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## Minding and Mending the Gap between Academic Kindness and Academic Justice



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### 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.<sup>1</sup> 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-

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<sup>1</sup> 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<sup>2</sup> 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 21<sup>st</sup> 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

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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).<sup>3</sup> 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

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<sup>3</sup> 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<sup>4</sup>

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

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<sup>4</sup> 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).<sup>5</sup> 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

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<sup>5</sup> 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, Kinloch 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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