

For ordinary kindness in human geography

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Abstract

In this commentary, I make a case for recognizing and encouraging in human geography a sort of mundane kindness that is unremarkable in its ambition, but potentially profound in its impacts. Although it is important to continue to analyze the conditions that have left so many of us in need of acts of kindness that compensate for the failures and violence of the neoliberal academy, I argue that alongside this critical scholarship we could continue to make room for ‘ordinary’ kindness that does not necessarily need to justify itself through critical reflection.

Keywords

Care, collegiality, generosity, kindness, recognition

As has been the case for many in our discipline, one of the most powerful experiences that I have had as a human geographer did not take place in any lecture hall, seminar room, conference session, or other ‘traditional’ venue. Rather, it was in my postgraduate institution’s on-campus health center, where every Friday a shifting group of mostly postgraduate students and university professional staff (with the occasional undergraduate student) would gather with one or more clinicians to discuss the twin albatrosses of procrastination and perfectionism (‘P&P’). I was a member of the group for many years for two reasons: first, despite attending on a regular basis, I found procrastination and perfectionism hard habits to break (I still do!). Second, I found that the group embodied a sort of radical kindness that responded to my own sense of vulnerability in a way that no other expression of social or intellectual solidarity had previously.

Saying that the kindness in that group was ‘radical’ may make the reader think that I mean the word in the sense of fostering a kind of politicized awareness of the violent structures that render us both collectively and differently vulnerable. In this particular case, I do not; I simply mean that the utter sincerity and generosity that the participants showed each other and me was a radical break from the performances of scholarly criticism that I was being inducted into as part of my postgraduate studies. This is not to say that there was no critical reflection within the group; on the contrary, the discussion often turned to, for example, forms of classism, racism, and sexism that render some particularly

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susceptible to the feelings of failure and inadequacy that produce procrastinating and perfectionist behaviors. However, those issues would be discussed with a directness that was, frankly, refreshing, and offered me a space where I felt I could admit failures and insecurities in a way that was not really possible in my department a few buildings over.

The preceding could be taken as an argument against theory, the academy or intellectual inquiry, of which it is none of those things. Rather, I present it as an experience that I think about often when I try to articulate the sort of ordinary kindness that inspires me and that I would like to foster as a scholar and colleague for the future of human geography. I should hasten to add that I do not find contemporary human geography *unkind*; rather, I would characterize the discipline as I experience it on some days as exuding a kind of greyness, exacerbated by the cultural shift to remote work catalyzed by the Covid-19 pandemic. The endless emails that are a part of all our lives, capped off by the clinically polite ‘Best wishes’, are one manifestation of this. Another is the disappearance of unscheduled social interactions with colleagues. What I describe are, of course, minor issues against the context of a neoliberal university that devalues and dehumanizes in uneven ways (Dowling, 2008), to say nothing of human geography that has been historically built on epistemic and material violence done within white supremacist and patriarchal structures (e.g. Hawthorne and Heitz, 2018; Hunt, 2014). In order to contextualize the relative insignificance of everyday mild loneliness against deep structural injustices and how kindness can respond to both, I think in part of the work of Clive Barnett. His extensive inquiries into the ordinary dynamics of democratic coexistence (e.g. Barnett, 2017) show a tendency within certain strains of critical thought to bifurcate between a fundamental level of authentic political potential (‘the political’) and its derivations into vulgarized ‘politics’ that obscure the more vital energy of the former. As an alternative, he suggests that we think of different political modes as different registers of the same phenomenon – some more mundane, some more profound.

Likewise, we can locate different registers of a common kindness that address our discipline’s pressing needs. Some of those needs are the kinds

of deep, structural injustices that require large-scale responses (see Oswin, 2020). I think here of the spaces in human geography where intellectual inquiry, the recognition of vulnerability, and political praxis have long come together to produce revolutionary kindnesses. To name just two of many, feminist geographic praxis has long brought together scholarship with multiple forms of mutual aid (e.g. Staeheli and Lawson, 1995). Likewise, Black geographers have maintained across generations networks of scholarship, solidarity, and activism that professional organizations such as the American Association of Geographers are, after far too long, providing with the same dedicated spaces enjoyed by other disciplinary communities (Eaves, 2020).

Alongside this level of change-making kindness, we might think of another register of kindness that is somewhat more modest in addressing itself to the forms of mundane but corrosive loneliness and frustration that afflict many of us. This might consist of knocking on a colleague’s door just to say hello (I am infamous for this!), offering to cover a class or take on a minor administrative task, or making time for coffee or lunch. It also might consist of somewhat emotionally riskier acts of kindness that remind someone that they are worthy of trust and esteem. I highlight this kind of act not because I think that they are lacking as such; indeed, I am fortunate enough to have been the recipient of such a volume of them in recent months that illustrating what I have in mind actually requires that I exclude many possible candidates for lack of space. However, in the context of a profession where we are relentlessly judged and ranked, it is important to honor the profound meaningfulness of small acts of kindness that have no particular theoretical grounding other than a willingness to extend trust and generosity to another.

Let me offer an example. During a period roughly coinciding with, though not directly attributable to, the most acute phase of the Covid-19 pandemic, I experienced a physically and mentally debilitating depression. One symptom of this illness was that I lost my voice – literally, as I largely stopped speaking altogether, as well as figuratively, as repeated fellowship, publishing, and employment rejections had convinced me that I had nothing of value to contribute to

human geography. The conditions of my recovery were complex, but one factor was the receptivity of an editor at *Political Geography* to my pitch for a guest editorial (Lizotte, 2021). By extending this opportunity to a junior scholar – or, at least, *this* junior scholar embodying multiple axes of privilege – trying to reboot his scholarly output and maintain an all-important publication flow, she did not radically change the discipline or its conditions of knowledge production. Regardless of its lack of paradigm-shifting potential, though, her generosity and support meant everything to me in a period when I was terrified of losing the only professional life I have ever known. In part, because of her act of kindness, I am able to continue my academic career and be in a position to reproduce that generosity for other early-career scholars.

In bringing attention back to the kinds of untheorized acts of kindness that human geographers are already practicing on a daily basis, I am, in part, not saying anything new: Dorling's (2019) argument that kindness should be revalorized as a standard by which (British) geography measures 'rigor' is powerful. Unlike in Dorling's essay, however, my ambition in this commentary is more modest; I am not aiming to reform the discipline (at least, not here). I would simply like to revalorize small, maybe even utterly banal, acts of kindness that, like those I experienced from my P&P peers, recognize and empathize with one other simply because they are there. I think here of the feminist tradition of care (e.g. Lawson, 2007; Tronto, 1993), which acknowledges the fundamental neediness of human existence. It is not, of course, a straightforward task to translate care into professional practice. Rose-Redwood et al. (2018: 116) rightly point out that 'care' can gloss over 'real or needed disagreements in both theory and practice'. Keeping this in mind, what I nevertheless find most compelling about the concept of care is that it holds a sense of the ineffable plurality of human needs that cannot always be relegated to one ontological category or another. Likewise, in thinking about how acts of kindness will shape the future of human geography, I see some as responding to emotions situated in relation to experiences of oppression and violence (see Ruez and Cockayne, 2021). I see others as arising simply because colleagues feel like being kind.

There is a real and pressing need to interrogate the conditions that require acts of kindness to compensate for the failures and violence of the neoliberal academy and society at large. There is also a need to continue to inquire into who is expected to contribute an amount of kindness disproportionate to that which they receive. These are projects that speak to the generosity of spirit and recognition of common humanity that characterize the discipline that I am proud to be a part of. Let's also continue to translate those qualities into the spontaneous and untheorized acts of kindness that often go unremarked. Sometimes we are in a better position to offer support than at other times; if your circumstances mean that you are in need, I offer the wisdom of someone whose kindness has sustained me: 'it doesn't hurt to ask'.

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