutional members such as non-tenure track and part-time faculty, contingent and contracted staff, graduate student and postdoctoral employees.

These scholars offer behaviors and dispositions that challenge academic spaces typified by toxicity, hyper-individualism, competitiveness, and quantification, which invite stress, exhaustion, burnout, demoralization, shame and other hallmarks of neoliberal workspaces. While some celebrate micro-interactions that are predicated on kindness, others conjure alternative, even subversive approaches to academic rhythms and practices. It is these latter understandings of "academic kindness" that I believe offer promise for deep and lasting change.

Examples of potentiality

Example one: I draw on my collaborative, interview-based research on academic administrators who self-identify as feminist to explore the kinds of "levers for change" that hold potential for enduring shifts in academic cultures and processes. In our research

2 I opt for gender-neutral pronouns as an alternative to making assumptions about gender identity based on others' names.

(De Welde & Ollilainen, 2022, De Welde, Ollilainen & Solomon, 2018, 2019) we identified values that frame respondents' feminist leadership practices to be: transparency, collaboration, inclusivity, and empowering others. These can be read as queer-feminist interventions in neoliberal academic contexts for their subversive intent to flatten hierarchies and share power. The behaviors that emerged from these values also could be read as acts of kindness given their overall generosity, benevolence, or goodwill. For example, a cornerstone feminist value for respondents in our study was inclusivity, which manifested in multifaceted ways, often depending on the institutional positionality of the feminist leader. Across many respondents, inclusivity centered on access to higher education for individuals who historically have been disenfranchised or excluded; recruiting, hiring and supporting diverse faculty and administrative workforces; openness to non-traditional ideas and knowledge production; and authentically listening to others' concerns (whether students, faculty, or staff). In practice, these values translate into micro-, mezzo-, and macro-levels: from valuing a non-tenure track faculty member's ideas in a department meeting (micro), to equitizing workload in a department (mezzo) or transforming institutional Title IX processes to be more explicitly attentive to racial justice (macro). Although I am more excited about the transformative potential of these actions on the cultures and structures of academic life, of course individual acts of kindness are needed too.

Example two: Many instructional faculty across the world embraced academic kindness in pedagogical strategies during the acute period of the COVID-19 pandemic. These "pandemic pedagogies" were radically kind, and are producing new scholarship on the pedagogy of kindness (e.g., Rawle, 2021, Roy & Cofield, 2021).[3] Coinciding with the beginning of COVID-19 disruptions in the early months of 2020, the U.S. experienced acute social uprisings related to systemic racism (or more specifically, the pandemic of state-sanctioned violence and death in Black and Brown communities, most notably the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis). Intensified attention to trauma-informed approaches to teaching (e.g., Davidson, 2017, Imad, 2020) called on instructional faculty to practice grace (Else-Quest, Sathay & Hogan, 2022) kindness (Denial, 2019), understanding, compassion, and flexibility, recognizing that status quo approaches would exacerbate the stress, fatigue, and mental health issues that undergraduate students in particular were navigating. Instead, faculty were encouraged to essentially be kind to their students by revising expectations, eliminating unnecessary content and assignments, creating space for whole, messy selves to coexist with/in our courses, and sharing our own personal struggles with students as a way of connecting with them. Catherine Denial (2019) simplifies and clarifies that kindness in pedagogy is "believing people and believing *in* people" (par. 8, original emphasis). As an extension of this, academic institutions across the country suspended traditional, competitive-based and hierarchical grading schemes for basic – and far more humane – pass/no pass options. While interactional kindness was unequivocally healing during

3 For earlier works on the intersections of pedagogy and kindness see for example Clegg & Rowland (2010), Denial (2019), and Magnet, Mason & Trevenen (2016).

a time of critical damage to our social institutions, the structural changes that we made in our courses and in our institutions to benefit all students (even ourselves) are where we can see the potentiality of academic kindness as queer-feminist intervention. The upending of long-standing and harmful rules, expectations, even grades, offer promise for a more kind, and just, higher education. These changes also underscore the necessity of such transformations.

Cluster Two: Minding the Gap[4]

The compelling imagining of kindness in academia – as contrast to unkind *habitus* – may be enough to justify its necessity, though the brief examples above offer concrete instances of its potential to enact equity and justice. And yet, there is a gap between quotidian acts of kindness and systemic justice that requires examination. By way of example we can refer to Willis (2020), who claims that kindness (in peer review specifically) is an end in itself. That is, kindness does not necessarily need to engage with questions of fairness, equity, inclusion, or justice and can instead possibly have "other dividends" (par. 18) and reverberating effects. Practices to interject kindness into peer review, in keeping with this example, do little to fundamentally challenge and upend the "publish or perish" system many of us have come to accept as inevitable and that lead to the attrition of BIPOC, interdisciplinary, and community-oriented scholars who tend to experience diminished success, even knowledge-based violence, in peer-review processes and in the academic reward system (e.g., Katuna, 2014; Hurtado & Sharkness, 2008; National Academies of Science, 2005). This positions academic kindness as a strategy that may not have the transformative possibilities it portends to. For instance, as long as someone being evaluated unfairly or denied a tenure-track position is treated kindly in the process – with clear guidelines, considerate communication, and empathy – the implicit (or explicit) bias and discrimination of that very process does not need to be interrogated. Kindness may ease the sting, but it is not a substitute for equity, fairness, or justice in academic life. As argued by Denial (2019), "Kindness can be a band aid we're urged to plaster over deep fissures in our institutions, wielded as a weapon instead of as a balm" (par. 6)

We also should engage with critiques of academic kindness as a possible tool of the neoliberal university ethos (e.g., Burton, 2021). I am persuaded by Burton especially that kindness serves as a "control mechanism" of the neoliberal university as a wellness or well-being strategy intended to adapt (or contort?) the individual to its demands. Burton also notes that in this context "the project of academic kindness appears as a collective goal for individual wellbeing rather than a collective practice of shared humanity and personhood" (p. 29, original emphasis).

A theory of systemic change that is grounded in individual consciousness or acts has the very real potential to fall short of any sort of transformative, institutionalized, sustained move toward justice. As Jack Halberstam writes in the foreword for Harney and

4 Ahmed (2017) argues that diversity workers often "live in this gap between words and deeds of an institution, trying to make those institutions catch up with the words they send out" (p. 107) as substitutes for the actual work of academic justice. I'm loosely drawing from her imperative to "mind the gap."

Moten's, The *Undercommons*, "Our goal…is not to end the troubles but to end the world that created those particular troubles as the ones that must be opposed" (2013, p. 9). Academic kindness as antidote may ease troubles, and may even temporarily interrupt them, but it cannot end the troubles, much less the world that created them. No antidote can be fully effective if the poison consistently and persistently invades and pervades the system, if the poison is systemic and systematic, so too must be its antidotes. We know this from studies of organizational change: we cannot take individualist approaches to effect system-wide change. If historical and cultural hierarchies are inscribed onto bureaucratic structures, practices, and interactions, then any efforts to resist, refuse, or transform those hierarchies must also be enacted at those levels.

Another feature of the gap is the relationship of kindness to power and privilege: who are the givers and receivers of kindness? Givers of kindness have a responsibility to understand and practice "consensual allyship" (Hunt, 2013), wherein what is needed by the "receivers" is centered instead of "a wholly self-generated approach that might be at odds with and in fact undermine [the receivers of allyship]" (Fletcher, 2015, p. 183).5 And if the receivers are those who are structurally vulnerable or socially minoritized, do they then become the cause of their own plight if they reject the kindness? In Ahmed's words, "Is it the ones who do not receive that [kind] gesture as a gesture of goodwill who would be deemed to cause the breakage?" (Ahmed, 2017, p. 178). Who is expected to be kind or receive kindness, and how are those expectations racialized and gendered? We should be wary of how the expectations for BIPOC faculty, staff or students to enact or (especially) receive kindness, reify the "imperialist white-supremacist capitalist [hetero]patriarch[al]" (hooks 1984) academic habitus. Kindness and expected reciprocity or gratitude may collude with hegemonic norms in ways that are currently uninterrogated.

Cluster Three: Mending the gap

To mend these gaps, I extend Burton's (2021) premise that "Kindness…is an ambivalent and mercurial concept, which can be used to oppress, to uphold dominant ideology, to co-opt citizens into dominant power, *and also to refuse, challenge, and provide dispositions and affects able to effect change*" (p. 32, emphasis added). I propose that we (re)envision academic kindness as collective practice in queer-feminist solidarity against oppression and injustice. Specifically, how can we academics practice these often small, barely visible, acts of humanity as affects of resistance, attentive to while centering equity, justice, and belonging? Burton suggests "That this iteration of kindness is underpinned by a collegiality which is vigilant about power and power relations; it refuses damaging and oppressive hierarchies, challenges exclusionary positions and values, and acts ethically to counter or alleviate the harms and violences of oppressive power" (p. 30). This is not a kindness that is an end in itself. Rather, it is a kindness

5 The concept of "consensual allyship" is attributed to Jessica Danforth Yee in a 2011 Twitter feed.

that is aimed directly at challenging and dismantling the harmful systems, policies, practices, cultures and interactions that are unjust.

Above I argued that systemic change cannot be accomplished through individual acts. Notwithstanding, organizational transformation can (and does) happen *through* people and their actions if those individuals have as their end goal a broader purpose for justice and equity. While there are no substitutes for the work of academic justice, if academic kindness is enacted as a counter-hegemonic praxis that "works against institutional norms and values," under the "illusion of working with" them, then "pass[ing] as willing in order to be willful" aligns academic kindness with academic justice. (Ahmed 2017, p. 101) In this way, the former can be a strategy for the latter, and an ethic of solidarity (Fraser, 1986), can serve as a compass.

Example one: Solidarity can be an antidote against neoliberalism's isolating and individualizing tendencies (Vachhani and Pullen, 2019), and move us toward a "shared responsibility for the lives of others…[in] resistance against socio-economic inequalities and patriarchal power…" (Segal 2017, p. 228). We see this in our study of feminist administrators' praxis as solidarity (De Welde et al., 2018, 2019), which offers concrete examples of what I here am proposing as oppositional and justice-oriented kindness. While micro-level kindnesses enacted by these administrators might have a lasting positive impact on an individual, it was the initiatives and policies for which these leaders advocated on behalf of others that institutionalized feminist and justice-oriented ideals. The interstitial spaces between kindness and justice in academic settings are where we find generative possibilities for closing the gap through solidary acts.

Academic *habitus* is constituted through interactions that are patterned, learned, practiced and reinforced throughout our careers. The more successful we are in academia, the stronger our "culture of acceptance" becomes (Willis, 2020) and the more likely we are to replicate learned patterns, even if they are harmful (to ourselves and others). Academic cultures thus need queer-feminist intervention to interrupt the oppressive interactions, processes, and policies it generates. Almost all the feminist administrators in our study offered examples of how they had intervened in the oft unjust academic reward system (primarily tenure and promotion cases). In one example, a department head confronted a (man) "bully" intending to derail an early tenure decision for a woman assistant professor based on false information. Ultimately, our respondent was successful and so was the (early) tenure candidate. This interaction, while seemingly only impacting one scholar, was part of a suite of interventions our respondents reported making, including contextualizing "gaps" in C.V.s for those who "stopped the clock" for child/eldercare, or biased teaching evaluations for faculty of color. These examples, occurring at the interpersonal level, offer evidence of how the daily work of feminist administrators' solidary actions are guided by "a framework for detecting gendered micro-politics and observing how power relations operate through daily interactions" (De Welde et al. 2019, p. 8). As such, these actions often catalyzed policy revi-

sions and institutionalized process changes. In effect, a feminist lens helps self-identified feminist administrators link the micro situations with the macro-level policies and processes in pursuit of fostering social justice through lasting change.

Example two: Similarly with pedagogies, feminist (hooks, 1994, 2003, Shrewsbury, 1997, Valle, 2002), abolitionist (Love, 2019), critical, and engaged (hooks, 1994, Kinlock et al., 2021) pedagogies are often subversive to the status quo in classrooms, disciplines, and institutions. Practitioners of these pedagogies encourage critique, flatten hierarchies, invite students to "claim their education" (Rich, 1977), and for both faculty and students to take risks (hooks, 1994). Rule-breaking (or bending), such as practicing un-grading or prioritizing community-engaged projects over traditional forms of evaluation are examples of "education as the practice of freedom" (hooks, 1994) as students are encouraged to bring their whole selves, including families and communities, into their work rather than be hyper focused on achieving arbitrary standards and predetermined learning outcomes (see Kinloch et al., 2021). Catherine Denial (2019) encourages us to see these as acts of kindness, extending compassion and care into our interactions with students as those that can transcend the micro-level interactional space to challenge neoliberal logics: "To extend kindness means recognizing that our students possess innate humanity, which directly undermines the transactional educational model to which too many of our institutions lean, if not cleave" (par. 16). I believe that solidarity with students with/in our pedagogies and beyond is one approach to mend the gap.

To keep things real, as much as I subscribe to these ideas and practice them in my classrooms through critical, abolitionist, and liberatory pedagogies, I am also not naïve to think that when students and I share a course that is premised on kindness and these pedagogical frameworks, that the barrage of injustices they face elsewhere are somehow alleviated in more than a transitory way. In order to mend the gap between kindness and justice in our pedagogies, we must be willing to engage with the reality that "The harm done by long-term exposure to injustice…calls for more than a simple understanding of kindness. It demands that kindness be interwoven with substantial notions of true justice" (Turner 2019, p. 42). In this way, I advocate for students when they are not in the room, challenge colleagues when they say that students are "lazy" or "unprepared for college work," reject the blind use of data analytics to predict their success, or otherwise try to extend my solidarity with students into institutional spaces beyond the classroom.

Final thoughts

Framing academic kindness as "unexpected goodwill, and excessive generosity" is akin to charity. Kindness helps another, it makes legible the violence experienced by those who may be structurally or otherwise vulnerable and extends compassion and consideration to them (and to ourselves). We all need more of this. But I hope I have offered a sufficient argument that academic kindness is lacking when not guided by or informed by academic justice. The bridge that may mend the gap between these is one

where solidarity, which requires collective action to address injustice, drives acts of kindness. Jauk, Thaler and Wicher (2021) frame academic kindness as an academic mutual aid strategy, which I interpret as invoking a form of solidarity, one where we engage in justice-oriented kindness with no need for personal gain, no accountability from the receiver, no expectation of reciprocity. I think this is what we need to be focused on in building a kinder academy.

And yet, we should be mindful of a solidarity that is premised on assumed shared experiences that produce a perverse empathy, re-inscribing power relations (De Welde et al., 2019, Pedwell, 2012). "Passive empathy" is a kindness that is unmoored from understanding our own responsibility in and complicity with historical and social conditions. It is a form of charity, even pity, that can dislocate us from the very systems that are producing the "troubles." Instead, we need what Nemeth and collaborators (2021) call "catalytic empathy," which emerges from felt responsibility, from a "feeling with others [that] is rooted in equity, ethics, and justice" (Kinloch et al., 2021, p. 68). This is a queer-feminist, kind, and justice-oriented solidarity that may reflect shared identities but is intentional to transcend them (e.g., Mohanty, 2003).

Finally, quotidian acts of kindness are not in themselves justice work, and the latter are what is required for transformation. Acts of kindness are individual, interactional, at the micro-level. Justice work is collective, aimed at institutions, predicated on coalitions, resistance and refusal. There is a gap between these, and as a scholar of academic justice, I am uneasy with the normalization of academic kindness in the absence of also attending to the unjust systems and processes in which these atomized acts occur. And, academic kindness has the very real potential to be coopted, marketized, and imbricated into institutional power dynamics (Burton, 2021), and as a form of labor, to be coerced. Academic kindness should be a "refusal of the academy of misery" (Halberstam, 2013, p. 10). In sum, coupled with an ethos and praxis of solidarity toward academic justice, kindness in the context of our academic professional lives can be a form of queer worldmaking that may just be irresistible.

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