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Solidarity, now!

Care, Collegiality, and Comprehending the Power Relations of "Academic Kindness" in the Neoliberal Academy

Comprehending Kindness: The Neoliberal University and Ambivalent Positions of Care

In the Spring of 2018, the University and College Union (UCU) undertook a period of industrial action pitched, in the main, at resisting stringent and damaging cuts to members' pensions. Less than a year out of my doctoral thesis, this was my first strike action. I recognised the damage and long-term harms neoliberal policies wrought in academia and supported the strike action but, still, I entered it feeling an uneasy muddle of fear and hope. Throughout the strike, I couldn't help but question the form of solidarity which demanded strike action for (often economically privileged) academic staff but continues to, as sociologist Les Back says, be extraordinarily "timid and conservative" (2018, 118) in the face of the sector-wide changes brought about by neoliberal ideology and policy. During this time, I embarked on a short ethnographic project with my long-time friend and collaborator, Vikki Turbine. Together we sought to explore the modes of solidarity we encountered across the academy together with strike action and the extent to which these solidarities offered to correct injustice and inequality, but also the ways these solidarities could be felt as onerous, judgemental, or divisionary. Who – for instance – gets to "have" or "be in" solidarity and who experiences solidarity as an ultimatum or imperative? Vikki and I kept "strike diaries" over the course of the industrial action - four weeks across February and March 2018 – as well as sharing our reflections with one another via email, social media, direct messaging, and video calls. The ethnographic data collected became the source material for two short articles in the online sociology magazine, *Discover Society* (Burton and Turbine 2018; Burton and Turbine 2019). In the first we sketched the importance of a feminist ethics of care for "doing" solidarity, especially in the context of precarity and casualisation (Gill, 2018; Loveday, 2017; Mackenzie, 2021a), and in the second we reflected more broadly on the necessity *of* care in an academy so many of us experience as "care-less" (Lynch, 2010).

This article presents a more sustained exploration of the relationship between solidarity, care, and the neoliberal university, but one which is specifically framed within the increasingly prevalent discourse of "academic kindness" (Turscak, 2014; *THE*, 2019; Willis, 2020). I argue that the narrative's particular focus on kindness – or what I term "kindness talk" – sets it as both a source of potential support and hopefulness, but equally also a concept hollow and ill-defined enough to risk being straightforwardly commodified and co-opted into the individualist "wellbeing" and "resilience" narratives of the academy's neoliberal governance (Gane, 2012). Nevertheless, it is valuable, I think, to take these broader ideas of kindness seriously vis-à-vis their potential roles in uncovering the creeping manoeuvres of neoliberal power, and in offering more radical forms of hope, optimism, and solidarity. With that in mind, my interest in this article is twofold: firstly, to confront experiences and atmospheres of *un*kindness in the academy and, via this, to comprehend the ways narratives of kindness may be co-opted and controlled through administrative and managerial processes; secondly, to argue for the radical potential "academic kindness" offers as a beginning point to reshape our intellectual and social relations within the academy, using the recognition of shared humanity and personhood present in "kindness talk". Throughout the article, I frame these analyses within the context of UK academics' experiences of kindness, solidarity, and the neoliberal institution, drawing on my own long-term ethnographic research as well as the already-mentioned collaborative fieldwork response to strike action.

A note on methodology and kindness

The allure of "academic kindness" arguably lies in the notion that it is a viable and valuable corrective to the stated harms caused to university workers by the neoliberal academy (Turscak, 2014; Willis, 2020). But – problematically – "academic kindness" though frequently discussed, is also a rarely defined concept. It is often characterized through broad terms such as "generosity" (Willis, 2020), or the undertaking of small acts of caring or niceness for a colleague – such as listening intently, gifting treats, or helping set up a teaching room (*THE*, 2019). Away from social media and the blogosphere, there has also been sustained scholarly interest in understanding what role kindness and care may play in counteracting, and protecting against the "poisonous individualising discourse" of neoliberalism (Gill 2018, 106; The Care Collective, 2020). These everyday acts of kindness and care - it is claimed - are important in supporting and protecting academics against the toxic culture of the academic workplace (Back 2016; Gill 2018; Turscak 2014). This article is not an attempt to define "academic kindness", but rather takes it as a starting point to explore kindness and care as multifaceted, paradoxical, and ambiguous sets of dispositions, acts, and ways of narrating the sociability of academic life. I draw a distinction between the particular formulation of "academic kindness" as akin to a marketing technology, and the scholarly literature on kindness, solidarity, and care. I am interested, however, in how this kindness talk travels between social and professional spaces of doing academia, and the effect of this on how academics as workers engage with concepts of kindness and care in the workplace. I argue that "kindness" is a distinctly elastic and ambivalent term, with the potential to mean all things to all people, as well as nothing at all. By laying out the malleability and contested nature of kindness, the article demonstrates how it can be used both as a tool of the oppressed and a tool of the oppressor and operationalised as both solidarity and domination. Underneath narratives of kindness, we can see the numerous and intersecting ways in which

academic workers are themselves imbricated in, and co-opted by, institutional power, thus further showing how and why some academics become invested in maintaining conventional "status quo" relations and structures. In considering "academic kindness" narratives within the context of these various sedimented and entwined inequalities, and with particular reference to the atmospheres and affects cultivated within the neoliberal university, this article demonstrates both the opportunities and risks offered when we lean into ideas and narratives of academic kindness. What kinds of power does "kindness" exert in academic spaces and relationships, and what is the potential of kindness in unmaking dominant hierarchical power relations, providing recognition of harms done in/by the neoliberal academy, or offering guidance for the future?

Methodologically, this article draws on long-term ethnographic fieldwork with academics working in sociology departments in the UK. This research investigated the relationship between writing practices and cultures and the production of legitimate knowledge and power within sociology. Ten "gatekeepers", who all held senior positions within the discipline directed me to ten central participants, all of whom gatekeepers felt to be producing "exciting" or "valuable" work. I spent a year meeting regularly with the participants, discussing writing, works in progress, co-author relationships and – most relevant to this article – working conditions in academia, inequalities of the sector, and the distribution and use of power in academia. The participants were positioned across career stages and the life course, and include heads of department, professors, fixed-term early career scholars, academics who edit journals, emeritus staff, and junior academics in their first permanent post. The conversations I use in this article come from recorded interviews and my numerous fieldwork diaries, including my own reflexive responses to both the formal participants and informal conversations with academics during the fieldwork and after. All participants have been anonymised, given a new name and a semi-fictionalised identity.

Emotions, audit culture, and the competitive academic life

The contemporary university, and academic relations and practices more broadly, are frequently understood as being driven by an individualising neoliberal ethic (Collini 2012; Evans 2004; Loveday 2018), with a number of scholars emphasising how this increasing bureaucratisation and managerialism underscores existing social and political inequalities (Burton 2018; McKenzie 2021a; Pereira 2016; Zheng 2018). Neoliberalism creates atmospheres of extremes; on the one hand it is, as Billig says, "a culture of boasting" (2013, 24), on the other it invokes feelings of "exhaustion, stress, overload, insomnia, anxiety, shame, aggression, hurt, guilt…out-of-placeness, fraudulence, and fear of exposure within the contemporary academy" (Gill 2009, 232). The common thread present in analyses of the neoliberal university is the lack of space afforded to the human or personal in favour of "audit culture" (Shore 2008), metricisation (Beer 2014), and instrumentally measured "impact" (Back 2016). Contextualising ideas of "academic kindness", care, and solidarity within these ideological and structural rejections of the personal, and the embracing of "unkindness", is vital.

The neoliberal university successfully implements a "toxic individualism" (Gill 2018, 106) which shames individual scholars for perceived professional failures (Breeze 2018; Sparkes 2007) and

makes "rising stars" or "future leaders" out of those able to meet the exacting demands of academia's "publish or perish" culture (Back 2018; McKenzie 2021b). Ros Gill describes the result of the application of metric data, and the reduction of academic labour and endeavour to a counting exercise, as "the quantified self of neoliberal academia" (Gill 2015). Rather than being present in the academy as thinking, feeling, breathing people, academic workers are more often comprehended by their institutions as the amount of public funding, the prestige of a grant, the volume of citations, or the number of "outputs" published, connected to their profile. This turn to bureaucracy and metrics promotes, as Les Back says, "competitive individualism at all levels" (Back 2018, 120). Likewise, critiques have long been made of academia and universities as spaces of whiteness (Arday and Mirza 2018; Bhopal 2016), patriarchy (Marshall and Witz 2004), able-bodiedness (Burke and Byrne 2020; Sheppard 2021) and middle-classness (Reay et al 2009), which structurally exclude and visit symbolic violence upon people of colour, women, working-class people, and disabled people. Despite this wealth of scholarship which understands such toxicity and discrimination as structural problems of sedimented injustices and inequalities, the neoliberal institution itself continues to tell its inhabitants that the problems they face are a result of each individual's lack of "resilience" and "grit" (Chandler and Reid 2016; Joseph 2018). This raises the question of how small acts of – arguably transient – kindness can work to fix a set of long-term systemic exclusions and injustices which institutions themselves deny the existence of.

This is particularly crucial given the lack of space made, or importance given, to the personal or the human in the neoliberal academy. The prevalence of inspection and quantification seeps into the everyday social and intellectual spaces of the university, so that "techniques and values of accountancy have become a central organizing principle in the governance and management of human conduct" (Shore 2008, 279). Fieldwork participants were very clear that measuring fora such as the Research Excellence Framework (REF), the internal assessments for the REF, promotion assessments, peer reviewing, module evaluation questionnaires, and the National Student Survey created environments of competition and oppression between colleagues, and between the academic and their employing institution. What is lost – or nearly lost – within this neoliberal individualist logic is the "value of the social and convivial features of academic life" (Gill 2018, 106). In my own fieldwork notes, I describe an ordinary department meeting in which the conversation turned to workload and how we might support one another as a collective. Colleagues opened the conversation with heartfelt pleas for their relentless conditions of overwork to be recognised – and reduced accordingly. Others asserted that the department was a family and that, of course, if some were struggling then others should step in to "take the load off". The discussion, though, came to an unsettling end with the interjection from another academic that, in the tough and demanding space of a neoliberal workplace, "it's everyone for themselves". I remember being viscerally angry at this, delivered as it was with such matter-of-fact assent, but what really made the pit fall out of my stomach was the lack of any serious challenge to this idea from the rest of the department members. "I know nobody's alright in the neoliberal academy", I wrote in my diary, "but there's the definite sense that some are more alright than others and they don't want to be bothered with the work of challenging the neoliberal way of doing things – which is really, let's face it, a very basic demand for fairness". It is unhelpful, I think, to assign individual blame for the ills of neoliberalism but, equally, it is necessary to acknowledge that neoliberal ideals foster distinct moods of unkindness and allow

such ruthless competition and abnegation of the human that each individual is effectively endorsed to behave in such cold and dehumanising ways. The omnipresent atmosphere of competition, judgement, fear, anxiety, and risk combines with the encouragement to boast and emboldens the idea that ego and selfishness are vital career attitudes, resulting in an academy which is deeply and acutely unkind, unforgiving, and uncaring (Billig 2013; Gill and Donaghue 2016; Lynch 2010; Rogers 2017). The mundanity and insidiousness of these actions is important to comprehending academic unkindness. The reliance on anonymity in academic reviewing – for example, in publishing, promotions, and teaching – emerged in the ethnography as a key driver of unkindness. According to many participants in the fieldwork, this anonymity serves to encourage behaviour such as rumour-spreading, gossip, and briefing against one's intellectual enemies. One participant, Andy, told me that, "[academics are] bastards and bitches when they know it's all done anonymously. They'll say things in a review that they would never say to your face. Which they know will damage you". It's important to note Andy's insistence that this damage is deliberate and calculated –it is done to retain power through gatekeeping. His assessment may seem bleak, but Andy's claim is supported by the ways other scholars have written about their experience of peer review and the phenomenon is evident in the wider literature (Santos 2014; Meagher 2012). Laurel Richardson shares her early experiences of peer review from a feminist/gender perspective, noting that, "The *American Sociological Review* gave my submission "Women in Science: Why So Few?" a one-line rejection: "This paper was obviously written by a woman because no one but a woman would be interested in it" (Richardson 2002, 416). Added to this apparently virulent temperament among academics, it also does not help that, as Back says, in academia we are not valued for our generosity but rather for "the sharpness of our intellect, for the unflinching nature of our academic judgements" (2016, 114). These adjectives – sharp, unflinching – all connote severity, anger, and masculinised ideals of strength. No one, as Andrew Sayer advises, wants to be thought of as uncritical; to do so is effectively to admit that you are "naïve and gullible" (Sayer 2009, 768). Criticality, Back tells us "becomes a badge of excellence, while generosity shows suspicious signs of intellectual feebleness" (2016, 114). And there lies the problem with academic un/kindness in the neoliberal system: the rewards for selfishness or damaging others' opportunities are apparently legion, whereas dispositions of kindness, care and generosity not only lack any form of reward or recognition as valuable but are actually seen as negative markers against one's intellectual ability and professionalism. Neoliberalism encourages individualism, particularly as it tends to selfishness and callousness, and in such a way that unkindness becomes part of the "rules of the game" (Bourdieu 1993) and, following this, unkindness is - arguably - inculcated into the academic habitus (Bourdieu, 1988).

Overcoming the "academic pose": professionalism and the discomfort of care

> *The air around me prickles. When I walk up to the building, my whole body drowns in adrenaline-fuelled sickness, my head thickens, and my vision mists. I'm terrified. Pushing a smile onto my face, I stride into the department and settle myself at my desk. When I think no one is watching, I close my eyes and take five deep breaths, but I still shake. Later, my manager knocks on my door and we chat. I try to maintain composure but I'm also bitterly close to a break, and so I reveal myself once more. The administrative processes cannot process*

> *trauma, I say. There needs to be some compassion, some humanity – just some basic kindness, I beg. "Kindness", my manager tells me, "is a bonus, in the workplace".*

Why is it that kindness is not understood as part of our workplace obligations? What is it about kindness, care, and emotional warmth that appears unfitting, or even suspicious, within the academic environment? I suggest that the reticence to fold the messier notions of the human condition, and their associated caring responsibilities, into the academic workplace stems from complex and competing ideas surrounding professionalism. Professionalism connotes the ability to behave, move, speak, and carry yourself in such a way as you fit seamlessly and harmoniously in your workplace (Bourdieu 1977). This degree of comfort and security in occupying the academic sphere is what Pierre Bourdieu refers to as "*sens practique*" or "feel for the game" (1980, 66). Through time and exposure, we develop this feel for the game so that it becomes instilled as our "habitus" (Bourdieu 1980) and whereby the "proper" behaviour or outlook feels unconscious – a given in a particular space and through this technique, the rules of the field reproduce and re-legitimate themselves. For the traditional academic or intellectual, professionalism arguably includes such qualities as dedication, autonomy, rigour, scholarship, and collegiality (Susen and Baert 2018; Becker 1986). Under the neoliberal ideal, those ideas of intellectual professionalism have merged with the "turn to character" (Bull and Allen 2018), and now include such elements as resilience, hyper-productivity, and embracing of individualism and an "always on" culture. The slow insidious creep of neoliberal ideology and praxis (Spooner 2015) has, I think, seen a collapsing of demarcation between these forms of professional behaviour and identity. The idea that we should all be "dedicated" scholars has slipped into a working culture that demands presenteeism and the frenzied production of "REF-able" publications. Likewise, the tendency towards autonomy – something all participants in my fieldwork unfailingly identified as a major draw of academic life – has reformed to include that distinctly neoliberal fetish for the individual, and with it come compulsions to be resilient or to comport oneself with grit and determination. The paradigm of the ideal neoliberal subject is not so far, really, from the ideal intellectual (Burton 2018; Gross and Fosse 2012). The underlying value paradigms, however, are distinct, and opposite enough that obeying both at once is equally discomforting, arduous, and precarious.

The most apparent locus of kindness within the professional sphere of academics is collegiality and "academic citizenship". UK universities increasingly use the concept of "academic citizenship" (Macfarlane 2007; Nixon 2008), often incorporating it into their "rewards and recognition strategies" (Macfarlane and Burg 2018, 2). Academic citizenship is, loosely, "those activities distinct from research and teaching that support and offer services to both the university and wider society" (Macfarlane and Burg 2018, 2) and includes activities such as sitting on committees, undertaking leadership roles, editing a journal, organising an event, or doing peer review for journals or funding bodies. Macfarlane and Burg comment on the intangibility of the concept, comparing it to the French expression *esprit de corps*, and noting the commonalities of a "sense of shared pride and loyalty to the group" (Macfarlane and Burg 2018, 4). This work, and the willingness to undertake it certainly shares a disposition with the small acts of kindness cited as key to “academic kindness” or the generosity with which scholars such as Les Back (2016; 2018) encourage us to meet neoliberal policy and mood. However, in the UK

context, this labour is often not accurately accounted for in the "workload model" which sets out the main duties of an academic and the time taken to complete them. Whilst these activities are, in theory, a standard part of the academic job, in practice they often end up coming "on top of" a normal workload and are therefore essentially unpaid. Moreover, Macfarlane and Burg note that academic citizenship is frequently approached by institutions in terms of "lack" rather than acknowledgement of labour done: rather than a positive and purposeful recognition of the citizenship and collegiality which *has* been undertaken, institutions instead frame this as individual academics not having done enough. Macfarlane and Burg, drawing on their own research into academic citizenship and institutions' policies in relation to it, note that universities have a "tendency to negatively frame academic citizenship as a potential absence, with the focus on academic staff who are perceived as poor academic citizens" (Macfarlane and Burg 2018, 2). This institutional emphasis on citizenship as a *deficiency* suggests that, under the neoliberal ethic, the inclination of academics to work cooperatively and generously is operationalised by the bureaucratic university to encourage hyper-productivity, normalise overwork, and gain free labour.

Further, scholars have recognized gendered, racialised, and classed disparities across academic citizenship, with women, working-class people and people of colour pressed to take on less institutionally valued pastoral and administrative roles and white men guided to more prestigious - and more frequently rewarded - leadership roles (Deiana 2010; Hoskins 2010). Whilst all citizens of academia are obligated to take on ever more unpaid and/or unrecognised labour (Gill and Donaghue 2016), evidence suggests that women feel "particularly pressured by the demands of service, mentoring, and teaching" (Misra et al 2011). Furthermore, evidence suggests that men are "more protective of their research time" (Misra et al 2011) *and* that gender norms advantage them in being more successful at protecting their research time. Such inequality of gender, with respect to academic publishing, is argued to have deepened during the Covid-19 global crisis, with women undertaking the majority of increased caring responsibilities, including home education during school closures (Smith and Watchorn 2020). The reproduction of structural sexism (as well as racism and classism) evidenced within the fuzzy boundaries of academic citizenship firmly genders caring work and places it in the domestic realm of the academy. This sort of structural inequality vis-à-vis care and kindness fractures notions of solidarity or loyalty across the privileged and the precarious. Acceptable forms of care and kindness emerge as those putatively distanced from "emotionality" – politeness, civility, citizenship – and the achievement of this distance is gendered, racialised, and classed. Indeed, acting and feeling outside of these expectations is noted as marking you out as transgressive – a troublemaker needing to be brought back in line (Ahmed 2017), with such formulations drawing on histories of "unrestrained" figures such as the "angry black person" (Ahmed 2010) or the "hysterical woman" (Bland and Doan 1998). Viewed thus, emotional dispositions and acts that occur outside of idealised neoliberal characteristics such as determination and resilience (Gill and Orgad 2018; Burman 2018) are read as "stigma", the relational nature of which (Goffman 1963) functions to set apart those who (can) conform to the neoliberal mood and those who cannot or will not. The stigma machine (Tyler 2020) of the neoliberal university thereby creates and controls not only what sorts of affect, mood, and feeling are allowed but also punishes those who stray from the designated path. This relationship between professionalism, power, and control requires further consideration of the forms of kindness and

care possible in the neoliberal university, and reconsideration of the efficacy of “academic kindness”.

The Rule of Happiness: "Academic Kindness" and its Discontents

"Academic kindness" emerges in multiple forms within the discourse, most often appearing as apparently lightweight and fleeting acts such as a friendly chat in the corridor but is occasionally noted as encompassing more radical and overt action such as clear condemnation of abuse or bullying, challenges to exclusionary practices and policies, and strike action. In this section I examine the problems and possibilities of "academic kindness", within the context of neoliberal ideals of professionalism, productivity, and individuality. I aim to show how this version of kindness works with, or can be co-opted by, hierarchical power and structural privilege, so that instead of offering escape from misery, inhumanity, and anxiety, it actually functions to uphold and perpetuate particular moods and affects which maintains neoliberal value paradigms and associated harms. "Academic kindness" – as evidenced in my fieldwork – is not without value, however. Here, I explore that value and question the opportunity for “academic kindness” to escape the neoliberal and capitalist ethic in ways that are truly radical.

A brief inspection of contemporary popular culture and merchandising offers a very particular version of kindness. We are repeatedly commanded by t-shirts, hash tags, and the mug that holds our morning coffee to “Be Kind”. The slogan appears emblazoned throughout numerous spaces and topics, from interior decor, to self-care and wellness discourse, to discussion of celebrity suicides (Alexander 2021). It is a distinctly marketable salutation, as much in academia as in popular culture. After all, who can find a problem with the notion of being kind to others? *Academic* kindness draws on these ideas of harmony, niceness, and wellness, but distinguishes itself with respect to how such dispositions and activities present themselves in the specific spaces and relationships of academic working life. It follows the pattern of wider "be kind" narratives, in that "academic kindness" is most frequently expressed via hash tag, narratives of self-care – including the "quit lit" genre (Mackenzie 2021b), and individualised experiences of small acts of care. This careful packaging of “academic kindness” allows it to be both elastic and mobile – it does what it needs to do in a given interaction and suggests an academy – or at least a volume of academics – that value kindness. The key question is: what sort of kindness is being offered?

Here, I want to turn to Sara Ahmed’s scholarship on happiness. Ahmed tells us that, "Happiness is consistently described as the object of human desire, as being what we aim for, as being what gives purpose, meaning, and order to human life" (2010, 1). Happiness is an affect that joins us together in harmonious pursuit of the same (happy) goal and allows for the successful continuation of social relations. Important to happiness, is the idea of collectivity – we must all be oriented to the same ends, to the same happiness. Those who are not, those for whom this common happiness causes pain or does not fit, become "killjoys" (Ahmed 2010), literally killing the joy of the whole with their refusal to conform, to "be happy". I argue kindness can be considered in like terms - as a goal and atmosphere which is co-dependent and mutual. Indeed, viewing kindness as a mood or affect highlights the relational aspect of the concept. In my 2018 strike diary, I record how strained my interactions with more "secure" colleagues were

becoming. "They all want me to be grateful", I wrote. In my colleagues' view, they were doing their "academic citizenship" – peer reviewing, committee work, mentoring – and their "academic kindness" work – smiling, passing the time of day, buying lunch. My appeal for them to pay closer attention to the affective and structural harms of casualisation and precarity was met with a disgruntled bewilderment because they thought they were already doing this. My lack of ability to feel in community or in solidarity with them during the strike action was, I perceived, felt as ungrateful and dismissive, even unkind. I, on the other hand, read this disgruntlement as a demand for gratitude and supplication to hierarchical authority. "They make me feel bad that I don't feel better", I wrote in my fieldnotes. This construction is key: each perspective had reason to consider themselves kind and reasonable, but disagreement on the constitution of "kindness" engendered perceptions and feelings of *un*kindness.

It is in these discrepancies of mood and affect that I argue the problems of "academic kindness" lie. If we are oriented towards happiness, as Ahmed claims, then it becomes desirable to maintain the relations and conventions which uphold this happy state of being – to keep in place this short-lived but feel-good kindness. The consequence is that in these conditions of precarious happiness, speaking about the anxieties, tensions, frustrations, shames, and abuses of the academy becomes distasteful and even taboo. When your choices are shaped within this set of - largely unspoken - rules and conventions, what scope is there for voicing opposition to the neoliberal system and the inequalities of academia and the university? If your workplace is ostensibly a space of friendliness and the neoliberal university is telling you that everything is fine and you're lucky just to have a job, what possibility is there for disrupting this apparent peace with your identification of abuse, overwork, sadness, and fear? Mona Mannevuo offers a critical insight, commenting that "contemporary academic capitalism works through affects and languages of love, flexibility, and productivity" (Mannevuo 2016, 86). I argue this invokes communal moods and affects which circumscribe and regulate disagreement and unhappiness, pushing it to be expressed in hushed informal conversations rather than having space held for it in legitimised forms, such as departmental meetings or annual reviews. Whilst academic meetings can certainly be venues for expressing discontent, it is rarer to have such disagreement formally validated and – according to participants in the fieldwork – there is often pressure exerted to come to a "happy resolution" and dispel the mood of unhappiness. Indeed, many of the control mechanisms of the neoliberal university come through forms of mood management (Hochshild 1983), particularly in relation to "wellness" or "wellbeing". To connect this to "academic kindness", it is key to draw commonalities between the maintenance of mood and the neoliberal emphasis on individual responsibility. The small acts of everyday care which comprise "academic kindness" were often narrated by participants as making them feel more valued, included, and human. These acts provoked a generalised atmosphere of conviviality and cheerfulness. For a number of participants, the pains and frustrations of the neoliberal university were counteracted by these interactions of care. Without denying the significance and vital place of this form of kindness, it is necessary to consider what is lost, and who is left out, when the "small acts" narrative is mobilised. Much like Ahmed's understanding of happiness, if everyone is not, or cannot be, included, the feelings of warmth brought about by these kindnesses is likely fleeting. The identification of kindness as relational suggests that we are all, collectively, responsible for the upkeep of a "good mood" – but for some, this "good" will involve cognitive dissonance precisely because it does not serve them well. Combined with the hyper-

individualism of neoliberal ideals, a dynamic arises wherein it is each individual's responsibility to *be* happy and each individual is responsible *for* their own happiness. Under these conditions the project of "academic kindness" appears as a collective goal *for* individual wellbeing rather than a collective practice *of* shared humanity and personhood.

Yet, in my fieldwork it was precisely those seemingly minor actions of a smile, a shared joke, or a gift of fruit left in your pigeonhole that were spoken of in acutely emotional and even reverential ways. These *were* the daily instances that help us to remember our shared personhood whilst living within the uncaring and bureaucratic machine of the neoliberal university. Ben, for instance, would often discuss how he "really liked going into [the building] because there's a real sense of community on the corridor". Participants spoke frequently of how much they valued a "doors open" decision from colleagues, in which office doors are left open, signalling the welcomeness of interruption, conversation, and interaction. Indeed, Lara expressed how she organised her commitments so that her days in the office consisted of work feasible to undertake with her door open; for her, it was important to extend this invitation of sociability and approachability to her colleagues because she "wouldn't want anyone to feel alone". Such actions are, clearly, well-meaning and encouraging. Despite this, I question the capacity for change and reformation in these forms of kindness. Ros Gill poses the question,

> to what extent can personal actions – even enacted by many individuals - offer a real challenge to the structural forces ranged against us? Is individual generosity a powerful enough too to fight systemic meanness and brutality? In short, is living a "good life" within academia enough? (Gill 2018, 107).

The quotidian form of kindness on show here – what we might term "academic kindness" – is, I think, more oriented to temporary wellbeing and peace keeping than it is long-term systemic challenges. Rather than being a salve, it is more akin to Lauren Berlant's "cruel optimism" (2011): the promises of happiness and community it makes cannot be fulfilled by its actions or criteria. The question is how academics might retain the cumulative humanity of these small, everyday actions whilst also rejecting any individualising, atomising, or neoliberal co-option of our kindness?

A Turn to Kindness? Solidarity and Community Against the Neoliberal Academy

What is the future for "academic kindness" and to what extent is it a viable tool for understanding and countering the harms of the neoliberal academy? Recognising how academics simultaneously reproduce, benefit from, and are harmed by systemic institutional inequalities, one participant, Naomi posed the key question: "how do you change the structures when you are the structure?" In what ways might we construct terms and paradigms of "kindness" which both recognise structural inequality but also operate with an awareness of academics *as* being the structure in question? I suggest that analyses of how to counter the harms of neoliberalism in academia need to move from valorising small acts of "academic kindness", and towards a broader recognition of the legitimacy of care and solidarity within and across intellectual aspects of academic life, rather than approaching care, empathy, solidarity, and community as ideas which stand outside of and beyond our intellectual practice. 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. Key to this is a recognition of shared humanity and personhood, but also acknowledgement that we exist and feel both as collectives *and* autonomous social actors.

At the centre of such an acknowledgement is the lack of possibility for an all-encompassing "manifesto for kindness", but rather a continued recognition of kindness as a relational object and affect. The possible trajectories towards practices of care and kindness I set out below thus understand these concepts as iterative, dynamic, and reflexive rather than an unshifting and prescriptive set of rules for conducting oneself. I suggest three modes of action where academics can pull care and solidarity into our structural and intellectual spheres of practice: generosity, vulnerability, and cooperation. In doing so, there is possibility to recognise such dispositions as being part of – even vital to – the work of academia, thereby countering the systematic individualism, ego, cruelty, and uncaring of the neoliberal university, audit culture and the inclination, as Andy says, to be "bastards and bitches". Whilst advocating this turn to a more "structural kindness" and recognising the role of academics in/as "the structure", there needs also to be a recognition that the ability to counter, reject, or act contrary to the neoliberal affect and character is not equally or evenly distributed. Changing the value paradigms of a structure is most effective when those possessing the most authority and privilege within that structure act first, and act clearly.

Generosity

Les Back outlines his perspective on generosity as a counterpoint to neoliberalism, describing how, "valuing the work of others becomes a way to strike a small blow of munificence against the miserliness of academic life" (2016, 114). This is as Back says, "not just a matter of being "nice" to others" (2016, 115). Rather, Back elucidates the ways that generosity of thought and action prompt a splashback effect, bringing a sensation of care and respect not only to the other person, but also to you. Intellectual generosity is "about the pleasure that can be taken in admiring the work of others that you feel animates something important" (2016, 115) – this isn't a simple external-facing action, but instead a holistic engagement by which one's own temperament and bent towards the adversarial and competitive nature of neoliberal academia is soothed through acts of generosity. Generosity also demands that we treat ourselves with care and our readers with dignity. Consider here the practice of citation. The damaging nature of metrics (Mountz et al 2015) and the quantified self (Gill 2015) are well noted, and the politics of citation are often critiqued, particularly by feminist scholars (Burton 2015). What is less discussed is the uncomfortable realisation that – to quote my friend and scholar, Phoenix Andrews, "some bastards are foundational" (WhatsApp group chat, April 2021). This statement came as part of a group chat on how we should treat the work of known abusers, bullies, and bigots – Phoenix pointing out the unfortunate circumstance that "bad" people – unkind people, even – sometimes write key texts. Can a generous, socially-just citation practice predicated on vigilance of power relations continue to cite such academics – after all, metrics do not have context and a critical citation "counts" as much as any other. The "splashback effect" Back notes in relation to the admiration of others' work functions similarly when those we invite into our

intellectual engagements are, in other spheres of their practice, bullies or abusers – except in these instances the sensations brought about are potentially ones of trauma, suffering, and pain. A generous structural kindness rejects the business-as-usual mode of academic practice which privileges some as "foundational" and foregrounds dignity and intellectual autonomy.

Vulnerability

The sense of shared humanity found in an orientation to generosity is equally in evidence in the quality of vulnerability. Vulnerability is vital to a structural kindness in that it runs counter to the underlying precepts of competitive neoliberal culture. In an environment where you are continually measured and assessed, it is arguably natural that you would desire to consistently present a very particular, very able and polished version of yourself. Vulnerability interrupts this, and in doing so it sticks in the spokes of power and the reproduction of privilege. David Beer suggests that one method of countering neoliberalism is in co-creating a "fearless" discipline (2014, 14). Beer is speaking specifically about sociology, but his comments are more widely applicable. Instead of constantly churning out glossy publications and refined talks, we focus on ideas and sharing. This is generative for, as Beer says, "the roughness around the edges gives others some purchase to respond and encourages them to enter into a dialogue about the limitations and inadequacies of the proposal" (Beer 2014, 51). We also, as Back says, "should not conceal the limitations on our ability to act" (2018, 124) – there is little kindness to be found in promises that cannot ever come to fruition. The open expression of imperfection speaks to our shared humanity and presents the possibility for relations of acceptance and achievable expectations. My 2018 strike diary recalls how, as the industrial action progressed, façades of ease fell slowly away revealing the person underneath. As this happened, and as others began to express their fears and doubts, we gradually reached an ever more intimate communion of trust. This is a trust eroded by the ruthless bent of neoliberalism, in which we, as Andy's earlier comments indicate, either feel - or know outright - that our colleagues are plotting against us.

Co-operation

Perhaps the most effective disposition of structural kindness comes as co-operation. It is possible in multiple forms and is a vital part of pushing back against an ideology that seeks to separate, isolate, and alienate us from ourselves and others. My fieldwork included a pair of frequent co-authors, Ben and Sebastian, who had met during their PhD years and continued to share ideas and write together. Their cooperation was not just intellectual, but mutually supportive and in recognition of vulnerability and precarity. There were numerous seemingly small, but actually very important, decisions taken to be generous scholars – for instance, Ben was at the time in more secure employment than Sebastian, so they arranged that Sebastian would be the first author on the more prestigious journal article they were co-authoring, because it would be of more strategic importance to his career. It is this kind of everyday activity that is within the ability of many academics, especially the more securely employed, to undertake as a counter to neoliberalism and a marker of solidarity. We can also extend this cooperation and generosity to how we make claims to knowledge and authority. I recall a conversation with one of my PhD supervisors, a few years post-viva and not entirely sure any more about my place in academia or direction of my research. "I just want", I said, "to be able

to stake out my territory". With a gentle force my supervisor responded that I was thinking wrong-headedly: "it's not about territory, you can't engage in that sort of competition. What's important is who you're in dialogue with. What conversations are you adding to and extending?" This notion of cooperation through dialogue is the soul of a kindness that challenges hierarchal power. Intellectual endeavour is not an individual competitor sport, but a team game.

One of the most joyful and giving forms of co-operation I experience in academia is a small collective named "Drag Them to Hell." This began as a WhatsApp chat where we – a geographically disparate and disciplinarily diverse set of scholars - could say all the terrible things that would be unspeakable in public spaces such as social media. Through the catharsis of sharing the unsayable, and the trust given and held that "what happens in the group stays in the group", this collective is now a co-operative: we read job applications, cite one another's work, share information on who's dodgy and who isn't, offer gentle correction to anyone erring on the toxic side of frustration, validate the choice to work or not work outside of office hours, cheerlead successes and futile attempts, and offer consistent and genuine belief in others' ideas and experiences. Practically, the collective also allows us to open networks and lines of engagement, so that we can share the inculcated resources of social and cultural capital. Importantly, the collective is not restricted to academic or work life; though it is what brought us together, it is not what keeps us together. Our solidarity is therefore predicated on the ways in which our myriad kindnesses flow through – and connect – all facets of our lives and ourselves.

Kindness, as shown throughout, 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. A greater attentiveness to the relationships between kindness, care, and power – and a sharper delineation of what these concepts actually mean in practice – present opportunities for practical and conceptual cultural shifts in academia – to change the way we work and the way we engage with each other. Neoliberalism, audit culture, capitalist cruelty, and precarity are not solely problems of academia – and academic staff are (generally) not the most precariously or oppressively employed of university staff (Gill 2009). There is much to be gained from acknowledging how we are connected to a far bigger, and more difficult global struggle. The trajectory to an inclusive, power-vigilant structural kindness begins with the recognition that we discover and create *together* – and that this process is not linear, but instead indirect, scrappy, and disjointed. Indeed, I suggest that a teleological perspective on kindness, care, and power pushes us in unhelpful directions, towards unattainable goals. The project of kindness, in all its relational, feeling, human messiness, is one that – necessarily – remains unfinished but nevertheless endures.

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