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## **Research as a practice of care**

*New year's speech at Center for Educational Policy Research CfU*

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New Year's speech at the Centre for Education Policy Research (CfU), Aalborg University, Department of Culture and Learning.

*Antonia Scholkmann, 01/08-2024*

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Esteemed CfU colleagues,

the new year has started with unexpected news, both in the realm of the kingdom of Denmark, where the Queen has announced her imminent abduction, and here in the group, where an equally important person, Christian, has announced his "abduction" as well.

The impending changes might make us a bit anxious, sad even, as we will soon be losing a cherished monarch and an even more cherished colleague. And while we all still sit and ponder upon the future, I will take the chance so long as there is a queen in Denmark, to take the crown of CfU's New Year's Queen for a couple of minutes.

As an outlook at what 2024 might bring, I want to shift our glances towards an unexpected – maybe overlooked – aspect in our day-to-day practice of conducting research, being an understanding of research as a practice of care.

The world is not in a good state – with the climate catastrophe allegedly having reached a tipping point in 2023, and ravaging wars and escalating conflicts, and new right and fascist movements on the rise; and even nationally and locally, sometimes it feels that education is being squeezed and cracked between economic, technological and political agendas that are not in any way integrating what we as experts could have to say.

This can make us doubt, what we as humanists, social scientists and educationalists can do about this, what we have to offer and how we can be heard. We have touched upon the question of research and activism – whether they contradict and how they can complement each other – in this group before. Inspired by especially feminist theory, I have over the last weeks started to think about how a practice of care in our research can give us new focus here.

By care I mean in no ways the often presupposed and even more often unpaid labour that especially women are doing by caring for children and the elderly

or as emotional and reproductive labourers at the workplace. Neither do I mean the sometimes helpful, however often de-solidarizing technologies of self-care that pose the burden of “functioning” on us as individuals who must organize their calendars via time-boxing, do mindfulness exercises and say “no” more often than “yes”.

Instead, I want to alert us to that care can mean a practice of allocating energy, to care for and about as opposed to saying “whatever”, “ok”, or “I don’t care” – i.e. a practice of indifference. Instead, we should add care as a relevant and radical aspect to what we are doing, because by caring we hold a powerful tool that can counteract self-immunizing ourselves against helplessness and despair by just not caring at all.

Borrowing from Hartmut Rosa (with whom I not necessarily agree on everything he has written on resonance), I want to propose that we can practice care in our research in at least three directions:

Firstly, in an external direction, towards the topics we commit ourselves to. When engaging in research, we are giving time, thoughts, efforts, actions, resources to specific causes. By asking “What topics do I care for? What causes do I care about? What is worth that I give my energy to?” we find direction. By committing to what matters we are making a difference, and I think it is worth cultivating awareness of the power we as researchers hold in setting instead of only following the agenda.

Secondly, with an internal direction, research as a practice of care must also encompass self-care. However, not as the self-optimizing endeavour I have mentioned before. Self-care in research instead can mean that we take ourselves seriously, to be respectful to the fact that we are dedicating a significant part of our lives towards the endeavour of research. Somewhat reminding of the Mari Kondo-meme of “does this spark joy” I think we need to give ourselves permission to ask what research does spark joy for us, resonates with us and gives us hope.

Thirdly, in a horizontal direction, I want to stress that a research practice that integrates care also must be directed towards caring for and about each other. The colleagues and research participants we work with, but also the world around us, needs our caring, now probably more than ever. Again, this is not meant as a one-sided demand for emotional labour. Instead, care-fully

choosing, crafting, and cultivating the relationships we work with will be necessary as not to feed of but to lift others.

Dear colleagues, don't get me wrong – I think we all know that practicing care in our research will not be an easy task. It will require courage and honesty and will sometimes be frustrating considering external pressures. It will require that we hone our wits, stamina, and finesse to integrate the work that we care about into the logic of the systems we work with.

However, the world and we as part of it need care, and we should use the tools we are best in – our sharp minds, brilliant theories, methodological rigour, and the capacity to look with clear eyes in order to establish practices of care in the best way possible.

Thank you and have a care-filled and cared-for new year.