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Disrupting neoliberal kindness: from individualism to institutional transformation

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Research Domains

Academic practice, work, careers and cultures (AP)

Abstract

Kindness is increasingly promoted in higher education (HE) as a remedy for burnout, disconnection, and student distress. Yet when framed through neoliberal logics, as a personal virtue or emotional obligation, kindness risks being co-opted into institutional discourses, masking structural inequalities and shifting responsibility for change onto individuals. This paper offers a conceptual framework that reclaims kindness as a critical, relational and justice-oriented practice. Drawing on feminist ethics of care, critical pedagogy, and systems thinking, the framework reframes kindness as a collective, political and systemic commitment. It contributes to growing scholarship that questions the instrumentalisation of kindness in HE and supports efforts to reimagine the sector as a space where compassion, collegiality, and critical engagement are embedded in both policy and practice.

Full paper

Kindness is increasingly promoted in higher education (HE) as a response to widespread burnout, student distress, and declining collegiality (Clegg and Rowland, 2010; Datu and Lin, 2022; Hosoda and Estrada, 2024). It appears frequently in wellbeing initiatives, resilience programs, and professional development resources. While this signals greater attention to the affective and relational dimensions of academic life, such discourses risk reducing kindness to an individualised emotional obligation, something to be performed by staff rather than supported by institutions (Burton, 2021). In this way, kindness becomes co-opted by neoliberal logics that deflect attention from systemic inequities and reframe structural challenges as personal responsibilities.

 As a response to scholarship calling for the differentiation between performative and authentic approaches to compassion in academic life (Burton, 2021; De Welde, 2022; Waddington and Bonaparte, 2025), this paper proposes a conceptual framework for reclaiming kindness as a critical and justice-oriented practice. By drawing on feminist ethics

of care, critical pedagogy, and systems thinking, it contributes to ongoing efforts to reimagine HE as a more relational, equitable, and critically engaged space.

Problematising neoliberal kindness

Kindness and care are increasingly visible in HE discourse. However, their institutional deployment often raises concerns. Kindness is frequently presented as a personal quality to be cultivated or a moral imperative in response to the multiple and ongoing crises facing the sector. This individualised framing detaches kindness from its political and structural contexts, thereby sidelining the systemic conditions, such as overwork, casualisation, and marginalisation, that produce harm in the first place. Cazenave (2023, p. 3) argues that this understanding of kindness supports the status quo by making kindness "small and power evasive," ultimately contributing to unkind, uncaring institutional cultures.

This depoliticisation is compounded when kindness is used as a branding device to signal institutional virtue. For instance, the University of Manchester's *1824 Acts of Kindness* campaign, launched as part of its bicentenary celebrations, encouraged staff and students to perform acts of kindness over a 60-day period. While well-intentioned, such initiatives can risk functioning as a veneer, particularly in an institution where staff have previously protested about workload intensification, job insecurity and lack of meaningful wellbeing support (Hollis, 2023). When acts of kindness are celebrated without addressing these systemic issues, the result may be a symbolic gesture that obscures rather than confronts structural inequality.

A framework for critical kindness

To challenge this depoliticisation of kindness, this paper propses a conceptual framework integrating feminist ethics of care, critical pedagogy and systems thinking. Together, these traditions offer an expansive understanding of kindness as a practice rooted in justice, interdependence and institutional accountability.

Feminist ethics of care (Noddings, 2003; Tronto, 2020) centres care as relational, situated, and inherently political. It insists that genuine care requires attentiveness, responsibility, responsiveness, and solidarity, and highlights how care work is unequally distributed within institutions. Critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970; Hooks, 1994) frames kindness not as sentimental or apolitical, but as a radical commitment to humanisation, mutual respect, and liberation. Systems thinking shifts the focus from individual behaviours to institutional structures, drawing attention to how policies, workloads, and cultural norms enable or constrain compassionate practice.

This paper offers a novel conceptual lens by synthesising these traditions into a framework that locates kindness at the intersection of care ethics, liberation pedagogy and institutional design. Feminist care theory foregrounds the everyday, often invisible labour of kindness. Critical pedagogy insists that this labour must be oriented toward liberation rather than compliance. Finally, systems thinking ensures these values are not confined to

interpersonal relationships but embedded in institutional cultures. Together, they reveal kindness not as a personal disposition, but as a collective, political and structural project requiring ongoing reflexivity, accountability, and action.

Future directions

This conceptual framework lays the groundwork for empirical research into how kindness is enacted, enabled or constrained in higher education. Future inquiry will include discourse analysis of policy texts, interviews with staff and students and classroom-based studies. Such research will explore the lived dimensions of relational practice and the gaps between institutional rhetoric and everyday academic experience.

Implications and contributions

The conceptual framework proposed in this paper offers a framework to inform research, institutional change, and pedagogical decision-making. In doing so, it supports efforts to challenge dominant HE discourse and reimagine the sector as a space where compassion, collegiality, and critical engagement are central to both practice and policy. It calls on educators, researchers, and leaders to resist reductive narratives of kindness and to foster communities of practice grounded in justice, interdependence, and care.