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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 ethnopschoanalysis 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 world-making. 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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