



Cities of care: Introduction to a special issue

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1. Introduction

Scholarship on feminist care ethics illuminated the ways in which everyday practices of care about, for, and with others and oneself are essential to “maintain, continue, and repair our ‘world’ so that we can live in it as well as possible” (Fisher & Tronto, 1990, p. 40). Care ethics focus on questions surrounding why and how people take proactive interest in others, assume responsibility for their needs, and take practical action to support their well-being (Conradson, 2003). Relations of care arise from attunement to others and their fragilities, and from attentive observation and listening to others through which new sensitivities and capacities for care are being learned (Kullman, 2014).

An emerging body of scholarship, especially in the field of geography, examines how relations of care are shaped by, and in turn produce, diverse spatial, social and political contexts, from everyday spaces such as the home (Milligan, 2005), through to varied service provision settings (Conradson, 2003; Williams, 2017), political regimes (Power & Hall, 2018), and geographical settings (Parr & Philo, 2003). Cities represent a particularly complex, and in many respects challenging, context for an ethics of care. Specifically, we wish to highlight here three aspects of urbanism and their challenges and opportunity for an ethics of care: individualism, diversity and estrangement as hallmarks of urban societies; cities as strategic sites for the rollout of neoliberalism; and cities as more-than-human environments.

2. Individualism, difference and estrangement

Human geographers have long debated whether and how relations of care might be extended from those most proximate to those who are

geographically distant (McEwan & Goodman, 2010, p. 103). In urban geography, rather than purely spatial distance, greater concern is placed on how ‘social distance’ shapes relations of care in the relatively dense proximity of cities. From early 20th century urban sociology (Simmel, 1903; Tönnies, 1935), through to contemporary literatures on the city as a ‘land of strangers’ (Amin, 2013), some of the defining features of urban societies have been characterised in terms of individualism, diversity and estrangement. What hope is there, then, for ethical relations of care to emerge and be sustained in an urban setting where self-interested individualism and notions of ‘independence’ are valorised over responsibilities towards others; where racial, cultural, class, gender, ability and other differences underpin alienation, oppression, conflict or tension; and, where one is surrounded primarily by strangers?

That countless everyday urban encounters between strangers do not erupt into violence, is but one of the mysteries of urban life (Amin, 2013). To some extent, these encounters are regulated by an etiquette of inattention rather than attunement, and ‘civility’ that does not necessarily equate with an ethics of mutual care (Valentine, 2008, p. 329). At the same time, the individualism, diversity and estrangement of cities make possible a different, quintessentially urban cosmopolitanism (Iveson, 2006), with the potential for a new urban ethics of care.

While social homogeneity is often associated with solidarity – and thus care – as noted by Sennett (2001), sameness also “stultifies the mind”, while “diversity stimulates and expands it.” Thus the encounter with a stranger who is ‘othered’ in multiple ways might trigger not only indifference or alienation, but also pleasure, arousal and stimulation, and these too might elicit care. The anonymity of urban life holds promise for relations of care freed from preconceptions of the other,

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and where the act of care towards a stranger is also an opportunity for conviviality, to be drawn out of oneself, learn about the other and experiment with new and more dynamic and hybrid forms of identification (Young, 1990). As such the individualism, diversity and estrangement that distinguish cities, while potentially harmful to certain versions of care associated with traditional notions of community, can also give rise to new forms of care associated with cosmopolitanism and conviviality.

3. Neoliberalism

In cities across the globe, processes of economic and political restructuring in recent decades have followed trajectories that are diverse, but share a broad ideological commitment to neoliberalism (Peck, Theodore, & Brenner, 2013, p. 1091). As pointed out by Tronto (2017, p. 29), “Like every political theory or ideology, neoliberalism contains a concept of care within it”. In contrast with a feminist ethics that understands care as a responsibility that arises from innate interdependency, from the neoliberal perspective, care is primarily a personal responsibility, “a private affair, occurring in homes and families” (Lawson, 2007, p. 3). In neoliberal care ethics, one must care for oneself by acting rationally, competitively and responsibly, and by procuring increasingly commodified market solutions to meet their care needs (Cox, 2013). If self-care fails, and market solutions are unavailable or cannot be afforded, it is the responsibility of families rather than the state to provide care (Tronto, 2017, p. 30).

Driven by such ideologies, neoliberal restructuring of the state involved deep cuts in government spending on welfare services, reduced entitlements, and the adoption of private sector market-inspired management of social services. In many cities across the United States, Canada, and western Europe, such restructuring has been framed as ‘austerity’ politics (Power & Hall, 2018). The devolving of state responsibilities of care to individuals and families increased inequality in the distribution of care work, primarily in gender, race and class terms (Duffy, 2011). As an ethic, care is often distinguished from justice as its binary opposite: care as particular, emotional and embodied versus justice as universal, rational and exterior. Yet, in the context of rising care inequalities, the neoliberal city enhances the need for an intertwined ethic of “care-full justice” (Williams, 2017).

4. More-than-human urbanism

Critiques of the limitations of dominant anthropocentric and Eurocentric framings of urban space (Ngurra et al., 2019; Steele, Wiesel, & Maller, 2019), call for thicker and more relational approaches to thinking about how we can live well with multitudes of earth others in the cities of the Anthropocene (Houston, Hillier, MacCallum, Steele, & Byrne, 2018). Growing recognition of cities as more-than-human spaces (Steele et al., 2019), highlights the vitality of a more-than-human care ethics, and specifically the need for critical attention to the political and ontological work of care as *being in relation* (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017). Relational politics of care, Puig de la Bellacasa (2017, 4) writes in *Matters of Care*, emphasises ‘that a politics of care engages much more than a moral stance; it involves affective, ethical, and hands-on agencies of practical and material consequence’. Further, for Puig de la Bellacasa (2017, 4), a relational politics and ethics of care foregrounds “care as vital in interweaving a web of life”, an ecological interdependency in which all beings are entangled.

Care represents the ‘ethical labours’ (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017) that are involved in thinking about what forms of life are enabled to flourish in cities and under what conditions. Pitt (2017), for example, in her work on community gardens, challenges the assumption of care ethics as emerging from simply being in proximity to non-humans. In her study, the community gardeners demonstrate through their everyday gardening practices caring relationships that are fraught, and include killing along with the adjudication of which plants, insects and

animals ‘belong’ and which do not. Steele et al. (2019) similarly challenge anthropocentric moral parameters by highlighting the conflicting and contradictory framings of nonhuman difference in cities through the figures of the ‘friend’ and the ‘stray’. Here again, care relations in more-than-human cities evoke ‘entangled empathies’ (Gruen in Steele et al., 2019) as a provocative way to move beyond Western moral orderings and to become involved in the shared possibilities for inhabiting living worlds.

Indeed, the relational and deeply attentive modes of caring in the more-than-human city is powerfully expressed by Ngurra et al. (2019). The Darug Ngurra research collective of Indigenous and non-Indigenous people and nonhumans demonstrate how by ‘walking together in good spirit to care-as-Country’ unceded urban places can begin the process of healing (2019, 2). Caring-as-Country reframes caring to recognise ‘the multidirectional and more-than-human responsibilities that co-create Country’ (2019, 2). This process draws attention to the colonial settler legacies of natural resource management and planning – particularly in heavily urbanised areas. One example of the decolonial possibility of caring-as-Country is the revival of cultural burns (cool fires) as a means of reviving culture and regenerating plant and animal life on Darug Ngurra – ‘Country also cares’ (p.9). Indigenous-led ‘caring-as-country’ in the more-than-human city is immensely powerful, vital and hopeful work for rethinking ethical relations with agential nonhuman worlds and for transforming settler-colonial spatial relations that continue to adversely impact Indigenous sovereign knowledges and lands.

5. About this special issue

The papers in this collection all seek to advance the application of an ethics of care as a critical lens to study some of the most burning concerns in contemporary urban studies, including: the precarity, displacement, exclusion and dispossession of disadvantaged urban populations, housing stress, food security, rural-urban migration and informality, state-led and grassroots responses to gender-based violence and the marginalisation of people with disability in everyday urban spaces. In applying a care-full justice perspective that bridges an ethics of care and an ethics of justice, these papers make visible forms of oppression as well as resistance that are often rendered invisible through other theoretical lens.

Miriam Williams (2020) asks how a feminist ethic of care might shape the urban research agenda. She adopts a politics of possibility approach which seeks to make visible and amplify progressive practices of care, often hidden as a consequence of both the ubiquity of care itself as an everyday practice, and the dominant neoliberal ideologies which tend to ignore the interdependencies on which care ethics are premised. One such space of care made visible by Williams is The Women’s Library in Sydney. She writes about the ‘care and repair’ work that is carried out by women in the library, and how caring attention to needs is woven into the fabric of the space itself. The work carried out within the library, Williams argues, empowers activism that spills out to transform the wider city.

Cloke, May, and Williams (2020) join Miriam Williams in their search for geographies of possibility and hope in seemingly mundane acts and spaces of care, in cities where welfare-based care is being eroded by neoliberalism. Specifically, Cloke et al. focus on the potential of postsecularity – of hybrid spiritual and secular narratives, practices and performances – to produce spaces where an ethics of care-full justice can be fuelled and ‘re-enchanted’. Cloke et al. illustrating these ideas with insights from their work on food banks in the United Kingdom, which they claim gain “motivational capacity” through their postsecular values and norms, and the involvement of faith-motivated organisations alongside the “ethical passions of the ‘faith of the faithless’”.

In contrast to Williams and Cloke et al.’s determination to find hope and possibility in spaces of care within the neoliberal city, Ruming and Melo’s (2020) paper highlights the extent to which care practices –

when enacted in ways that are divorced from an ethic of justice – reinforce neoliberal regimes, and can facilitate dispossession of those who are marginalized. Focusing on a project involving the state sanctioned relocation of public housing tenants in Sydney, to allow redevelopment by private developers, Ruming and Melo contrast the ‘personal care’ practices of the state’s ‘relocation officers’ – their self-reported efforts to go above and beyond to care for residents at a stressful period in their life – with the ultimate goal of the project they enable, which is the removal of those residents from their home and community.

The contributions by Hotker, Steele, and Amati’s (2020), and by Sophie Bond (2020), both consider how Tronto’s notion of ‘caring-with’ and its emphasis on collective responsibility for care work, achieved through communication, trust and respect, might be applied as a different way of addressing pressing social and environmental problems.

Hotker et al. propose that community responses to gambling in the regional Australian town of Castlemaine can be usefully reframed as practices of ‘caring-with’ to more effectively achieve transformation. As opposed to the neoliberal framing of “caring for” individuals addicted to gambling in the privacy of the counselling room, Hotker et al. see caring with as a collective process through which coalitions are formed to resist oppression and bring about social transformation. In line with Williams’ proposal for an integrated ‘care-full justice’, Hotker et al.’s work highlights the intersection between care ethics and procedural justice, as evident in the uneven power relations between gambling institutions, local government and the community.

Similarly, Bond considers ‘caring with’ as a different way of ‘doing’ climate change adaptation, and examines responses to increase flood events associated with sea-level rise in Ōtepoti Dunedin, Aotearoa New Zealand. In contrast with the market-driven approach to adaptation that often exacerbates inequalities, the caring-with approach proposed by Bond involves the creation of safe spaces for difficult conversations based on openness, transparency, respect and care. Applying Miriam William’s concept of care-full justice, Bond demonstrates how a caring approach might lead to more just adaptation process and outcomes.

Alam and Houston’s (2020) contribution to this special issue frames everyday non-institutional caring spaces, where both care givers and receivers – as diverse as children, birds, and homeless migrants – are accommodated as equals, as “alternate infrastructure”. Alam and Houston’s paper offers vignettes of such care infrastructures, such as a fruit and vegetable stand side-by-side street book-shelves in Dunedin where neither donors nor beneficiaries of food or books are necessarily identified as such; or the ‘Cockatoo Coalition’ more-than-human care networks that have emerged to protect the habitat of three threatened species of Black Cockatoos in Perth, Australia.

Martino, Yon, and Whitzman (2020) consider the way a care-full justice lens might inform policy analysis and development. They call for a care-full justice reframing of social policy in Australia, and highlight the potential cascading effects of care-full policy interventions which can lead to other informal caring practices in the city. For example, Martino et al. suggest care-full provision of social housing – carefully attuned to the needs of family violence survivors – might allow residents to engage in alternate care practices, such as care for children or elders.

Rachele et al. (2020) consider the tensions and overlaps between an ethic of justice, an ethic of care, and the more pragmatic notion of ‘feasibility’ that is central to how policy interventions are planned and prioritised. On face value, the hard-nosed realism implied by ‘feasibility’ seems incompatible with both the idealism of justice, and the ‘soft’ relational approach alluded to in care ethics. Yet, Rachele et al. argue that on further consideration, the emphasis on responsibility, competence, resourcing and action alluded to in ‘feasibility’ are well aligned with the grounded approach lauded in care ethics, while also requiring deep engagement with questions of distributive justice. This discussion is informed by empirical data from a research project undertaken in the City of Melbourne, Australia, where the authors examine ways to bring together what people with disability consider the

most important initiatives to enhance their social inclusion in the city, and the perceptions of local government officers about what initiatives are feasible to implement.

Practices of care (or lack thereof) infuse every aspect of the contemporary city. Yet theoretical, conceptual and empirical work on care in cities is still rare. This special issue makes a contribution to extending the discourse in urban research to include topics such as disability, homelessness, domestic violence, gambling, climate adaptation and species extinction. Each of the papers highlights the significance of care spaces, ethics and imaginaries as central, not peripheral, to what we understand as ‘cities’. How then might our cities be different if ‘care’ lay at the heart of city research, policy and planning?

We would argue, very different indeed.

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